

Best Practices in School Meal Application Collection

Strategies from across the country

School principals, teachers, and staff know how important the school breakfast and lunch programs are to ensuring that all low-income students receive proper nutrition. Here are some effective strategies for maximizing the collection of applications from students eligible for free and reduced-price meals:

- ✓ After the initial application is sent out, **send reminders** to parents by automated phone message, parent newsletters, or memos from the principal or food service director. Focus follow-up efforts on families with more than one child in the district.
- ✓ **Ensure confidentiality** by providing information sheets explaining the confidentiality of the information and that the information does not get passed to Citizenship and Immigration Services. Promote confidentiality by sending return envelopes with “confidential” stamped on the front with the application.
- ✓ Encourage teachers to be part of the process by offering **incentives** to students such as stickers or extra credit for returned applications. Schools may also offer a reward to the class with the most applications returned.
- ✓ **Use face-to-face time with parents** as opportunities to explain the application and encourage families to return the forms. Examples of opportunities include parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights.
- ✓ Consider **teaming up with community organizations**, sports teams, or local businesses to offer raffle prizes or recruit local celebrities to promote collecting school meal applications.
- ✓ **Offer rewards** such as monetary stipends or school equipment to principals if they collect a certain percentage of applications.
- ✓ **Decrease language barriers** by offering the applications in all languages spoken in the community.
- ✓ Help parents navigate the application process by having video tutorials on completing the online form and offering district “welcome centers” that **assist parents with filling out paperwork**.
- ✓ **Increase the availability of the application** by sending it out with mandatory forms such as the health form and making it available at other places throughout the community.
- ✓ **Use different community-based sites** to emphasize the importance of returning the application. For example, use immunization clinics as a venue for completing and turning in meal applications while parents are waiting for immunization forms to be filled out.

School Meal Application Collection

Case studies from successful campaigns

Baltimore City Public Schools

For school year 2009-2010, Baltimore Public City Schools (City Schools) launched an aggressive meal application enrollment strategy designed to recapture the dollars lost in previous years due to low application returns. The strategy included:

- Requiring each principal in the district to identify a meal application project manager in their school. Each F/RP project manager was required to attend a mandatory training;
- Establishing a 90 percent application return rate for elementary schools and an 85 percent application return rate for secondary schools;
- Launching an electronic application to expedite processing;
- Supplying meal application project managers with school-level data on students homeless during the previous school year, the names of students who submitted F/RP meal applications during the previous school year but who had yet to complete applications during the current year, students selected for income verification, students with expiring zero-income temporary applications, and current homeless students;
- Sending postcards to parents reminding them to complete the meal application.
- Partnering with Community-Based Organizations to assist school-based staff;
- Establishing cross-departmental F/RP meal application workgroup within the central administration that meets weekly during the summer to strategize and better coordinate the F/RP meal application campaign for the upcoming school year.

As a result, City Schools increased the number of students enrolled in the free and reduced-priced meal program by 10.6 percent over the previous school year.

Indianapolis Public School District

- School district has joined the school meal application with the textbook rental fee waiver application. One form allows families to apply for school meals as well as textbook rental fee assistance.
- Schools use a three-tiered system to distribute the application: families are sent the combined textbook fee waiver/school meal applications in July, the applications are handed out during the first week of classes, and follow-up phone calls are made to those who were eligible the previous year.
- There is a separate application for non-eligible or non-interested households.
- In 2006, the school district had 88 percent return rate for school meal applications.