

“WHY DO WE NEED TO FILL OUT THAT FORM?”
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE MEAL APPLICATION PROCESS

Why do parents need to fill out a meal application?

Student Nutrition Services (SNS), the district department responsible for providing school meals, is asking all families to fill out the meal application, even those who know they won't qualify based on family income. See below for more details.

SNS has annual expenses of about \$15 million. Their main source of income is from federal and state reimbursements for breakfasts and lunches served to students who qualify for free and reduced price meals. Without a meal application on file, SNS cannot receive the full government reimbursement for those meals.

Based on family size and income, as reported on the meal application, students are designated eligible for free or reduced price meals, or they are designated as being on “paid” status (meaning not reimbursable). The “paid” category includes not only students whose family income is too high to qualify for reimbursement, but also students whose families have not filled out a form at all. SNS receives just 25 cents from the government to offset the cost of “paid” lunches, while reimbursement for a student qualified for free meals is \$2.57. Students on “paid” status are expected to pay for their school meals. However, not all of them do so.

How will my school benefit if parents fill out the meal app?

BENEFITS TO SCHOOLS

- ▶ Schools receive money based on the figures that come from these forms.
- ▶ Free and reduced lunch counts determine individual school eligibility for Federal Title 1 funding.
- ▶ There are other grants and award available to schools based on percentages of students enrolled in the NSLP.
- ▶ Higher rates of students qualified for free or reduced price meals brings higher WSF funding.
- ▶ Having a free/reduced lunch participation rate which accurately reflects the economic status of the school's students ensures a more accurate “similar schools” ranking on the Academic Performance Index.

BENEFITS TO ENROLLED STUDENTS

- ▶ Eligible students can receive breakfast as well as lunch.
- ▶ Often school lunch is more nutritious than what students bring from home, because the school lunch must comply with USDA nutrition standards.
- ▶ Studies show students who eat a nutritious breakfast and lunch learn better and behave better in school.
- ▶ Enrolled students pay a greatly reduced rate for each AP exam they take, and are eligible to participate in other paid programs at reduced or no cost.

BENEFITS TO EVERY STUDENT IN THE SCHOOL

► Higher participation in the lunch line means better quality food for everyone!
► Student Nutrition Service is working to improve the meal quality at all schools, but changes require money. The budget for SNS comes from government reimbursement and from student's payments for each meal served. No revenue is generated when students don't sign up or use the lunch program, when students buy their food off campus or from vending machines, or when students do not pay for their lunches even when they should. If more students enroll and use school meal programs, more money will be available to order fresher, more appealing food for every student's lunch, whether they are eating the NSLP lunch or buying a la carte food from the Beanery.

(This information is available as a flyer which can be printed out at:

http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/benefits_nslp.pdf)

What about families who know they won't qualify because their income is too high?

SNS is asking all families to fill out the meal application, even those who know they won't qualify based on family income. Those families can simply provide the student's name and write "NOT INTERESTED" prominently on the top of the form. The reason why families are being asked to return the form even if they are not interested, is that SNS has determined that fear of being identified as "poor" created a stigma for students returning the form in prior years. Having every student return a form eliminates this stigma, and makes it more likely that students who would qualify for reimbursement will return their forms without embarrassment.

Why not just add a "not interested" box on the form to be checked off if the family knows they won't qualify?

The contents of the meal applications are tightly regulated by the state and federal government. No changes can be made to the form with prior approval. SNS did ask for permission to add such a box to their form, but permission was denied by the state.

Why should a family fill out the form if their child doesn't want to eat in the cafeteria?

If there is any chance that the student might qualify for reimbursable meals, the family should fill out the entire form, even if the child won't eat in the caf, because every qualifying child raises the school's free and reduced percentage. It is on this percentage that funding decisions are based. So being identified as qualified helps the school even if the child never sets foot in the caf. Of course, if the child does decide to eat school meals sometimes, then that helps too, by bringing in more reimbursement money for SNS, which is then available to fund better quality food.

Many of our parents are undocumented. They are afraid to fill out the form in case it might get them deported.

By federal law, all meal applications are confidential! The information they contain is available only to certain SNS employees, and an individual family's information is never shared with other departments or other government agencies.

What about families with no Social Security number?

Families who have no social security number can still apply for reimbursable meals. There is a box on the application to check indicating that there is no SS#. Families who indicate no SS#, and who also write "zero" for family income, will receive "temporary qualified" status for their child. The child is qualified for 8 weeks of reimbursable meals. After 8 weeks, the family is sent a new application (this is to update their information in case anything has changed.) If they again check "no SS#" and indicate zero income, the child will receive another 8 weeks of "temporary qualified" status. There is no limit to the number of times a family can file an application in this manner.

What is the process SNS follows to verify the information a family provides on their meal application?

SNS is required to verify the information on 3% of the forms they receive, and this verification must be completed by the end of October. If information is found to be not accurate, SNS will contact the family and ask them to fill out a new form with more accurate information. If the student no longer qualifies for free or reduced price meals based on the updated information, then the student's status will be changed to "paid", and SNS will expect the student to pay for meals in the future. There is no other "consequence", and neither SNS nor any other government agency will attempt to collect payment from the family for meals served in the past.

The school year is already underway; is it too late to fill out the form?

No – it is never too late to fill out a meal application. A student who becomes qualified for reimbursable meals this school year will also continue to be qualified through the first 6 weeks of the next school year, too.

Does it really matter if some low-income children aren't officially designated "free/reduced lunch"?

It is the policy of SNS and the San Francisco Board of Education that no child is allowed to go hungry. Those who show up in the cafeteria line with no applications for reimbursable meals on file, and no money to pay for their food, are given the meal at no charge. In some other districts, children in that situation are given a "meal of shame" such as a bowl of cereal, and some districts simply let them go hungry. In SFUSD, SNS absorbs the cost of these meals and the loss is recorded as a "cash shortage"; in recent years, these "cash shortages" have risen as high as half a million dollars. The money SNS loses providing meals to students on "paid" status could otherwise be used to pay for

higher quality food, or for piloting new programs like salad bars, or for hiring more cafeteria staff to speed the lunch lines. Worse, when SNS cannot balance their budget, it encroaches on the general fund, using money which would otherwise be available to pay for teachers or other classroom expenses.

Everyone at our school is poor. Why should they have to fill out a form – can't Student Nutrition just feed them for free?

Unfortunately, no. Without a form on file, SNS cannot collect enough money from government reimbursement to cover the cost of the meals served to students.

Students whose families receive food stamps, or participate in CalWORKS or TANF, automatically qualify for free meals through Direct Certification. These families only need to provide the name of their student, the name of their school, and their CalWORKS case number. [All students eligible for Direct Certification will eventually be qualified for reimbursable meals regardless of whether their family fills out the form, but the process is quicker if the family does submit the form.] All other families *must* fill out the form in order for their children to qualify for reimbursable meals.

Doesn't the food come free from the government?

Certain ingredients for school meals are available at no cost from the government. Called "commodities", these items vary from year to year based on availability. "Government cheese" is a typical example of a "commodity". Although the cheese is free, it is available as a giant block, which is then directed by SNS to a processor, who can turn it into grilled cheese sandwiches, or other menu items. The processing of commodities is NOT free; SNS may pay anywhere from 40-60 cents per serving for the processing of an entrée from commodities. Not every food item is available every year as a commodity; for example, during 05-06, beef was not available as a commodity. Any beef for school lunches that year had to be purchased by SNS.

Additionally, SNS must pay for salary and benefits for its 275 employees. Currently, over half of the SNS budget goes for labor costs. SNS must generate in the neighborhood of \$15 million per year in income (mostly from government reimbursement for qualified students) in order to break even.

Why does SNS have to break even? Feeding the kids is important – why can't the district just cover the cost, whatever it is?

SFUSD is currently facing a budget shortage of over \$6 million, with a much larger shortage projected for the 07-08 school year. SNS has been told that they MUST balance their budget this school year. There is no additional money in the SFUSD budget to pay for any "encroachment" on the general fund.

A few years ago, the district participated in Provision 2, and we didn't have to collect meal apps. That worked better for my school – why can't we do that again?

Provision 2 is an alternate way of collecting federal reimbursement money for school meals, but it is not cost effective for a district like SFUSD, which had only about 55% of students qualified for reimbursable meals in 05-06. Provision 2 is only appropriate when about 85-90% of students are qualified. Putting the entire district under Provision 2 led to much higher losses for SNS, encroaching on the general fund – that is, coming out of classroom, teacher and student needs.

For a more detailed answer, please visit:

<http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/pro2.pdf>

The meal form looks different than I remember. Why is that?

In 2005-06, SNS began using new software to process meal applications. The software requires a special format for the meal application. To learn more about this new meal application, please visit:

<http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/rocket.pdf>

Once my school has given out the meal applications and families have had a chance to return them, how can we find out which students don't yet have an application on file?

SNS will be making lists available of students at each school who do not yet have an application on file. Schools should receive this list from SNS in October.

What else can the school do to encourage more parents to fill out the form?

- ▶ The Principal can make sure that the entire school community (parents, staff, and students) is aware of the benefits from a higher rate of meal applications returned (see above).
- ▶ PTSA or other parent organization can publicize the importance of return of the meal applications to the parent body. A flyer is available for download at:
http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/benefits_nslp.pdf
- ▶ Teachers can make return of the meal application a homework assignment, or award extra credit points to every student who returns a meal application.
- ▶ PTSA or other parent organization can offer incentive reward to any class which has a 100% return of meal apps.
- ▶ Teachers can make meal applications available during parent-teacher conferences.

An informational flyer for parents about the meal application is available at:

<http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/SPMealFaqEnglish2006.pdf>