GUIDE TO INCREASING SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION COLLECTION IN COLORADO

THE BENEFITS OF INCREASED SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION COLLECTION

• Improved Student Health and Performance: Research shows that school nutrition programs can reduce child hunger, support health, and improve school achievement.

• Increased Funding for School Budgets: When school meal applications are collected, the school budget may benefit. Free and reduced-price (FRP) meal eligibility numbers are used to qualify schools for E-rate funding which provides schools with discounted telecommunications. State at-risk dollars are calculated with FRP lunch eligibility and districts also use the FRP numbers to determine which schools to serve with the federal allotted Title I funds. These funds provide more money for books, teachers, computers, and other essential educational materials.

• Increased Number of Children with Health Insurance: The FRP application may be used as an “express lane eligibility” for Medicaid or Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+) unless families choose to opt out on the FRP form.

• Qualify for Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and After-School Snacks and Suppers (CACFP)

SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION

THERE ARE THREE WAYS TO QUALIFY STUDENTS FOR FRP SCHOOL MEALS:

1. Direct Certification

   • Student data is compiled and an automatic enrollment in FRP school meals is available to qualifying students through matches with the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) files. Districts can make match reports at any time during the year, but must do so a minimum of three times per year. For more information, visit: www.cde.state.co.us/nutritiondirectcert

   • Students who qualify for Direct Certification include: children who live in a household that receives benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), as well as, participate in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

2. Categorical Eligibility

   • Some children are eligible for free meals based on their participation in other federal programs. Categorical eligibility qualifies students who have documented status as foster or Head Start/Even Start. Homeless, runaway or migrant children have categorical eligibility if they are documented so by an approved district official. Applications do not need to be returned for these students. Foster children can be eligible from a county list or meal benefit application.

3. Income-Based Eligibility

   • Most families apply for FRP meals using income-based eligibility requirements. To receive free meals, families must have household income below 130 percent of the federal poverty line which varies depending on the size of the household. To receive reduced-price meals, families must have household income between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. For example, between July 2018 and June 2019, a family of four that makes $46,435 annually will be at 185 percent of the 2019 poverty level.

NEW GUIDANCE ON FOSTER CHILDREN

Foster children will receive free lunch, but may need to submit an application including all income of the foster family. Other children in the same household must qualify for FRP lunches through income eligibility.
Complete applications must have the following pieces:

- The names of ALL household members, including the child or children on the application
- Last four digits of the social Security Number (SSN) for the adult who signs the application OR an indication that the household member does not have an SSN
- The current amount of income and frequency received by each household member, including students, identified by the individual who received it, and the source of the income, such as wages, cash assistance, alimony, disability
- The signature of an adult household member

District officials must review and determine eligibility within 10 working days of receiving the application. Parents should be encouraged to submit applications right away so new enrollees can be processed.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO INCREASE SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION COLLECTION

A SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION COLLECTION CAMPAIGN CAN INCORPORATE GENERAL OUTREACH TO THE ENTIRE SCHOOL COMMUNITY.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

- Let families know about the different types of school funding that can be generated by school meal applications.
- Train school staff about the importance of meal applications and how to assist families in completing applications.
- Organize an outreach committee with principals and teachers from throughout the district.
- Include meal applications in enrollment packets and other direct mailings to families: School meal applications that are included with other registration forms such as immunization forms or emergency cards are more likely to be turned in with other required documents. A checklist of paperwork, with “optional” next to FRP application, that should be turned in to the school is also helpful.
- Incentivize high collection rates by offering prizes to schools or classrooms: For example, a new computer could be offered to all schools that return over 90 percent of their complete Back to School packets including the optional meal application. Or individual schools could offer sporting event tickets to classrooms with high percentage return rates. Local businesses or philanthropic foundations are great resources to provide the prizes.
- Incentivize high collection rates by offering individual prizes to families: Prize incentives can be offered to individual families who return their Back to School packets with the optional meal application. Or, you can organize a prize raffle for all the families that turn in school meal applications at registration or back-to-school night.
• Partner with local grocery stores and media outlets to advertise the application campaign: Work with SNAP and WIC offices, local grocery stores and Colorado Works locations near your school to post and handout flyers or other outreach materials to spread the word about the value of school meal applications. Also, reach out to local TV and radio stations to create public awareness about the importance of school meals and applications.

• Work with local community partners to raise awareness: Local community groups like parent organizations, unemployment service centers, immunization clinics, Medicaid providers, foster care groups, homeless advocates, nutrition advocates, and places of worship can post flyers and posters where clients and patrons can see them, highlighting the importance of completing and returning school meal applications.

LOCAL EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL MEAL APPLICATION CAMPAIGNS

• Mesa County Valley School District 51 in Grand Junction successfully increased the amount of returned applications. With the increase of applications and other factors, the FRP eligibility rate went from 35 percent to 44.5 percent of the total student population between 2007 and 2009. This success translated to the addition of much needed dollars in school meal reimbursements and educational funding. This gain was accomplished through:
  o Inclusion of meal applications in pupil registration packages at the beginning of the year and directly mailing applications to all families with the annual menu;
  o Sponsorship of tables at “Back to School Nights” to encourage parents to fill out their child’s application that evening and attracting families with small prizes like school supplies and snacks;
  o Effective communication and training for principals and school receptionists about the importance of school meal applications at summer meetings and routine emails; and
  o Creation of a media campaign through press releases to local news outlets and interviews with local TV stations linking school meal applications with educational success.

• Pueblo City School District launched an extensive outreach campaign to increase the number of completed meal applications returned. In 2004, approximately 56.3 percent of students returned applications for FRP meals. In 2009, following the implementation of outreach, 64.4 percent of the students returned applications for FRP meals. This was achieved through:
  o Effective communication with principals, teachers, and parents about the educational impact of high meal application return rates which included increased funding for school nutrition and general funding through E-rate and Title 1 funds;
  o Continuation and development of outreach planning committees to bring together the expertise of teachers, principals and school nutrition directors to organize and implement a school-specific outreach plan to increase the number of completed applications returned; and
  o Celebrations with classroom pizza parties for classes who returned 100 percent of their applications fully completed. The pizza reward was actually the school lunch program pizza; the only school cost was for the meals of students who did not qualify for FRP lunch.
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USEFUL RESOURCES

• Colorado Department of Education—School Nutrition (Indexed information about all topics involving school nutrition and contact information)
  http://www.cde.state.co.us/index_nutrition

• Colorado Department of Education—Child Nutrition Program Forms 2010-2011 (Links to the current required school meal application forms)
  http://cde.state.co.us/nutrition/nutriprogramrenewal

• Colorado Department of Human Services (with information available by county, need, or agency)
  http://www.colorado.gov/cdns

• Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)
  http://www.frac.org/programs

• Hunger Free Colorado
  http://www.hungerfreecolorado.org

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ENDNOTES

1 Colorado Revised Statutes (CRS) 22-54-112 requires school meal applications to be included in new pupil registration packets, so this is a great opportunity to take advantage of for your district’s campaign. For more information refer to: http://www.michie.com/colorado/lpExt.dll?f=templates&eMail=Y&fn=main-h.htm&cp=cocode/1/350da/383ab/383f9/38403/3862b.

2 Increase of FRP eligibility can also be attributed to other factors such as the impact of the recession on families.