



Food and
Nutrition
Service

Park Office
Center

3101 Park
Center Drive
Alexandria
VA 22302

DATE: April 29, 2016

MEMO CODE: SP34-2016

SUBJECT: Revised Prototype Free and Reduced Price Application
Materials for SY 2016-17

TO: Regional Directors
Special Nutrition Programs
All Regions

State Directors
Child Nutrition Programs
All States

Please find attached to this memorandum a revised edition of the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals*, with accompanying instructions document and letter to households. These materials have been updated for use in school year (SY) 2016-17, and may be adapted either for direct use by State and local agencies, or as a reference for designing an effective application packet that meets all statutory and regulatory requirements. This memorandum supersedes policy memorandum SP 33-2015, *Revised Prototype Free and Reduced Price Application Materials: Policy Changes and Design Overview*, published April 13, 2015. Furthermore, all corresponding prototype materials published with this memorandum supersede those published with SP 33-2015.

This prototype was designed to make it easier for families to complete so they can provide accurate information. Program operators are encouraged to use this prototype to support access to school meals, especially for children whose parents may have limited literacy, and to strengthen program integrity. Program operators that use this prototype application in the upcoming school year guarantee compliance with Federal requirements and will meet all criteria examined during administrative reviews for the application in SY 2016-2017.

Thanks to the extensive and valuable feedback solicited from State and local officials following the publication of last year's fully redesigned prototype, the SY 2016-2017 prototype features a series of customer service-oriented adjustments that intended to enhance its utility for local program operators. This memorandum highlights and explains these changes, and also details features that are either currently required, or will become required on *all* applications used to determine free and reduced price school meal benefits, effective SY 2017-2018.

The *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* is accompanied by the following materials:

- Prototype letter to households, titled *Frequently Asked Questions About Free and Reduced Price School Meals*
- Prototype application instructions, titled *How to Apply for Free and Reduced Price School Meals*
- Prototype information sharing authorizations:
 - *Sharing Information with Medicaid/SCHIP*
 - *Sharing Information with Other Programs*
- Prototype verification materials:
 - *We Must Check Your Application*
 - *We Have Checked Your Application*
- Prototype household benefit issuance notifications:
 - *Notice to Households of Approval/Denial of Benefits*
 - *Notice of Direct Certification*

Policy Changes Effective SY 2017-2018

State and local agencies must structure their application forms so as to ensure that only those households applying on the basis of income are requested to provide the last four digits of an adult household member's Social Security Number (SSN) or indicate a lack thereof. Households applying based wholly on categorical eligibility status are not required to provide this information. The *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* accomplishes this by making the SSN reporting field part of the income reporting section.

This modification was introduced as an optional feature on the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* in SY 2015-2016. It will continue to be optional in SY 2016-2017, but will be a *required* element of all applications for free and reduced price school meals beginning in SY 2017-2018.

Policy Clarifications Effective SY 2016-2017

The following practices are required for all State and local agencies in SY 2016-2017, and reflect previously established policy as detailed in SP 33-2015.

Indication of 'No Income'

All household applications for free and reduced price school meals must request that applicants write a zero when there is no income to report, but they may not *require* a separate indication of no income from the applicant, such as a check box or other fill-in field. Instead, applications must include a clear and easy to understand instruction that communicates to applicants that *any income field left blank is a positive indication of no income* and certifies that there is no income to report. As such, applications with blank

income fields are to be processed by the school district as complete, rather than incomplete as in prior practice. If local officials have information that the household has intentionally misreported its income, they must verify any such application for cause.

Survey of Race and Ethnicity

The survey of race and ethnicity and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Non-Discrimination Statement are required elements of any application for free and reduced price school meals. Please note that the wording of the USDA Non-Discrimination statement has been revised; State and local agencies are required to use the current USDA Non-Discrimination statement on all free and reduced price school meal applications. The current USDA Non-Discrimination statement may be referenced at:
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/usda-nondiscrimination-statement>.

Design Changes to the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals for SY 2016-2017*

A series of streamlining changes have been made to the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* for SY 2016-17. These modifications are intended to improve application processing by local officials and provide additional clarity for applicants. Inclusion of these elements on application forms developed by State and local agencies is optional.

“Grade” Reporting Field

A “Grade” field has been added to the children and students reporting section (Step 1). This change was made in response to feedback from State and local officials requesting additional identifying information to assist in the matching of student names to existing enrollment figures. It is important to note that inclusion of the “Grade” field on free and reduced price application forms is optional, as are other similar identifiers such as school name and student ID number that may facilitate, but are not essential to, the eligibility determination process.

“For School or District Use Only” Section

A section to assist the review process for determining officials has been reintroduced into this year’s prototype application. This feature was included on prior application designs, and has been returned to the application based on feedback from State and local officials. This section is located at the bottom of the reverse side of the prototype application form, and provides income conversion guidelines, fields to report the calculated total household income and frequency, indication of eligibility determination, and signature/date blocks for determining and verifying officials. School and district use sections are not a required element of free and reduced price school meal applications, and may be included or structured at the option of the State or local agency.

“Sources of Income” Charts

In last year’s release of prototype application materials, helpful charts were included in the instructions document listing the reportable sources of income for children and adults. In an effort to make this information more easily referenced for household applicants, these charts have been moved from the instructions document to the top of the prototype application form’s reverse side. Detailed income reporting instructions are still listed in the prototype instructions document. State and local agencies have the option of providing a list or chart of income sources on the application form. While inclusion of such information is recommended, it is not required.

Other Recommended Design Elements of the Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals

The following are design changes that were previously made to the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals* and included in the current version. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) strongly encourages State and local agencies to include the following design elements in their application forms.

Income Reporting in Whole Dollars

FNS strongly recommends that all income reporting fields on the application ask for sums in whole dollars only. This simplifies income reporting for the household while reducing processing burden for the school district. Standard rounding rules may be applied under this approach; to round off amounts to the nearest whole dollar, drop amounts under 50 cents and increase amounts from 50 to 99 cents to the next dollar.

Separate Reporting for Children and Adults

Free and reduced price school meal applications are recommended to clearly separate household member reporting sections for infants, children, and students up to grade 12 from those for adult household members. This layout is intended to reduce the risk of duplicate entries and make it easier for households to accurately list all members.

Total Household Members Reporting Field

FNS recommends including on the application a field for reporting the total number of members present in the household. This is intended as an accountability safeguard, and to further encourage households to report all members who are present. For example, households may accidentally omit household members who do not attend school or do not receive income when listing household members separately. This error was frequently observed throughout the focus testing process for the *Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals*, and the presence of this field helped to alert reviewing officials to discrepancies in the number of household members reported. Typically, this field will be included at the end of the application’s income reporting section(s).

Design Changes to Other Prototype Materials

The prototype instructions document has been redesigned for SY 2016-17 in an effort to enhance its usefulness as a step-by-step guide, while reducing printing costs for local agencies. The updated instructions document has not received substantive content changes compared to last school year, however, the new design employs a horizontal (rather than vertical) page orientation and reduces the page count from four pages to two.

Non-English Language Versions

This initial release only includes the English language version of the prototype materials. A Spanish language translation will follow shortly. FNS is in the process of translating the prototype materials into a total of 49 languages, including all languages currently made available in prior design versions. A list of languages to be translated is attached to this memo. These translations are expected to be published prior to the start of the 2016-2017 academic year. Until these additional language translations are released, State and local agencies may continue to use the current translated application materials, available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/applying-free-and-reduced-price-school-meals>.

Availability of Prototype Free and Reduced Price Application Materials

All the prototype documents are currently available on the FNS website at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/applying-free-and-reduced-price-school-meals>.

The prototype application is made available in the following formats for ease of adaptation at the State and local level:

- Adobe PDF (fillable)
- Microsoft Word

All other prototype documents are made available in Microsoft Word.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this memo to program operators immediately. Program operators should direct any questions concerning this guidance to their State agency. State agencies with questions should contact the appropriate FNS Regional Office.



Angela M. Kline
Director
Policy & Program Development Division
Child Nutrition Programs

Attachments