



October 2020

Boosting School Meal Applications Critical During Pandemic

With many schools serving free meals to all children, districts across New Jersey are reporting a low return rate of school meal applications. Families should complete these applications to ensure eligible children receive special federal nutrition assistance, known as Pandemic EBT, during COVID and for districts to claim state and federal funding for education programs.

Congress recently extended Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) through Sept. 30, 2021 to children in kindergarten through 12th grade who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals and whose schools are operating on remote learning at least five days a week. The student's school must participate in the National School Lunch Program for the child to be eligible.

School districts that engage in effective and ongoing outreach have the potential to reach more students. Below are some best practices.



Provide materials in a language and at a level that parents can understand. According to USDA's guidance, school districts "have a responsibility to be aware of the language needs of limited-English proficient households and ensure these households have access to the same information other parents have in a manner they can easily understand."

Ask only for information necessary to determine eligibility. Under program regulations, the information requested on school meals applications “shall be limited to that required to demonstrate that the household does, or does not, meet the eligibility criteria for free or reduced-price meals.”

Reduce the potential for applicants to make calculation errors. Households often have multiple sources of income that arrive at different frequencies — weekly or bi-weekly wages combined with monthly Social Security benefits, for example. Asking families to convert all sources into an annual income level can be confusing. School districts can improve program access and accuracy by doing the conversion calculations themselves rather than asking households to do them.

Encourage eligible families to apply. Include school meals information in routine communications with families and communities throughout the school year to encourage newly eligible families to apply. The first weeks of the school year provide an early opportunity to reach families. But providing information about the school meals programs should be a regular part of communication with households.

Applications and school meals websites should clearly state that:

- A household may apply for benefits at any time during the school year.
- Children of parents who become unemployed may become eligible for free or reduced-price meals.
- A single application will be accepted for all children in the household attending schools in the same district.
- Household members do not have to be U.S. citizens for children to qualify for free or reduced-price meals.
- School meal applications are used to determine other federal nutrition assistance and education funding, making it critical that parents return the applications so districts can count all eligible students.

Use various platforms to communicate with parents, including e-mails and listservs, district websites, school newsletters, social media, mailings to parents and distributions at school events, when held.

Learn more about reducing childhood hunger at njfoodforthought.org.

Source: Center on Budget Policy and Priorities

Hunger Free New Jersey | 192 W. Demarest Ave., Englewood, NJ 07631 | (201) 569-1804, x23 | hungerfreenj.org