

# MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents and Independent School Heads  
FROM: Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education *DMF*  
SUBJECT: Data Collection: Household Income Data and “Fill the Form” Campaign  
DATE: August 19, 2022

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## Purpose

With students returning to school in the near future, it is critical that Supervisory Unions (SU/SDs) and independent schools focus on encouraging and supporting families to provide household income information as appropriate for each school’s status. Ensuring as many families as possible provide this information before October 1, 2022, will ensure that the Agency of Education (AOE) collects accurate data on student poverty. These data are key to helping schools and SUs/SDs qualify for critical Federal Title funds, to providing afterschool and summer programs, student and school broadband access, special education, and much more.

## Background

The Vermont General Assembly enacted Act 151 in May of 2022 to provide universal meals to Vermont students using a mix of state and federal funding. This law will be in effect for the upcoming school year, with decisions about whether to extend the program likely to be made in the upcoming 2023 legislative session. Vermont’s universal school meals program follows several years of universal school meals made possible by federal COVID-19 waivers.

The continuation of universal school meals after several years of universal meals in the pandemic context means that a family’s incentive to provide household income information and/or their comfort and familiarity with the process will be significantly reduced. However, it remains 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 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 \(HIF\) Form](#), 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](mailto:marc.grimes@vermont.gov).

You should ask families to complete the appropriate form regardless of whether or not their children intend to eat school meals or apply for other educational benefits such as 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, your encouragement that they do so to help their school and community will support all the education programs that rely on this critical data, including universal school meals.

## Benefits to Students and Families Completing Free and Reduced Meal Applications

Thanks to the universal school meal program, households do not need to fill out income forms to access free meals at schools. However, for schools in their base year of Provision 2 there are several other programs directly benefitting students and their families that you may wish to promote to encourage families to complete their free and reduced meal application. These benefits depend on a household submitting the application and being approved for free and reduced-price meals.

- Waived SAT and ACT testing fees
- Reduced AP test fees
- Reduced or waived college application fees
- Discounted home internet, computer, and Wi-Fi hotspot access through Comcast Internet Essentials
- Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

In particular, the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), which provides up to a \$30/month discount on broadband service and a \$100 discount on a tablet or computer may be of interest to many families. Households with a student attending a CEP school are automatically eligible, but

households attending a Provision 2 school would need to complete the [Application for Free and Reduced Price Meals](#) (FRL) to qualify.

## **“Fill the Form” Campaign**

The Agency of Education is planning a significant back to school communications campaign to encourage Vermont families to “fill the form.” School and community partners will have a key role to play in this campaign, encouraging your parent and family communities to provide this important information. This campaign will start at the beginning of school, and last through the month of September, as this key data 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, in the coming days AOE will provide:

- 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 SY22-23 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.