

# Strategies to Increase Applications for School Meals

Schools had the option to serve all students free school meals through various nationwide waivers during school year 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Many of those flexibilities have expired, meaning school districts across the country are returning to normal operations for the 2022-2023 school year, including using school meal applications to qualify students for free, reduced-price, and paid school meals.

Many schools have found it more difficult to collect school meals applications during COVID-19, and this may be exacerbated as schools return to pre-pandemic operations. These forms often are used for more than just certifying students for free or reduced-price school meals; they also help with linking families to other benefits (e.g., waiving testing fees) and distributing some types of education funding. As schools return to normal and students don't automatically receive free school meals, submitting school meals applications remains crucial to ensuring that students and their families are able to access these key benefits, and for this to happen, schools must continually encourage families to submit applications.

FRAC has updated this [toolkit](#) to share outreach strategies and communication resources to help school districts and community partners ensure families return school meals applications.

## Effective Outreach Strategies

- Translate the application and outreach materials into the languages needed to reach and serve the school community.
- Explain the confidentiality protections for the application and promote the practice of including a return envelope with a “confidential” stamp on the front of it.
- Include language that “The public charge rule does not affect participation in school meals, and a Social Security number is not required to complete the application.”
- After the initial application is sent out, send reminders to parents by mail, robocalls, or text. Many districts use a combination of these approaches.
- Work with trusted messengers in the community, such as faith-based organizations, to encourage families to submit their application and to provide application assistance.
- Use interactions with parents as opportunities to explain the school meals application and encourage families to return them. Examples include in-person and virtual parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, and other meetings.
- Consider teaming up with community organizations, sports teams, or local businesses to offer raffle prizes or recruit local celebrities to promote submitting school meals applications.
- Offer rewards, such as monetary stipends or school equipment, if a certain threshold of the forms is collected.
- Help parents navigate the application process by offering video tutorials on topics such as how to complete the form and where to direct questions.
- Increase the availability of the application by sending it out with mandatory forms (e.g., the health form), making it available online, and distributing it through community partners.

- Use a variety of community-based sites to emphasize the importance of returning the application. For example, immunization clinics can be a place for parents and guardians to complete and turn in meal applications, since they often must wait for immunization forms to be completed.
- Remind parents and guardians about applications at summer and afterschool meal sites. Flyers, follow-up information, and even applications can be distributed alongside meals.
- Share information through the district’s social media channels.

## Sample School District Website Language

*(for school districts that are transitioning from serving free meals)*

Many of the flexibilities that allowed our school district to serve free meals to all students during the pandemic have expired for the 2022-2023 school year. **[insert name of school district]** asks all families to fill out a school meals application to determine whether your child qualifies for free or reduced-price meals. Students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals can qualify for other benefits, e.g., **[insert applicable benefits; example: waived test fees]**. The school meals application also helps the district and your child’s school receive much-needed education funding.

If one or more people in your household receives benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or if your child is classified as homeless, runaway, or migrant, then your child is categorically eligible for free school meals. You should receive notification from your child’s school that your child can receive free school meals. If you fall into one of these categories and have not been notified that your child is certified for free school meals, you should contact the **[insert name of school nutrition department]**.

Families can fill out and submit school meals applications at any point in the school year. Families also can submit a new application if something changes, such as a parent or other member of the household lost their job or had their hours reduced. If all your children are enrolled in **[insert name of school district]**, you only need to submit one application; however, families must fill out a new school meals application each school year.

If you need assistance with completing the application, contact **[insert phone number and email]**.

**Applications are completely confidential, can be completed by all families enrolled in our school district, do not require a Social Security number, and have no effect on public charge.**

Click **[here]** to download the school meals application form.

## Sample Letter or E-mail to Families

Dear **[Name]**,

Many of the flexibilities that allowed our school district to serve free meals to all students during the pandemic have expired for the 2022-2023 school year. School meals provide nourishment

that allows students to excel in the classroom and lead happy, healthy lives. They also help families stretch their food budget.

This school year, **[insert name of school or school district]** is asking families to submit school meals applications to determine whether your child qualifies for free or reduced-price meals. These applications are used for more than determining eligibility for free and reduced-price meals. This includes **[list applicable benefits; examples: receiving Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits to help purchase food on the days that a child is learning remotely, waiving test or other fees, and determining education funding for the school or district]**.

**Here is some information to consider as you fill out an application for your family:**

- Only one application is needed per family; if you have more than one child attending a school in our district, you only need to submit one application for all children.
- Applications can be submitted at any time during the school year.
- Families also can submit a new application if there is a change in the household, such as a parent loses a job or has their work hours cut. A new application must be submitted each school year.
- Eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals is determined based on the federal income guidelines. Children may be eligible automatically for free school meals if one or more family members participates in a federal nutrition program, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or if they are classified as homeless, runaway, or migrant.
- All families enrolled in the district can apply for free or reduced-price school meals. There is no citizenship requirement — for you or your child — to be eligible, and participation has no bearing on public charge.
- Applications are also available in [list applicable languages or omit this bullet].
- Applications are confidential and do not require a Social Security number.

**What you will need to fill out the application:**

- Your case number if you participate in SNAP, TANF, or FDPIR.
- If not, you will need to provide your family's total pre-tax income data, including
  - the earnings of anyone in your household with a job;
  - Social Security or retirement benefits for anyone in your household; and
  - other sources of income.

You can find the school meals application for our district, along with detailed instructions on how to complete it, here: **[insert the name of the school meals application, including the link if this is being sent electronically]**.

We look forward to providing healthy school meals for your child with the goal of helping them learn and grow throughout this school year and beyond.

Thank you,

**[Name]**

## Sample Social Media Posts

- Changes are coming to school meals for the 2022-2023 school year. Families must submit school meal applications to determine eligibility for free and reduced-price meals. To find out if your family qualifies, and how to apply, click [\[here\]](#).
- School meals applications are good for more than just meals – they help schools get funding and resources. Click [\[here\]](#) to learn more and to fill out an application.
- School meals applications are more important than ever as school meals are no longer automatically free for all students. To learn more, click [\[here\]](#).
- Has your family submitted a school meals application this year? Click [\[here\]](#) to fill one out.
- Does your child qualify for free or reduced-price school meals? To fill out a school meals application, click [\[here\]](#).
- School meals support learning. Click [\[here\]](#) to find out if your child qualifies for free or reduced-price school meals and to submit a school meals application.
- When you fill out a school meals application, you help your child get healthy meals, and their school receives critical funding. To learn more and apply, click [\[here\]](#).

## Robocall Script to Families to Encourage Completing School Meals Applications

Hello, this is [\[insert name of school district\]](#), with an important message. We ask that you submit your school meals application if you haven't already. School meals changes are coming in the 2022-2023 school year, and students will no longer automatically qualify for free meals. Completing a school meals application will determine whether students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, as well as other benefits such as food assistance through the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, [\[insert other examples in your district\]](#). Applying is easy and completely confidential. Go to our [\[insert website\]](#) to learn more.

## Talking Points on the Importance of Returning School Meals Applications

Share these with teachers, principals, front office staff, school nurses, and other district stakeholders so that they can encourage families to complete their school meals application during virtual learning, parent teacher conferences, and other district meetings.

- Our district offers school meals through the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. Depending on a family's income, these meals could be provided to your child free of charge or at a reduced price. To see if your child is eligible, please complete a school meals application.
- **Why should I submit an application?** In addition to determining eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals, school meals applications help our school district allocate vital funding and resources to schools. School meals applications also grant your child access to other benefits, such as Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), [\[insert other examples in your district\]](#). For these reasons, please complete the school meals application. Applications are completely confidential and secure, and do not require Social Security information.

- **When should I apply, and do I submit a separate application for each child?** Families can apply for free or reduced-price school meals at any time during the school year. Families can also reapply later in the school year if there is a change in family circumstances, such as loss of income. Each family needs to submit one application for all the children attending schools in the same district; however, families must submit a new application each school year. To apply, go to: **[insert information and link if available]**.
- **Who is eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals?** Eligibility is based on household income. Determinations are based on comparing a family's income to the federal income guidelines through school meal applications. In addition, children whose households participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or if they are classified as homeless, runaway, or migrant, are eligible.
- **I receive benefits through WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children). Can my child get free meals?** Many children in WIC households may be eligible for free school meals. Please fill out an application to confirm your child's eligibility.
- **Does my or my child's immigration status matter for submitting school meals applications?** Neither you nor your child needs to be a U.S. citizen in order to gain access to free or reduced-price school meals. Applications are completely confidential and secure; they do not require a Social Security number, and they have no effect on the public charge rule.
- **Are applications available in other languages?** Applications are available in English, **[insert languages if applicable]**.
- **If we already get free meals because of the pandemic, do we still need to submit a school meals application?** Yes. When schools start operating meal programs by using more traditional models, having your child's application on hand will ensure a smooth transition from one meal service program to another and without disrupting your child's access to healthy school meals. Further, some school funding during the pandemic is still reliant on the collection of school meals applications, which means that your child's school stands to gain even more resources to further your child's education during these difficult times.
- **Where do I fill out an application?** The school district has the application posted online here **[insert website]**. Parents can also go to the school office (if open) for a physical school meal application.

## Partner Resources and School District Examples

- USDA: [School Meal Changes are Coming in the 2022-2023 School Year Q&A](#)
- Hunger Free Colorado: [School Meal Application Toolkit](#)
- Hunger Free New Jersey: [Boosting School Meal Applications Critical During Pandemic](#)
- Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (Washington state): [It's More Than a Meal Application Toolkit](#)
- Maryland Hunger Solutions in collaboration with FRAC: [Best Practices in School Meal Application Collection](#)
- School Nutrition and Fitness: [Free and Reduced Meal Application FAQs](#)