



**SCHOOL MEALS OUTREACH
TOOLKIT**

**STRATEGIES TO
IMPROVE OUTREACH & COMMUNICATION,
INCREASE MEAL BENEFIT APPLICATIONS,
AND IMPROVE FOOD ACCESS WITH THE RETURN TO
PRE-PANDEMIC SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS**

2022-2023

Schools in RI and across the country are transitioning back to pre-pandemic USDA school meal regulations for the 2022-2023 school year.

This means a return to the collection of meal benefit applications to qualify eligible families for free or reduced-price meals. Ensuring all eligible families complete and submit applications is critical for students to have access to healthy school meals without stigma and for preventing unpaid meal debt from burdening families and district budgets. There's also a financial impact for districts as state education funding streams rely on the number of students who qualify for free/reduced-price meals.

Effective communication about the school meal application process and benefits of submission with families and staff is crucial this year. For the past two school years during the Covid-19 pandemic, all students were able to eat school meals for free regardless of household income. The return to meal benefit applications or paid status with money in school meal accounts will be a change for everyone.

- New school families have only known universal free meals so the meal benefit application process is completely new
- Some families that have had a change in employment/income status may now be eligible for free/reduced price meals and have no experience with the application process
- Other families, who are full-pay, may need a reminder that money must once again be deposited into a school meal account to cover the cost of meals for their children

The meal application collection process has always been challenging and time-consuming for schools, and the changes from last year to this year will likely make the process more difficult.

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RI Healthy Schools Coalition (RIHSC) in partnership with RI Department of Education Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) has developed this toolkit to support district/school efforts with outreach strategies, communication templates, and meal service models to ensure all students have access to healthy meals, to mitigate potential unpaid meal balances, and to reduce administrative staff overload.



Eligibility Information

RIDE Child Nutrition Program's recorded webinar [Eligibility Determination and Verification](#) provides a comprehensive review of the meal benefit eligibility determination and verification process.

There are several ways for students to qualify for free or reduced-price meals:

1. Children living in households that participate in the following programs

- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)
- TANF/RI Works (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)
- FDIPIR (Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations) - N/A in Rhode Island

automatically qualify and DO NOT NEED TO COMPLETE A MEAL BENEFIT APPLICATION. Schools must identify these students and notify families of their eligibility for free meals at least 3 times per year through a process called **Electronic Direct Certification**, which ensures that students receive the benefits they deserve.

It's important to verify students believed to qualify for direct certification because errors like misspelled names or incorrect birthdates mean some children are missing from the state direct certification system that are eligible. Improving direct certification numbers will lessen the paperwork families have to fill out and reduce administrative burden for the district.

2. Children who are migrant, in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or enrolled in Head Start automatically qualify for free school meals, but DO REQUIRE A COMPLETED MEAL BENEFIT APPLICATION, which may be submitted by a social worker or homeless liaison.
3. Children living in households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals with a COMPLETED MEAL BENEFIT APPLICATION. Children living in households with incomes between 130-185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price school meals with a COMPLETED MEAL BENEFIT APPLICATION.



Eligibility Information

Income Eligibility Guidelines July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023

FREE meals if gross household income is at or below:		
Total # of people in Household	GROSS Monthly Income	GROSS Weekly Income
2	\$ 1,984	\$ 458
3	\$ 2,495	\$ 576
4	\$ 3,007	\$ 694
5	\$ 3,518	\$ 812
6	\$ 4,029	\$ 930
7	\$ 4,541	\$ 1,046
8	\$ 5,052	\$1,166
For each additional household member,* add:	\$ 512	\$ 118

REDUCED-PRICE meals if gross household income is at or below (but higher than free limits at left):		
Total # of people in Household	GROSS Monthly Income	GROSS Weekly Income
2	\$ 2,823	\$ 652
3	\$ 3,551	\$ 820
4	\$ 4,279	\$ 988
5	\$ 5,006	\$ 1,156
6	\$ 5,734	\$ 1,324
7	\$ 6,462	\$ 1,492
8	\$ 7,189	\$1,659
For each additional household member,* add:	\$ 728	\$ 168

* Household members include ALL who live in the household, including children not in school and adults supported by the household income

[Full eligibility chart at USDA Food and Nutrition Service website](#)

Effective Outreach Strategies

Frequent & Varied Communication

Repetition is key! Message frequently and through various channels. Utilize the **district website (preferably linked on the home page), district letters & emails, school websites, indoor/outdoor school signboards, school e-newsletters, principal letters & emails, registration packets, robocalls, and social media** to get the word out about the changes with school meals and the benefits of completing an application for free/reduced-price meals.



Send the meal benefit application alongside other school forms, like emergency contact, health forms, etc., that have higher return rates. Be sure to include the meal benefit application in registration packets both for new students and students transferring in mid-year.



Consider renaming it “Meal Benefit Application” to avoid the stigma of “Free/Reduced-Price Meal Application” and stress the confidentiality of the information provided.

While schools cannot require families to complete a meal benefit application, some districts have great success with **asking ALL families to respond** in some way - if not with a completed application, with a marked checkbox indicating that the household is declining to complete the application.

Online Application Format linked to District Website

Offering **online applications** for both completion and submission is an easy, convenient, and secure option for parents and guardians. Districts can partner with programs such as schoolunchapp.com or myschoolapps.com and link a web-based application which can be accessed from smartphones, tablets, or laptops with internet connection. The step-by-step guides (available in multiple languages) provided on these websites makes completing and submitting an accurate application much easier.

In order to make accessing the application as easy as possible, **add a button to the district homepage** linked directly to the page with application information: a link to the online application (if applicable) and a paper application to print, along with instructions for completing and a mailing address.

Meals Advocate Position (See sample [Meals Advocate job description](#)).

The establishment of a **Meals Advocate position** can reap many benefits for schools/districts. Reductions in food insecurity, improvements in student diet quality, improved school-home relations, centralization of administrative duties, reduction of unpaid meal debt and financial strain on families, and increase in Title 1 funding are a few.

An advocate becomes the point person to oversee the meal benefit application process and any unpaid meal debt while reducing administrative burden. This dedicated position can build and maintain open and sensitive lines of communication with families, students, building staff, and food service, especially at the start of the school year when qualification of free/reduced-price eligible families is critical.



The Meals Advocate can participate in school events (Open Houses, Back to School Nights, Kindergarten Orientations, etc.) to raise awareness of the school meals program and offer help with understanding and completing the application as well as other USDA food and nutrition programs such as SNAP.

In many cases, a Meals Advocate position pays for itself with an improved rate of return of free/reduced-price applications, the reduction of potential unpaid meal debt, and increased educational funding. Meals Advocate positions can be full or part time, depending on the needs of a district, and the portion of time spent directly on supporting the school meals program can be charged to the non-profit school lunch account.

Application Support

Offer help to parents/guardians to navigate the application process. Teachers, principals, and other staff with trusted relationships can encourage families to complete applications and answer questions.

If your district accepts electronic applications, set up an “Meal Benefit Application Station” with a computer/tablet in the school office or during events where families are present.

Share RI Healthy Schools Coalition's [Meal Benefit Application how-to video](#), a step-by-step guide (in English and Spanish) for filling out the paper application. Include a link and QR code to the video in family communications; share it with staff to provide to families; and utilize the customizable flyer on the next page. The application may look scary and overwhelming, so this simply worded video can help.

Customizable Flyer for Families

This flyer was developed to send digitally or home in backpacks to families. It alerts families to the switch back to the pre-pandemic meals program payment system for the upcoming school year and explains the importance of filling out meal benefit applications. Consider printing and sending flyers home with the September lunch menu and having it available at school events.

The flyer (available in English and Spanish) has an area on the back (second sheet) for customizable contact information:

- district
- phone number
- email address

and an area to enter your meal prices for the 2022-2023 school year.



HEADS UP! SCHOOL MEALS ARE NO LONGER FREE-FOR-ALL

Beginning in school year 2022-2023, schools can no longer offer free meals for every student, as they have for the past two years because of the pandemic.

Meal benefit applications are ONCE AGAIN necessary and important.

If your child is not approved for free school meals, you must add money to your school meal account to buy any meals, food or beverage items.

Information on your school meal application:

- ✓ may qualify your child for free or reduced-price lunch and other educational discounts, *which benefits your child!*
- ✓ helps your child's school get important state and federal education funding, *which also benefits your child!*

IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER:

YOUR FAMILY MAY BE ELIGIBLE Many families do not apply for free or reduced-price school meals because they do not think they are eligible.

DON'T GUESS - FILL OUT AN APPLICATION! You do not have to be below the poverty line to qualify.

You can get help for your family budget and food for your child! Fill out an application to see if you qualify.

Apply Now

NEXT PAGE →

APPLICATIONS CAN BE FILLED OUT IN MINUTES The application may look scary, but it does not ask for a lot of information and can be filled out in 10 minutes. **NEED HELP?** This **VIDEO** provides step-by-step help. Or see below to contact your school. 

APPLICATIONS ARE CONFIDENTIAL Information is **NOT SHARED** with teachers, school staff, other students or other agencies. Free and reduced-price school meals are available for all who qualify, citizens and non-citizens. PIN pads assure privacy in the cafeteria. 

LOTS OF HEALTHY MEAL CHOICES Healthy school breakfast and lunch choices are the same for all students, whether full-priced, reduced-price, or free. 

ONE APPLICATION COVERS EVERY CHILD IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD. Only **ONE** application is needed for your family no matter how many kids you have. A completed application must be submitted **each school year** to continue to receive free or reduced-price meals. 

Meal prices for school year 2022-2023:	BREAKFAST		LUNCH	
	Full pay	Reduced-pay	Full Pay	Reduced-pay
		\$	\$	

HAVE QUESTIONS? NEED HELP?

Anytown Public Schools
(555) 555-5555 ext 3
JaneBrown@anytownps.org

VIDEO with step-by-step instructions for filling out the application 

or scan code: 

HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS *fuel for success!*

August 2022

Sample Enews/Email Notice

1. **HEADS UP!** School meals are no longer free for all students as they have been for the past two years because of the pandemic. Students must be approved for free meal benefits or have money in their school meal accounts to buy any meals, food or beverage item.

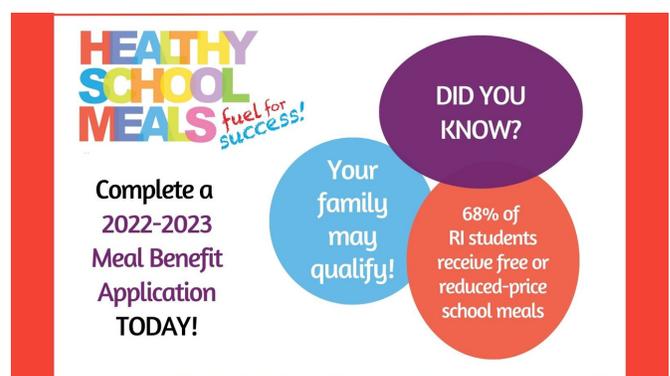
Do not guess if you are eligible – 68% of RI students get free or reduced-price school meals. All meal benefit application information is private and you can qualify for benefits whether or not you have a social security number. To get an application, [XXXXXXXXXXXX](#)

2. **IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOL MEALS:** The federal government is no longer providing free school meals for all students as they have for the past two years because of the pandemic. **Meal benefit applications are once again important and necessary.**

All families are encouraged to complete an application for the 2022-2023 school year. Only one application is needed per family and new applications can be submitted at any time if income decreases or household size increases. Applications do not need a complete social security number, if you have one - just the last 4 digits - and do not require citizenship. To get an application, [XXXXXXXXXXXX](#)

If students are not approved for free meals, money must be put into their school meal accounts to buy any meals, food or beverage item.

SUGGESTED GRAPHICS TO ACCOMPANY TEXT:



[Click here to easily copy/paste/download text and images above \(in English and Spanish\)](#)

Sample Social Media Posts

Helpful tips:

- Copy and paste the text into your social media post
- Skip a line, then insert the URL for your meal benefit application page or link
- Keep Twitter's character limit in mind (280 characters) and shorten URL if necessary (with bitly.com or ow.ly)
- We suggest deleting the automatic image that comes up on Facebook and use one of the images created below EXCEPT for the SNAP-Ed post - automatic picture is great!
- These posts were created with Facebook and Twitter in mind because they contain links, but they are definitely suitable for Instagram as well without a workable link or if you have a "link in bio" space

[Click here to easily copy/paste/download text and images below \(in English and Spanish\)](#)

Facebook, Twitter or Instagram:



1. Has your family completed a school meal benefit application? School meals are no longer free for all students so submit an application today. [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
2. Your child's school offers free and reduced-price meals to eligible students! Find out if your family qualifies and how to apply here [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
3. School meal benefit applications help kids get healthy meals for free at school and also helps schools receive needed funding. To learn more and get an application, [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
4. It's time! Kids go back to school and need to eat healthy to learn. Find out if your child can get free or reduced-price meals. It's easy. Learn more [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
5. HEADS UP! School meals are no longer free for all. Complete a meal benefit application or deposit money in your school meal account so your kids can eat at school. [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
6. Did you know? 68% of RI school kids get free or reduced-price school meals. Find out if your family is eligible. [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)

Sample Social Media Posts

Facebook or Instagram (exceeds Twitter's character limit):

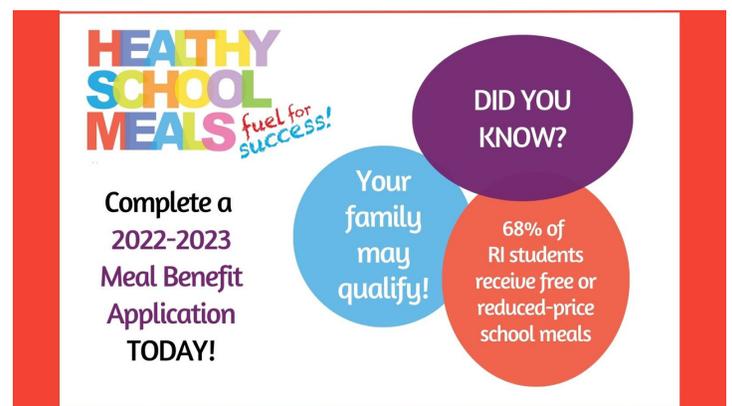


1. Personal information provided on school meal applications is always kept private. There is no citizenship requirement and applications only collect the last 4 digits of your social security number, if you have one. Find out if your family qualifies and your kids can get free or reduced-price healthy meals daily at school. [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
2. School meals are no longer free. But schools can provide free or reduced-price meals to eligible students. Has your family income been hurt by the pandemic? See if your family qualifies. Learn more and get an application [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
3. Be ready for the start of school! School meals are no longer free for all students. Add money to the school meal account to buy any meals, food or beverage items or find out if your family qualifies for free/reduced price meals. [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)
4. The pandemic continues to impact our community in many ways. You can get help with groceries by learning about SNAP benefits at <https://dhs.ri.gov/programs-and-services/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/supplemental-nutrition-0> and get a school meals application at [\[INSERT LINK\]](#)

[Click here to easily copy/paste/download text and images \(in English and Spanish\)](#)

Sample Social Media Images

Facebook



Sample Social Media Images

[Click here to easily copy/paste/download text \(in English and Spanish\) and images](#)

Twitter

HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS *fuel for success!*

Free school meals for all have sadly ended 😞

Your family may still be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals 😊

Complete a 2022-2023 Meal Benefit Application TODAY!

This graphic features the 'HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS' logo in multi-colored block letters with the tagline 'fuel for success!' in a script font. Below the logo are two overlapping circles: a yellow one on the left containing a sad face emoji and the text 'Free school meals for all have sadly ended', and a blue one on the right containing a happy face emoji and the text 'Your family may still be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals'. At the bottom, a red banner contains the text 'Complete a 2022-2023 Meal Benefit Application TODAY!'.

HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS *fuel for success!*

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Your family may qualify!

DID YOU KNOW?

68% of RI students receive free or reduced-price school meals

This graphic features the 'HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS' logo in multi-colored block letters with the tagline 'fuel for success!' in a script font. Below the logo is the text 'Complete a 2022-2023 Meal Benefit Application TODAY!' in a bold, black font. To the right are two overlapping circles: a blue one containing the text 'Your family may qualify!' and a purple one containing the text 'DID YOU KNOW?'. Below the purple circle is an orange circle containing the text '68% of RI students receive free or reduced-price school meals'.

Instagram

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Sample Robocall Scripts

1. It's important to know that school meals are no longer free for all students. The federal government has ended this pandemic program. All families should consider submitting a meal benefit application for free/reduced-price meals to see if they are eligible OR deposit money in the student school meal accounts to purchase any meals, food or beverage item. Contact _____ for details on the application process.
2. We want every child to have access to healthy foods at school. To continue to receive free school meals, you must complete and submit a meal benefit application. Don't guess if you're eligible – 68% of RI students get free or reduced-price school meals. All application info is confidential and a Social Security number is not required. To get an application and help completing it, contact _____.

[Click here to easily copy/paste/download text \(in English and Spanish\)](#)

Meal Service Models to Increase Access

Nearly all schools had to adapt to more flexible meal service models during the covid-19 pandemic to address health and safety concerns.

With cafeterias closed, students ate breakfast in classrooms or other designated areas of the school. Split lunch periods shortened lines and gave students more time to eat. And more kids eating school meals fostered an increased sense of community and equity. Food service and building staff worked closely together and got creative and flexible with these adaptations.

Many schools have found that these strategies remain effective at getting more kids eating and improving behavior, academic performance, and attendance even after returning to a more normal meal service program. Schools can continue to work closely with food service to encourage all students to eat meals and make them more accessible.

The [School Breakfast Expansion Toolkit](#), developed by RI Healthy Schools Coalition in conjunction with the RI Department of Education, details the research, national and local best practices, communication resources, and a step-by-step guide and rollout timeline for making Grab & Go, Breakfast in Classroom, and Second Chance Breakfast successful.

