

Best Practices for School Meal Applications

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Attention: Child Nutrition Directors, Determining Officials

Contact: Ireland Stone Smith

Phone Number: 501-324-9502

Email: Ireland.stone-smith@ade.arkansas.gov

The Child Nutrition Unit (CNU) encourages quick action by districts and schools to ensure accurate reflections of the need of their student populations by promoting the completion of school meal applications.

When families and schools partner to complete Free and Reduced Price Meal Applications, both benefit from:

- Free and Reduced Price Meals to eligible students
- Access to ACT testing at no cost to the family
- Access to concurrent credit opportunities at no cost to the family
- Access to discounted rate for internet services and other supports

Districts should strongly encourage households to complete a meal application.

Allowable practices in the collection of applications can include, but are not limited to:

- Sharing with parents and guardians the benefits for both families and schools.
- Providing community outreach to encourage households to submit applications for meal benefits.
- Providing families with a school contact who will provide additional information and answer questions.
- Remind families that participating in school meals or completing an application does not affect the student's or family's SNAP benefits.
- Reassuring families that schools maintain the confidentiality of families that complete meal applications.

- Providing the community information regarding free and reduced price meals by posting applications in parent centers, post offices, grocery stores, unemployment offices, county health units, and other community buildings.
- Utilizing technology (social media, emails, apps, websites, etc.) to remind families that meal applications must be renewed at the beginning of each school year and that meal benefits are available to all students at any time during the school year.
- Make additional contact with households that have not completed an application for school year 2023-24, especially when that household qualified for benefits in school year 2022-23, before the allowed carryover from the previous year's eligibility expires for the new school year.

Sample flyers and media release attached to this memo: [Child Nutrition Resource Center](#)

Districts might consider distributing the "Public Release," which details the availability of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and provides information related to program eligibility, in the following locations:

- School and district websites and social media
- Local newspaper
- Local cable TV company
- Local TV and radio stations
- Local businesses / employers / factories
- Local health department offices
- Local Department of Motor Vehicles
- Local Department of Human Services office
- Local WIC office
- Local churches
- Public libraries
- Local hospitals and clinics
- Local housing developments

Schools must be aware that federal policies govern the free and reduced-price application process. [Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#) dated July 18, 2018, is the most recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidance available.

Schools should continue to rely on their district determining official(s) to accurately determine the eligibility of students for free and reduced-price meals. These individuals are trained on the appropriate methods and requirements for approval and denial of all applications returned. The determining official will communicate with households if additional information or clarifications are needed prior to making the determination of the benefit.

Income eligibility guidelines for the 2023-2024 school year can be found [here](#).

Students who transfer to a non-provision school from a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2 (P2) School must receive free, reimbursable meals for up to 10 operating days or until a new eligibility determination for the current school year is made, whichever comes first.

In Arkansas, the meal benefit can be extended for up to 30 operating days or until a new eligibility is determined for the current school year, whichever comes first.

Flexibility in Effective Date of Free or Reduced Price Meal Eligibility

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [Policy Memo SP 11-2014](#) clarifies the requirements in order for districts to establish flexibility concerning the effective date of certification for National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) program benefits.

The Eligibility Manual for School Meals states that the determination, notification, and implementation of free and reduced-price meal status be made within 10 operating days from the date the application is received by the SFA. If the SFA chooses, and the requirements below are met, the SFA could establish the date of receipt of the application as the effective date of eligibility, rather than the date the determining official approves it.

This flexibility only applies to eligibility determination made through the application process, and only to complete applications containing all required information at the time of submission.

School Food Authorities (SFAs) choosing to exercise the flexibility in the effective date of eligibility MUST:

- Notify the CNU in advance.
- Apply this flexibility to all students participating in the NSLP and SBP;
- Have a method to document the date the application was received, such as date stamp;
- Refund families of eligible students for a reimbursable meal prior to the eligibility determination;
- Forgive debt accumulated between receipt of application and determining or forgive debt accumulated during application processing time.

Sample Situations:

If a student has paid for full price meals and was subsequently determined eligible for free price meals:

If the student was allowed to charge 5 lunch meals under the SFAs established charge policy at the paid rate after submitting an application but prior to being determined eligible for free meals.

5 lunches @ \$3.40 each = \$17.00

- Revise daily records prior to the claim submission to reflect addition of five (5) free lunches and reduction of 5 paid lunches.
- If the student had paid the \$17.00 then the SFA must refund the family.

This flexibility could help families of low-income students by allowing them to access free or reduced-price meals during the eligibility determination period. It could benefit the SFAs that experience challenges with unpaid debt.

For further information, contact the District's Area Specialist at (501) 324-9502.