

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents and Independent School Heads
FROM: Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D., Interim Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Collecting Household Income for Education and School Meals Purposes:
“Fill the Form” Campaign
DATE: August 15, 2023

Purpose

With the school year approaching, the Agency of Education would like to remind Supervisory Unions (SU/SDs) of the “Fill the Form” campaign. Please encourage and support families in your Supervisory Union (SU/SDs) to complete the appropriate income form (either the USDA School Meals Application or AOE Household Income Form depending on which kind of school meals program your school is operating in 23-24) by October 1, 2023. A high response rate helps ensure that the Agency of Education (AOE) collects accurate data on student poverty. These data are a key to helping:

- Schools qualify for critical Federal Title funds
- Afterschool and summer programs
- Student and school broadband access

This information also enables the Agency to draw down the maximum federal dollars for our school meals programs, reducing the cost to VT taxpayers of Universal Meals.

Background

In May 2022, the Vermont General Assembly enacted Act 151 to provide universal meals to Vermont students using a mix of state and federal funding. This law was in effect for the 2023-2024 school year. [Act 64 of 2023](#) made this program permanent.

It is essential that families provide this data to ensure the AOE has a complete picture of student and school-level poverty within the SU/SD in order to fairly distribute educational benefits and program supports (including school-level Title I funds) and comply with mandated federal accountability reporting that accompanies the millions in federal dollars received by Vermont schools.

Furthermore, the more students are determined eligible for free or reduced-price meals by completing applications/forms, the greater the amount of federal funding for school meals the state can draw down, reducing the cost of universal school meals to Vermont taxpayers.

With these factors in mind, SU/SDs and independent schools should make every effort to ensure that the appropriate applications and forms are completed by as many households as possible.

Which Forms to Use?

Talking with families about “filling the form” and submitting this information is complicated by the fact that there are two different forms that may be used by your school(s), depending on the provision a school is using to provide meals.

- Schools in the first or “base” year of Provision 2 should ask families to complete the USDA’s [Application for Free and Reduced Price Meals](#) (FRL). A special template cover letter to households for schools in their base year of Provision 2 explains to households why they are being asked to complete this form.
- Schools that are participating in the USDA’s Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or are in Years 2-4 of Provision 2, and schools that do not offer the National School Lunch Program should ask families to complete a [Household Income Form](#) (HIF), because the USDA does not allow these schools to collect FRL applications.

If you are not sure what Provision your school is using, please check with your school food service director or business manager. Translations of these forms and template letters in many languages are also available via the links above. If you need additional translations, please contact Marc Grimes at marc.grimes@vermont.gov for the USDA School Meals Application or Jamie Jarvis at for the HIF at AOE.SLDSSupportGroup@vermont.gov. Please also use the latter email for any questions related to how and when to use the electronic versus “paper” versions of the HIF.

You should ask families to complete the appropriate form regardless of whether their children intend to eat school meals or apply for other educational benefits such as the Affordable Connectivity Program or Early College tuition waivers. Neither state nor federal law require that families complete these forms, and SU/SDs and independent schools may not require households to complete them. However, filling the forms helps support all the education programs that rely on this critical data, as well as universal school meals, and therefore should be actively and strongly promoted to all households.

“Fill the Form” Campaign

The Agency of Education is providing the content and materials to help you encourage Vermont families to “fill the form.” School and community partners have a key role in this campaign: encouraging your parent and family communities to provide this important information.

The campaign should start immediately and continue through the month of September. Please note that identification of which students are low-income must be included in your DC06 census data collection (for SU/SDs) or your Independent School Census (for independent schools).

Many of you have already sent the appropriate forms to your community. We ask that you follow up those communications with messages asking families to complete and return their form before the end of September. In support of this request, AOE is providing:

- Key messages and talking points for use in parent and family communications
- A template letter for your consideration emphasizing why it is important to Fill the Form
- Communications collateral including posters, social media graphics and other visual resources for prominent posting and sharing with your family community.
- An FAQ for district and school leaders to use as they navigate community conversations about the importance of this initiative. This FAQ also addresses technical questions related to how to collect and submit household income information under the several different types of SY23-24 universal meals implementation scenarios.
- In addition, the AOE will engage in a statewide media campaign to spread the word. We encourage you to do similarly with local and community media and would welcome the opportunity to partner with you if desired.

The campaign will include the following key messages:

- Every family should Fill the Form (either FRL or HIF depending on the specific school)
- It's about more than meals
- By filling out your form you are helping to
 - Support your school to access its fair share of millions in federal dollars for educational programs
 - Provide students in our district and across Vermont with healthy, nutritious food.
 - Reduce the cost of universal school meals for Vermont taxpayers.
- There is no other way currently for the State to gather the needed income information, which is required to access federal funds for your school.
- The privacy of your household financial information is protected by law.
- It only takes a few minutes, and it will help your school and your community.