

A Checklist of Key Features of School Meals Application Materials to Improve Program Access

As a result of changes in recent legislation reauthorizing the federal school meals programs, every school district in the country will have to revise its school meals application for the 2011-2012 school year. The following changes will have to be made to applications and related materials:

- The application may not ask for income information to determine the eligibility of foster children and foster children may be included on applications with other children in the household.
- The application may ask only for the *last four* digits of the Social Security number of the signing adult or an indication that he or she does not have one.
- The verification notice may not ask for Social Security numbers for any household member.

While making these changes, state and school districts have a unique opportunity to do a comprehensive review of their applications and related materials and revise them to make it easier for eligible low-income parents to enroll their children for free or reduced-price school meals.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reviewed both printable and online applications available on the web for each state and the 100 largest school districts. Based on that review, program administrators may wish to consider the following features when revising their applications and related materials.

Provide materials in a language and at a level that parents can understand by

- Explaining how to obtain materials or assistance in languages other than English
- Providing a link to USDA's translated materials
- Providing a link to translations of local materials
- Using language that parents with limited literacy can understand

Ask only for information necessary to determine eligibility by

- Explaining clearly on printable applications that households that provide a case number do not have to provide income information or information about a Social Security number
- Placing the request for information about a Social Security number in the income-information section on printable applications so parents who provided a SNAP/TANF/FDPIR case number will not mistakenly think they have to provide this information
- Omitting from online applications the request for income information or information

about a Social Security number if the household has provided a SNAP/TANF/FDPIR case number

- Prominently stating on the application that a Social Security number is not required to apply and that an indication that the signing adult does not have one will suffice
- Clarifying on the application that one SNAP/TANF/FDPIR case number for any child or adult in the household is sufficient
- Providing in the direct certification notice instructions to parents about how to make other children in the household known to the school district

Reduce math errors by

- Providing options on the application to note different frequencies of income without doing calculations

Encourage families that may be eligible to apply by stating clearly on the web site and application

- That a household may apply for benefits at any time during the school year
- That children of parents who become unemployed may become eligible for free or reduced-price meals
- That a single application will be accepted for all children in the household attending schools in the same district
- That household members do not have to be U.S. citizens for children to qualify for free or reduced-price meals
- The required non-discrimination statement
- The income eligibility limit for reduced-price meals

Encourage eligible families selected for verification to respond by including in the verification notice

- A toll-free number for assistance and an explanation that families will not be charged
- Clarification that documentation may be provided for any point in time between the month prior to application and the time of verification
- Instructions about how households with homeless, runaway, or migrant children can verify their eligibility
- Instructions about how households with no income can verify their eligibility