



Examining Free and Reduced-Price Meal Application and Income Verification Practices in School Nutrition Programs



INTRODUCTION

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide nutritious and safe meals to more than 30 million students a day, and the majority of participants receive free or reduced-price (F-RP) meals. In 2015, the federal reimbursement for these programs was approximately \$15.6 billion dollars. A recent USDA study indicated that almost \$1.5 billion dollars was associated with certification and claiming errors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the current practices and attitudes of school nutrition (SN) program directors regarding the F-RP application and verification process.

METHODOLOGY

- Interviews with 14 state child nutrition directors and 25 SN directors were conducted to aid in developing the survey.
- The survey was reviewed by a panel of experts, pilot tested, and the final revised survey was e-mailed to 1,500 district SN program directors in 14 states. An additional 500 paper-based surveys were mailed to 1/3 of the sample to increase participation.
- Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS.

RESULTS

- A total of 319 (21% response rate) surveys provided usable data.
- Over half (55%) of the SN programs accepted only paper-based F-RP meal applications, and another 33% used paper-based and online applications. Thirteen SN programs accepted only online F-RP meal applications.
- District directors, bookkeepers, secretaries, or assistants to SN program directors processed both paper-based and online F-RP meal applications.
- The majority (72%) of SN programs used electronic point-of-service systems and Error Prone software (7%) to select the required 3% sample for F-RP meal application verification.
- Two-thirds of the participants indicated the current verification process was adequate for determining eligibility.
- However, 10% of SN directors perceived the current verification system as inadequate for the following reasons:
 - Parents might omit some of the income documentation.
 - Parent response rate is low.
 - The verification process is too cumbersome.
 - The process of checking a random sample of 3% of applications is insufficient.

Free And Reduced-Price Meal Application Verification

Verification Documents Accepted

Which of the following do you ask to be submitted for income eligibility verification?

	<i>n</i>	%
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

CONCLUSIONS

- Paper-based applications required time- and resource-intensive processes.
- Online F-RP systems are less common, but help simplify the process, because parents enter the information directly.
- The verification process is considered accurate, but there were several concerns over the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School nutrition program directors may:

- Utilize electronic F-RP meal application systems to reduce the number of human errors, the workload at schools, and the risks related to confidentiality and security of information.
- Encourage parents to apply online, if available, to reduce the workload and to improve accuracy.
- Maximize the use of direct certification procedures as suggested by the USDA, FNS, to:
 - Reduce over-certifying F-RP meal participants; and
 - Eliminate the need for parents to supply documents for income verification.

For more information, you can download the executive summary of the original report at <http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20160714023517.pdf>

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