

Iowa Eligibility Application Processing Key Points
Iowa Department of Education
Bureau of Nutrition and Health Services
515-281-5356

USDA Eligibility Guidance for School Meals Manual

USDA revised the Eligibility Guidance for School Meals Manual in October, 2011. It is located at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/default.htm>. **This guidance is an excellent resource and should be utilized fully when processing the Iowa Eligibility Applications at the beginning of school as well as throughout the year.** This guidance manual covers commonly asked questions on determining eligibility and the verification process.

Below are several key points concerning the approval process. It is essential that the individual processing the applications review the USDA Eligibility Guidance for School Meals Manual to ensure compliance with USDA regulations.

Key points:

- Foster children are categorically eligible to receive free meals and are now also considered part of the household.
- The Iowa Eligibility Application must be distributed to **all** households **at the beginning** of the new school year or sent home with the student during the first week of school. **LEAs should send out the letter no earlier than four calendar weeks prior to the time students start school.**
- If **any** household member currently receiving FIP or Food Assistance benefits or is identified under direct certification, free meal eligibility extends to all children in the household. **Foster children** identified as categorically free on the direct certification list **do not** extend eligibility to other children in the household. USDA guidance (Questions and Answers on Extending Categorical Eligibility to Additional Children in a Household) is located in the Form Download section of the CNP 2000 system.

This means that a household may provide an application with ONE FIP or Food Assistance number per household rather than per child or student. Students residing in households where one student qualifies for free meals based on direct certification (electronic or letter) also qualify. LEAs must maintain appropriate documentation to demonstrate eligibility under the extension of categorical eligibility for students who do not individually qualify. This must include the information source for extending categorical eligibility, such as school enrollment records, information from household adults about household membership or other similar documents. A flow chart and examples of extending eligibility are located in the Form Download section of the CNP 2000 system.

- USDA required the use of **household applications**. Households with more than one child are to complete one application listing all children in the household.

- To ensure confidentiality, the Iowa Eligibility Application **must not be** placed on a table for households to pick up during registration. It may be included in a registration packet that is distributed to all households during registration.
- If the application, the parent letter or the instructions to parents are adapted, a copy must be sent to the Bureau of Nutrition and Health Services for review and approval prior to distribution to households. “Adaptation” means that the LEA has changed the **CONTENT** of the application, letter or instructions. Adding the LEA’s name, address, etc., or printing the material on letterhead does **NOT** require approval.
- LEAs are encouraged to share eligibility information with other Child Nutrition Programs. When a student moves from one district to another, the LEAs can share the application or the student’s benefit eligibility level. The receiving LEA incurs no liability for the accuracy of the initial determination, unless a copy of the application itself is provided and the first district has made an error. If a copy of the application is provided, the receiving LEA should check the arithmetic and compare the application to income guidelines to be sure that correct benefits were assigned. If the receiving LEA finds an error that changes benefit levels, it must notify the household that a new application must be filed.
- Households’ eligibility for free and reduced price meals shall remain in effect beginning on the day of approval in the current school year and for a maximum of 30 operating days after the first operating day in the following school year or when a new eligibility determination is made, whichever is earlier. Students who are approved for free meal benefits based on foster status, homeless status, migrant status or direct certification also have yearlong eligibility.
- Households are no longer required to report changes in circumstances that may result in a reduction in benefits, such as an increase in income, a decrease in household size or when the household is no longer certified eligible for Food Assistance or Family Investment Program (FIP). Households may apply or reapply for benefits at any time during the school year.
- Prototype notification letters that comply with existing regulations must be used as printed. The Bureau of Nutrition and Health Services must approve adaptations in advance of use. Printing the letters on school letterhead does not require advance permission. Prototypes located in the Form Download section of the CNP 2000 system.