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Using Household Income Forms instead of school meal applications to collect family income data is an opportunity for higher return rates and decreased stigma around school meals & sharing income information

Schools are required to capture household income information from students and their families each year. This information is used by the federal government to determine school and community eligibility for a number of nutrition and education programs and funding sources, including Title 1 funding and summer and afterschool meal programs. Schools that are not already providing universal school meals gather this information using school meal applications. Schools providing universal school meals gather this information using an alternative form, called the Household Income Form in Vermont. As schools transition to providing universal school meals the transition to using a Household Income Form to collect income data is an exciting opportunity to transform the way that schools are requesting this information from families into a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable process that has the potential to improve return rates.

What's Happening Now?

- Schools that do not provide universal school meals collect school meal applications and use the income information provided in the applications. Getting a free school meal is dependent on caregivers' filling out and returning the application.
- Schools that provide universal school meals collect household income information using a Household Income Form. Getting a free school meal is not dependent on caregivers' filling out and returning the form.

Challenges with the School Meal Application as a tool for collecting income information

- The school meal application must meet strict federal guidelines, leading to a complicated form that is not user friendly. Schools are not able to add messages to the form itself explaining why schools need to collect the information and how filling out the form helps the caregivers' students and the entire school.
- Schools are not able to make this form mandatory, meaning that primarily only families who think they qualify for free school meals and whose children want the meals, fill out the form.
- For many students, access to free school meals is dependent on their caregiver filling out and returning this form. Students and their families must divulge highly personal information in order to make sure the student does not go hungry during the school day.
- Filling out the form is stigmatized, as it is connected to a program that is associated with being low-income.

Benefits of the Household Income Form

- This form is far more flexible than the school meal application because it does not need to meet federal requirements. Schools are able to design a form that is simple and welcoming, that only asks for the basic information needed. It can contain messaging explaining why schools need to collect income information and how filling out the form helps the caregivers' students and the entire school.
- The Agency of Education is able to design a template form meeting best practices that schools can adopt or model.
- Schools are able to make this form mandatory if they wish, ensuring greater rates of completion from caregivers in all income groups.

- Access to free school meals is not dependent on their caregiver filling out and returning this form. Students who want and/or need school meals are able to get them and won't go hungry during the school day because their families did not return an income form.
- By decoupling the need for a school to collect income information from eligibility for school meals, the school has the opportunity to destigmatize the form and invite all families to fill it out as an activity to support the school's access to federal funding, rather than as an application for school meals.

How the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill supports a strong Household Income Form

- The bill supports Vermont schools in using strong and accessible Household Income Forms. It requires the Agency of Education to develop a template form that meets best practices that schools can adopt. It also requires the Agency of Education to meet annually with Hunger Free Vermont and the Vermont Association of School Business Officials to review and update the form so that it continues to reflect best practices.
- The Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program helps connect schools with support from organizations like Hunger Free Vermont that can help them develop and implement Household Income Form outreach strategies along with funding to implement strategies like mailings and robocalls. Hunger Free Vermont also provides this kind of technical assistance and support to schools across the state annually at no charge.

Will families submit the Household Income Form if they don't need to in order to get school meals?

- In short, yes. 25% of VT's public schools are already using the Household Income Form and have not reported widespread decline in form return rates.
- Schools across the country have also been using Household Income Forms for many years. All schools in New York City have been providing universal school meals since 2017. They have reported no decline in return rates since switching from school meal applications to Household Income Forms.

How does the transition to Household Income Forms work?

- Some schools will provide universal school meals using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). School meal applications will not be eliminated in year one and will not be required for as long as the school uses CEP. Schools will transition to using the Household Income Form in year one.
- Other schools will provide universal school meals using Provision 2 (P2). For these schools, the school meal application is used in year one. Hunger Free Vermont and other organizations support these schools in implementing a major School Meal Application Campaign in that year, as strong return rates are crucial for federal funding for the program. VT schools who are using P2 have had great success with this.
 - In year two, the school meal application is eliminated, and schools will begin to use the Household Income Form. Schools will not need to use the school meal application again unless required to recertify. This happens, at most, every 4-5 years.