



Protecting Access: School Meal Applications Are a Critical Link to Nutrition

School meal applications have long played a significant role in determining eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). While these applications still identify households that are eligible for assistance, growth in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and the increased adoption of statewide Healthy School Meals For All (HSMFA) policies have made free meals accessible for more students regardless of individual household circumstances. Although these policies represent a significant step toward improving child nutrition and reducing stigma, school meal applications remain an important tool for connecting households with additional benefit programs and providing schools and states with data used to allocate funding and other services.

Applications Matter for Schools

For districts, the shift toward Healthy School Meals for All changes how applications function, but it does not eliminate their value. In standard NSLP schools, applications determine which children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. In CEP schools and HSMFA states, where students already receive meals at no charge, the same information can help schools understand the economic needs of their student population and maintain access to resources tied to that data.

That makes returned school meal applications and household income forms an important part of school operations, particularly for programs and funding streams that rely on accurate measures of student need, including:

- **Education funding:** State and federal education funding is often based on the number or share of students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Without school meal applications or household income data, states may not be able to direct funding accurately, and schools risk missing out on vital resources.
- **Reimbursements from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):** Some schools operating in HSMFA states must count meals based on a child's free or reduced-price meal status to receive accurate reimbursements from USDA.

Beyond School Meals: Connecting Households to Other Resources

Households whose children attend schools where all children eat for free may not fully understand the importance of returning either a school meal application or a household income form. To encourage households to fill out these applications, states and schools can help promote the importance of these applications in connecting children and schools to additional resources:

- **Summer EBT enrollment for those who are income-qualified:** By submitting either a school meal application or a household income form, households can be connected to Summer EBT without filling out an additional Summer EBT application.¹
- **Access to summer and afterschool meals:** Summer and afterschool meal sites often rely on free and reduced-price school meal data to determine area eligibility. In most cases, a site must be located in an area where at least 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals to participate. More applications means more data to help inform eligibility.
- **Other potential benefits:** Depending on the state and school district, income forms can qualify households for discounts on internet, testing fees, and college application fees.

New Barriers to Participation

The importance of collecting school meal applications and household income forms is becoming even greater, as households face increasing barriers to accessing nutrition assistance programs.

In July 2025, Congress passed the budget reconciliation law ([H.R. 1](#)), making detrimental and [unprecedented changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#). These changes already have caused [millions](#) of people to lose some or all of their nutrition benefits, threatening their health and well-being. Many of the SNAP cuts will also affect households' access to child nutrition programs, including direct links to school meals and Summer EBT, as well as access to summer and afterschool meals, increasing the risk that children will experience hunger both at home and at school. Without SNAP as a direct link, more households will need to fill out applications to ensure they remain connected to the child nutrition programs. For more information, see FRAC's fact sheet, [Cuts to SNAP Threaten the Child Nutrition Programs](#).

¹ Only households that are 185 percent of the federal poverty level or below will qualify for Summer EBT benefits.

Combatting the Chilling Effect of Federal Policy on Immigrant Households

In addition to the impacts of H.R. 1's SNAP cuts on child nutrition programs, the current administration's policies on immigrant households can also lead to households choosing not to apply for benefits they may qualify for.

Many eligible immigrant households may choose not to apply for, or even disenroll from, programs such as Medicaid and SNAP, as well as school meals, out of fear, confusion, or misinformation around immigration rules. To help keep immigrant households connected with the child nutrition programs, schools should consider implementing the following strategies:

- **Partner with community organizations and departments already working with immigrant communities** to encourage and aid households in filling out school meal applications and learn about other nutrition resources. This can also be useful in combatting misinformation around areas such as public charge.²
- **Offer opportunities to fill out paper applications** for individuals that don't feel comfortable filling out an online application.
- **Make your school representatives visible in the community**, if possible, with bilingual staff. For example, pair outreach with bus drop-off or go to areas where communities feel safe to conduct outreach.
- **Send out personal invitations to fill out applications or for other nutrition services.** Ensure you follow up with households individually to remind them of the resources available.

Increasing Households' Connection to All Nutrition Programs

SNAP Outreach in Schools

The cuts to SNAP have resulted in many states opting to restrict access to the program both directly and indirectly. For example, in Arizona, the state immediately enforced the provisions in H.R. 1, which resulted in unnecessary over-verification, while at the same time facing historical state-level staffing shortages. This has meant that households have struggled to navigate the increasingly complicated bureaucratic systems and many have lost access to SNAP completely. When a household loses access to SNAP, they lose access to their direct tie to school meals and Summer EBT.

² A small group of noncitizens — including some people seeking to obtain a green card through family sponsorship or legal permanent residents who leave the country for more than 180 days — may be impacted by the new Department of Homeland Security public charge rule and its connection to the federal child nutrition programs. [Learn more here.](#)

As more households face barriers to applying for or maintaining SNAP benefits, schools can play a vital role in helping households get connected and stay connected to the program. Schools that act as outreach partners for SNAP can not only educate households about the program but can help offer direct services or referrals to services that can help them navigate applications and recertifications. For more information, see FRAC's resource [*SNAP Outreach: A Win-Win for School Districts and Families*](#).

New York Schools and SNAP Outreach

New York State law requires that all school food authorities conduct SNAP outreach to households. This can include schools offering direct referrals to SNAP outreach providers who can help with applications, distributing educational materials about the program, or connecting households to local social services. To fulfill this requirement, Syracuse City School District uses information from household income forms to contact households directly and connect them with the Food Bank of Central New York's Nutrition Outreach and Education Program, whose team members help families complete SNAP applications. This type of partnership can decrease the impact of H.R. 1 cuts on households with children, as they receive direct help navigating complex bureaucratic systems.

Cross-Promoting the Child Nutrition Programs

Schools and community organizations have many touchpoints with households during the year. These groups can use the following strategies to cross-promote the programs and increase participation:

1. **Distribute school meal applications, household income forms, or Summer EBT applications at summer meal sites.** This can mean setting up tablets for households to access applications or having paper applications available.
2. **Send out information about Summer EBT with school meal applications.** When sending out school meal applications, be sure to highlight that returning this form can connect a household to Summer EBT benefits the following summer.
3. **Collect school meal applications and spread the word about other nutrition resources at back-to-school nights and other school-based events.** By utilizing face-to-face time with parents to share information about what these applications can do and what benefits they can unlock, schools may be able to increase the number of returned applications.

Rethinking Household Income Forms

If CEP schools or HSMFA states use a household income form instead of a school meal application, that form should also be able to qualify households for Summer EBT. These forms should be created by state agencies and approved by USDA for this multipurpose use. Many states have redesigned their household income forms to comply with the [specific regulations around Summer EBT applications](#). These income forms can not only allow households to qualify for Summer EBT but also qualify the school district for educational funding.

New Jersey's School Meals and Summer EBT Form

New Jersey [state law](#) requires all public schools to provide the school meal application to all parents, and if a household does not return it, the school must follow up and request a household complete it. A [separate law](#) also requires that schools must display a direct link to the application prominently on their websites. During enrollment, this can mean that a parent may not be able to access their child's school information unless they complete the application or acknowledge that they have reviewed it. The state has also created a [single form](#) that can qualify a household for school meals and Summer EBT while also providing the data needed to determine education funding regardless of which type of school meal program the school is running — standard NSLP, CEP, or Provision 2.

For more outreach strategies, see FRAC's toolkit [Strategies to Increase Applications for School Meals](#).

Conclusion

As schools continue to expand access to free meals through CEP and HSMFA policies, school meal applications and household income forms remain an essential tool for connecting households to a broader array of nutrition programs. These applications help ensure children can access benefits such as Summer EBT, summer and afterschool meals, and other important resources, while also providing schools with critical data to secure educational funding. By prioritizing outreach, reducing barriers to participation, and clearly communicating the value of meal applications, states, schools, and community partners can help strengthen nutrition support and ensure more children and households receive the support they need to thrive.