

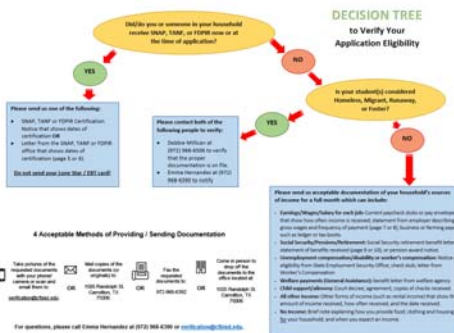
NSLP VERIFICATION RESPONSE RATE CHALLENGE WINNERS!

Game Changer



Verification Improvements
Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District, TX

- uses direct verification,
- added phone calls and emails in addition to a reminder letter,
- encourage parents to respond by emailing smartphone photos of documentation to dedicated SFA email address,
- developed a visual representation of verification process, included as an insert with verification instructions.



Game Changer and Popular Choice



Meeting the Challenges and Creating Solutions for Verification
Gwinnett County Public School System, GA

- highly organized administrative process,
- phone calls in addition to an adverse warning letter,
- adverse letter offers parents the opportunity to opt out rather than not respond,
- consult student information database for alternate addresses, phone numbers, emails if necessary,
- have a separate follow-up for those who provide partial documentation,
- Spanish speaker in SFA office; get help with other languages from other departments in the school district,
- adjust schedules to make phone calls in early morning and late afternoon.

Game Changer and Best Documented



Rolling Verification Process
Orange County Public Schools, FL

- updated language on verification letters,
- added new translations,
- increased follow-up phone calls and emails in addition to reminder letter,
- use school district's reserve call messaging system to reach parents,
- text messages,
- adopted rolling verification (sampling and sending notices weekly rather than all in October),
- send verification packet home with student in addition to mailed letter,
- packet includes checklist for parents and contact information.



NSLP VERIFICATION RESPONSE RATE HONORABLE MENTION`



Roswell Independent School District, NM

Submitted by Tracey Wells



Guilford County Schools, NC
Submitted by Betty Ann Champion

- organized administrative process,
- all letters in both English and Spanish,
- letters sent certified return receipt,
- call a few days after initial verification notice to answer questions, remind parents of deadlines, and clarify the consequence of not responding,
- explain by phone that parents can opt out rather than not respond,
- mail reminder notices every 10 days using different colors in the letter header,
- make weekly calls; check student files to confirm use of current phone number,
- have access to translator.

- phone calls and emails in addition to reminder letter,
- marks envelopes with "Important Information," "Student Information," and "Time Sensitive,"
- continuous phone calls in the last weeks.

Plans for 2017-2018:

- alert parent by phone to expect a mailed verification notice,
- phone calls throughout verification period for nonresponders,
- YouTube video to explain verification process to families.

Thanks to SNA for the *EXTRAORDINARY* support

Lessons from Omaha Public Schools – Tammy Yarmon

- Review last year’s plan and “tweak” it, then set a goal for the coming year.
- Ask for help and support – we explain why it is so important to have families respond:
 - School Secretaries: monthly meetings starting in August through November
 - School Principals: email the timelines
 - Contact the bilingual liaisons in the schools and the ESL office at our Central Office
 - Contact our Nutrition Services Cafeteria Managers
- Utilize numerous methods of directly contacting the parents or guardians:
 - Start EARLY and don’t FINISH until the last day!
 - Mail the verification notification home
 - Send the information home with the youngest child
 - Email the parent or guardian (if an email address is on file)
 - Personal calls; best response time is between 4:45 and 6:00 PM
 - Use a tracking form to document all of our contacts

Be Persistent!






School Year 2015-2016 Pilot: Modified Verification Notice

In 2015, Food and Nutrition Service staff and members of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST – part of the U.S. General Services Administration’s Office of Evaluation Sciences) began a series of projects to address verification non-response. For this first project, the FNS and SBST redesigned its verification notice template to see if a more personalized and friendlier tone would encourage more families to respond.

- The new template was available for school year 2015-2016 for districts to adopt (and personalize) and was pilot tested in 70 districts across the country.
- The three primary changes in the template were:
 - adopting a friendlier, more conversational tone,
 - rewriting the instructions resulting in three, easy to follow steps, and
 - making it as easy as possible for households to respond – including emailing pictures of their documentation.

Send this information via ONE of the following methods:

 Take pictures of the requested documents with your phone/camera and email them to [e-mail]. Include a picture of this page.	OR	 Mail documents along with this page to [address] using the envelope provided. If possible, send copies.	OR	 Come in person to the office located at [address] to drop off the documents. Bring this page with you.
---	----	---	----	--

Results of the pilot

- Among all the participating districts, the use of the modified letter resulted overall in a modest increase in verification response rates, however results varied across States. One State found the new letter so effective they asked to extend the pilot to the rest of the districts in their State.
- One of the most popular changes was the option to send pictures of documentation by email.
- The pilot reiterated findings from the challenge – that is, it’s a combination of methods that will affect overall response rates.
- A new letter without graphics is available, and districts may also continue to use the old template.

USDA's Existing Verification Notice Prototype¹

WE MUST CHECK YOUR APPLICATION

You must send the information we need, or contact [name] by [date], or your child(ren) will stop getting free or reduced price meals.

School: _____ Date: _____

Dear _____:

We are checking your Free and Reduced Price School Meals Application. Federal rules require that we do this to make sure only eligible children get free or reduced price meals. You must send us information to prove that [name(s) of child(ren)][is/are] eligible.

If possible, send copies, not original papers. If you do send originals, they will be sent back to you only if you ask.

1. IF YOU WERE RECEIVING BENEFITS FROM [State SNAP], [State TANF] OR [FDPIR] WHEN YOU APPLIED FOR FREE OR REDUCED PRICE MEALS, OR AT ANY TIME SINCE THEN, SEND US A COPY OF ONE OF THESE:

- [State SNAP] or [State TANF] or [FDPIR] Certification Notice that shows dates of certification.
- Letter from [State SNAP] or [State TANF] or [FDPIR] office that shows dates of certification.
- Do not send your EBT card.

2. IF YOU GET THIS LETTER FOR A HOMELESS, MIGRANT, OR RUNAWAY CHILD, PLEASE CONTACT [school, homeless liaison, or migrant coordinator] FOR HELP.

3. IF THE CHILD IS A FOSTER CHILD:
Provide written documentation that verifies the child is the legal responsibility of the agency or court or provide the name and contact information for a person at the agency or court who can verify that the child is a foster child.

4. IF NO ONE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD RECEIVES [State SNAP] or [State TANF] or [FDPIR] benefits:
Send this page along with papers that show the amount of money your household gets from each source of income. The papers you send must show the **name** of the person who received the income, the **date** it was received, **how much** was received, and **how often** it was received. **Send information to: [address]**

Acceptable papers include:

JOBS: Paycheck stub or pay envelope that shows the amount and how often pay is received; letter from employer stating gross wages and how often you are paid; or, if you work for yourself, business or farming papers, such as ledger or tax books.

SOCIAL SECURITY, PENSIONS, OR RETIREMENT: Social Security retirement benefit letter, statement of benefits received, or pension award notice.

Free and Reduced Price School Meals Application
We Must Check Your Application
Page 1 of 3
July 2016 - Language

UNEMPLOYMENT, DISABILITY, OR WORKER'S COMP: Notice of eligibility from State employment security office, check stub, or letter from the Worker's Compensation's office.

WELFARE PAYMENTS: Benefit letter from the [State TANF] office.

CHILD SUPPORT OR ALIMONY: Court decree, agreement, or copies of checks received.

OTHER INCOME (SUCH AS RENTAL INCOME): Information that shows the amount of income received, how often it is received, and the date received.

NO INCOME: A brief note explaining how you provide food, clothing, and housing for your household, and when you expect an income.

MILITARY HOUSING PRIVATIZATION INITIATIVE: Letter or rental contract showing that your housing is part of the Military Privatized Housing Initiative.

TIMEFRAME OF ACCEPTABLE INCOME DOCUMENTATION: Please submit proof of one month's income; you could use the month prior to application, the month you applied, or any month after that.

If you have questions or need help, please call [name] at [phone number]. The call is free. **[Toll free or reverse charge explanation]**. You may also e-mail us at [e-mail address].

Sincerely,

[signature]

The Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act requires the information requested in order to verify your children's eligibility for free or reduced price meals. If you do not provide the information or provide incomplete information, your children may no longer receive free or reduced price meals. Pursuant to Section 7 of the Privacy Act, disclosure of your Social Security number is not required. We do not need and are not requesting any Social Security numbers that may appear on documents you submit.

Non-Discrimination Statement: This explains what to do if you believe you have been treated unfairly. "In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA.


Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g. Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.), should contact the Agency (State or local) where they applied for benefits. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

Free and Reduced Price School Meals Application
We Must Check Your Application
Page 2 of 3
July 2016 - Language

¹ This old USDA template is just for illustration. The use of data and nondiscrimination statements in this letter are not current. Please refer to USDA's Eligibility Manual for the most current statements.

Modified Verification Notice²

School District Name and Logo _____ Household ID # _____



Confirm Your Eligibility for Free/Reduced Price Meals

Dear [Susan],

Your application was approved a little while ago, and [Bob, Jill and Sara] should already be receiving free/reduced price meals.

However, **there is one last step you need to take** – please send us documents to confirm your eligibility. Each year we select different meal applications to confirm eligibility. This year, your household was selected.

You must send us the information [by date], or [Bob], [Jill], and [Sara] will stop receiving free/reduced price meals.

You can send a Certification Notice for [SNAP], [TANF], or [FDPIR] benefits, or documents that show your household income, for example, paycheck stubs, benefits statements, and/or copies of checks. The back side of this letter has more information about what to send and how you can send it.

For questions or help, please contact [Name] at the toll free number (xxx)-xxx-xxxx or via email.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name]
[Principal/Superintendent?]
[School District Name]

The Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act requires the information requested in order to verify your children's eligibility for free or reduced price meals. If you do not provide the information or provide incomplete information, your children may no longer receive free or reduced price meals. Pursuant to Section 7 of the Privacy Act, disclosure of your Social Security number is not required. We do not need and are not requesting any Social Security numbers that may appear on documents you submit.

Non-Discrimination Statement: This explains what to do if you believe you have been treated unfairly. *In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g. Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.), should contact the Agency (State or local) where they applied for benefits. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-3339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program complaint of discrimination, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, (AD-3027) found online at: http://www.aisor.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html, and at any USDA office, or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

1

Household ID # _____

How to Show Eligibility for Free/Reduced Price Meals

Please provide the following information. All documents can be dated from [the month before application], or any month since. Include this page with your documents.

Were you or someone in your household receiving benefits from [SNAP], [TANF] or [FDPIR] at the time of application, or any time since?

IF YES, please send us your [SNAP], [TANF] or [FDPIR] Certification Notice that shows dates of certification. OR, you can send the "Statement of SNAP/TANF/FDPIR Benefits" page included in this packet instead. Do not send your EBT card.

If you send us one of the above documents, you are DONE. You do NOT need to send anything else.


IF NO, please read the following options and follow the instructions if they apply to you:


- The child is homeless, migrant or runaway:** Contact [school, homeless liaison, or migrant coordinator at (xxx)-xxx-xxxx or e-mail] for help.
- The child is a foster child:** Send documentation that verifies the child is the legal responsibility of the agency or court. OR, provide the name and contact information for a person at the agency or court who can verify the child's foster status.
- The child is not covered by 1 or 2:** Return this page along with documentation of your household's sources of income for either the month before application, or any month since. Acceptable documents below. The document(s) must show:
 - Name of person who received the income
 - Date received
 - Amount received
 - How often it was received


Acceptable Documents for Showing Household Income

- **Jobs:** Paycheck stub or pay envelope that shows the amount and how often pay is received; letter from employer stating gross wages and how often you are paid; or, if you work for yourself, business or farming papers, such as ledger or tax books.
- **Social Security, Pensions, or Retirement:** Social Security retirement benefit letter, statement of benefits received, or pension award notice.
- **Unemployment, Disability, or Worker's Compensation:** Notice of eligibility from State employment security office, check stub, or letter from the Worker's Compensation office.
- **Welfare Payments:** Benefit letter from the [State TANF] office.
- **Child Support or Alimony:** Court decree, agreement, or copies of checks received.
- **All Other Income (Such as Rental Income):** Information that shows the amount of the income, name of the person who received the income, the date it was received, and how often it was received.
- **No Income:** A brief note explaining how you provide food, clothing, and housing for your household, and when you expect an income.
- **Military Housing Privatization Initiative:** Letter or rental contract showing that your housing is part of the Military Privatized Housing Initiative.

Send this information via ONE of the following methods:

 Take pictures of the requested documents with your phone/camera and email them to [e-mail]. Include a picture of this page. OR

 Mail documents along with this page to [address] using the envelope provided. If possible, send copies. OR

 Come in person to the office located at [address] to drop off the documents. Bring this page with you.

2

² This letter is just for illustration. The use of data and nondiscrimination statements in this letter are not current. Please refer to USDA's Eligibility Manual for the most current statements

School Year 2016-2017 Pilot: Beginning Verification Before October 1

Districts do not need to wait until October to begin verification – something that has always been allowed, we’re just pointing it out!

- It’s easy! Rather than waiting until Oct. 1 to select the verification sample, districts select their required sample size from among the applications as they come in; it could be weekly or maybe early in September and again in October, or anything else that makes sense for your district – you get to choose!
- The idea behind starting earlier is that contacting parents shortly after they completed the application could make it easier for them to find and then provide income documentation.

In school year 2016-2017, five large school districts sent verification notices to households on a weekly basis, starting in late August. FNS talked with pilot participants to get feedback on their experiences. After the pilot,

- Four of five participating districts plan to continue weekly verification in school year 2017-2018.
- Evidence suggests that starting verification earlier has the potential to increase response rates (the data are still being analyzed). In addition, pilot participants thought starting verification earlier
 - generally reduced administrative burden,
 - removed a big push in November,
 - allowed staff more time to follow up with non-respondents.

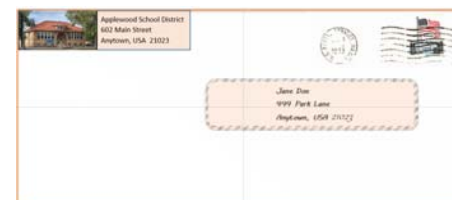
Example!



“Applewood” School District approves 68 school meal applications the first week of school (August 21 - 25).



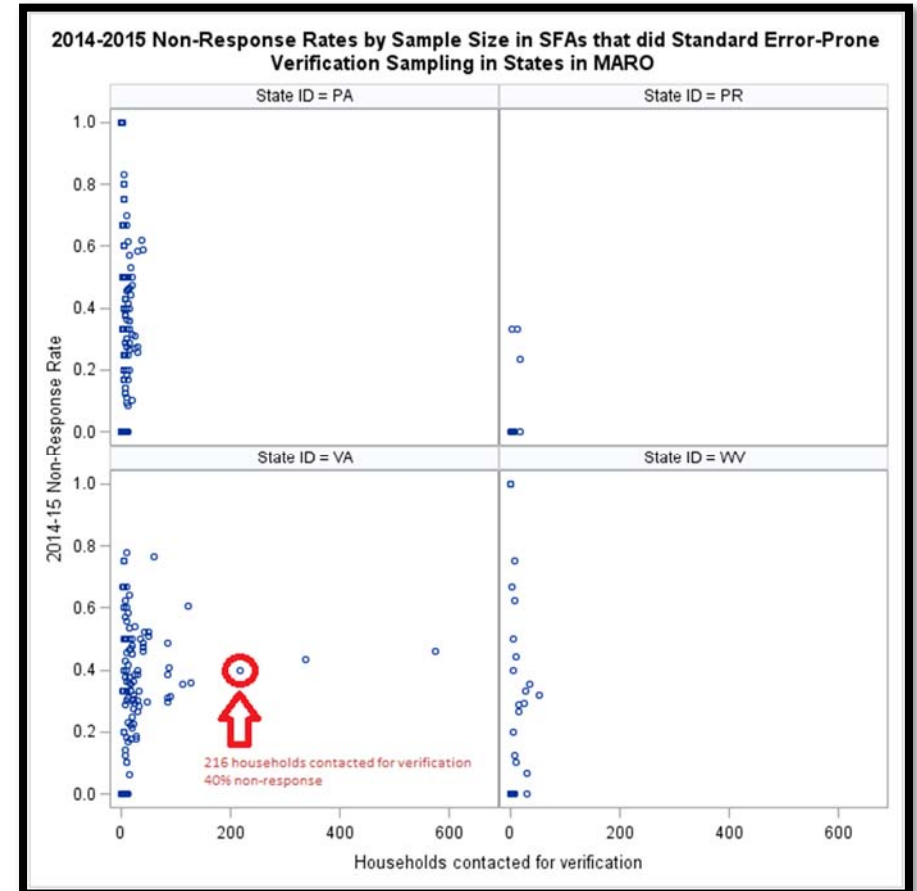
Staff select 3% of the applications to verify (68 × 3% = 2 applications).



The 2 verification notices are mailed to the families on Friday (August 25th).

VERIFICATION “OUTLIERS” PROJECT

- **WHAT:** FNS spoke with school food authorities (SFAs) from across the country that had demonstrated above average response rates in a single year or significant improvements in their response rates year-over-year, as well as those just interested in sharing their verification practices.
- **WHY:** USDA research tells us that many non-respondents may be eligible for benefits, so in order to help SFAs get benefits to families that need them, FNS wanted to compile and disseminate the practices and procedures underlying these notable, or “outlier” response rates in an effort to improve response rates nationwide.
- **WHO:** Staff from the Child Nutrition Office of Program Integrity (OPI) based in each FNS Regional Office and key officials in the SFAs, including Directors and subject matter experts with knowledge of and involvement with the annual certification/verification process.
- **HOW:** High-performing SFAs were identified using annual *FNS-742 Verification Collection Report* submissions dating back to SY 2013-14. Selections were made via weighted analysis taking into account relative size of verification sample. OPI staff spoke with these SFAs over the phone or during a site visit. We also spoke with SFAs at conferences, meetings, and on accompanied Administrative Reviews.
- **WHEN:** Conversations took place starting in late SY14-15 and continued through late SY16-17.



VERIFICATION “OUTLIERS” PROJECT

Preliminary Findings and Insights

Initial Notice

- Use envelopes or snap mailers that have a distinct marking, message, or unique color so that they stand out for families;
- Send verification packets home with youngest child in the household – in addition to sending via mail;
- Make use of highlights, underlines, and boldface text, and include specific examples of acceptable income documentation;
- Enclose a self-addressed and/or pre-paid envelope to facilitate response; and
- Call families to let them know that a notice is in the mail.

Reminders and Follow-ups

- Prominently include a message like “second/follow-up request for information,” so that if previous communications were missed, the family knows it is not the first verification attempt; and
- Place notification and reminder phone calls after 5pm when families are more likely to be home.

General

- Incorporate plain language in all communications, and avoid program jargon, such as “direct certification” or “categorical eligibility” wherever possible;
- Send email notices and/or accept emailed responses – this is more convenient than sending hard copies through postal mail for many families;
- Consider making personal calls in addition to or instead of automated calls to emphasize the importance of the verification process;
- Enlist the help of school secretaries or other school staff to contact families - someone that families are more likely to be familiar with and trust; and
- Treat families and parents as valued customers.

The image shows a stack of 'School Food Authority (SFA) Verification Collection Report' forms. The top form is tilted and shows various sections for reporting verification data, including sections for total schools, operating provisions, and free/reduced price eligible students. The form includes checkboxes for completion status and instructions for reporting errors.

A final report incorporating a detailed analysis of all findings will be released by OPI in Fall of 2017. Stay tuned!