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Free and Reduced-Price Meal Application and Income Verification Practices in School Nutrition Programs in the U.S.

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Objectives

To assess the current practices and attitudes of school nutrition program (SNP) directors regarding free and reduced-price (F-RP) meal application and verification processes.

Methodology

• To explore current practices related to F-RP meal application and verification and to develop the survey instrument, individual interviews with state child nutrition (CN) directors ($n = 14$) and district-level SNP directors ($n = 25$) in 14 states (2 states per USDA region) were conducted.

• The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts and pilot tested.

• The link to the final revised survey was e-mailed to a stratified random sample of 1,500 district SNP directors.

• Additional 500 paper-based questionnaires were mailed to 1/3 of the sample to increase participation.

• Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS.

Results

A total of 319 (20.9% response rate) provided usable data.

Types of Free and Reduced-Price Meal Application Used in Small ($n=156$) and Large ($n=138$) Sized Districts					
	Small (≤ 2,500)		Large (> 2,500)		
	n	%	n	%	X^2
Use of paper-based F-RP meal application only	129	82.7	46	33.3	254.53***
Use of both paper-based and online F-RP meal application	24	15.4	82	59.4	
Use of online F-RP meal application only	3	1.9	10	7.2	
***p<.001.					

Processing Free and Reduced Price Meal Applications

• District directors ($n = 138$, 43.3%), bookkeepers or secretaries ($n = 89$, 27.9%), or assistants to district SNP directors ($n = 87$, 27.3%) processed the paper-based applications.

• District directors ($n = 65$, 54.6%), assistants to school directors ($n = 54$, 45.4%), bookkeepers or secretaries ($n = 43$, 36.1%) processed online F-RP meal applications.

• In some cases, temporary staff members were hired to process paper-based F-RP meal applications during the enrollment period ($n = 17$, 5.3%).

• Challenges: Time- and resource-intensive nature of processing and verification of paper-based applications.

Free And Reduced Price Meal Application Verification

Verification Documents Accepted		
Which of the following do you ask to be submitted for income eligibility verification?		
	n	%
Pay stubs	280	87.8
Award letters from other agencies (SNAP) indicating their eligibility to receive services	236	74.0
Support payment decrees from courts	195	61.1
Tax report	194	60.8
Other	42	13.2

• The majority ($n = 210$, 65.9%) of the participants indicated the current verification process was adequate for determining eligibility.

• However, 31 (9.7%) participants perceived the current verification system as inadequate for following reasons:

  • Parents might omit some of the income documentation ($n = 22$, 6.9%).

  • The parents' response rate is low ($n = 6$, 1.9%).

  • The verification process is too cumbersome ($n = 5$, 1.6%).

  • The 3% random checking is insufficient ($n = 5$, 1.6%).

• Large districts ($n = 139$) accepted more types of documents than small districts ($n = 161$) (M ± SD = 3.44 ± 0.99 vs. 2.87 ± 1.29, p < 0.001).

Conclusions

• Paper-based applications required time- and resource-intensive processes.

• Online F-RP system is less common, but the system helped simplify the sequential processes as parents entered information directly.

• Verification process is considered to be adequate but there were several concerns over the process.

Recommendations

School Nutrition Directors May:

• Utilize online F-RP meal application systems to reduce the number of human errors, the workload at schools, and risks related to confidentiality and security of information.

• Encourage parents to apply online, if both online and paper-based applications are accepted to reduce workload and improve accuracy.

• Maximize the use of direct certification procedures as suggested by the USDA, FNS:

  • to reduce over-certifying F-RP meal participants, and

  • to eliminate the need for parents to supply documents for income verification.

• Use more inclusive reports for 3% income verifications instead of documents such as pay stubs and child support documentation.

USDA, State Agencies, ICN, or SNA May:

Provide guidance for acceptable documentation for F-RP meal application and verification requirements to assist SNP directors and staff members in streamlining the application and verification processes while reducing human errors.