

# Strategies to Improve Response Rates in Verification

Practices used by School Food Authorities (SFAs) around the country and the research that supports them...

## Initial Notice

- ⊕ Use envelopes or snap mailers that have a distinct marking, message, or unique color so that they stand out for families<sup>1</sup>
- ⊕ Send verification packets home with the youngest child in the household – in addition to sending via mail
- ⊕ Make use of highlights, underlines, and boldface text<sup>1</sup>
- ⊕ Include specific examples of acceptable income documentation
- ⊕ Enclose a self-addressed and/or pre-paid envelope to facilitate response<sup>1, 10</sup>
- ⊕ Call families or send a “pre-notice” letter to let them know that a notice is in the mail<sup>1, 10</sup>
- ⊕ Send materials in the language in which the family applied
- ⊕ Select households and send notices closer to the time they applied (see the “rolling verification” resources in the toolkit)

## Reminders & 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 contact attempt
- ⊕ If you have the time and capacity, follow-up as many times as it takes, by multiple methods, up until the final cutoff date<sup>2</sup>

## General

- ⊕ Make phone calls before 8am or after 5pm when families are more likely to be home
- ⊕ Send email notices and/or accept emailed responses – this is more convenient than sending hard copies through postal mail for many families
- ⊕ Allow photos of documents to be emailed<sup>3</sup> (see the “flier for households”)
- ⊕ Incorporate plain language in all communications, and avoid program jargon, such as “direct certification” or “categorical eligibility” wherever possible<sup>4</sup>
- ⊕ Enlist the help of school secretaries or other school staff to contact families - someone who families are more likely to be familiar with and trust
- ⊕ Give households the option to receive text message notices and reminders
- ⊕ Allow (and advertise) that parents can use a computer in the office to access and/or print documents
- ⊕ Make personal calls in addition to or instead of automated calls to emphasize the importance of the verification process<sup>5</sup>

# A few more strategies...

Here are some additional ideas that were not specifically cited by SFAs, or that remain untested in the verification process, yet are promising based on Social Sciences research.

---

- ⊕ Estimate the weekly, monthly, or annual dollar value of the household's current school meal benefits and prominently feature that information in the notification letter.<sup>6</sup> (Be careful not to imply that by simply responding they will get to keep their benefits!)
- ⊕ Encourage parents to schedule time to work with you (either over the phone or in person) on completing the verification request. Whether they want to know more about the process or they need help submitting documents, having a pre-set time to work together on their response may increase the likelihood that they will respond fully and completely.<sup>7</sup>
- ⊕ Speak with a friendly tone and exude trustworthiness!<sup>8</sup> This one may seem obvious, but it is worth mentioning. You probably already know that some households think that they are in trouble or have done something wrong when they receive a verification notice. Try to ease their concerns! And even more importantly, establish yourself as a trustworthy source of help and information for families all year and every year.
- ⊕ Give your verification letters the personal touch by having someone the families will be familiar with, like the school principal, hand sign them. Wait for a week and if you haven't gotten a response from the family, resend the verification letter and include a hand written note that stresses the importance of responding.<sup>9</sup>
- ⊕ Personalize notices and phone messages with the names of parents and students (see the "Redesigned Verification Notification Letters" in the toolkit).<sup>10</sup>

## References

---

- 1 Edwards, P., Roberts, I., Clarke, M., DiGuseppi, C., Prapat, S., Wentz, R., et al. "Increasing response rates to postal questionnaires: systematic review." *BMJ*. 324 :1183. 2002.
- 2 Botti, S., Iyengar, S. S. "The Dark Side of Choice: When Choice Impairs Social Welfare." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 24-38. 2006.
- 3 Anderson, M. "Technology Device Ownership: 2015." *Pew Research Center*. 2015.
- 4 Kimble, J. "The elements of plain language." *Michigan Bar Journal*. 81.10: 44-55. 2002.
- 5 Kimball, S. H., Levy, T., Venturelli, H., Miller, S. "Interactive Voice Recognition Communication in Electoral Politics." *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol 58, Issue 9, pp. 1236 - 1245. 2014.
- 6 Frederick, S., Novemsky, N., Wang, J., Dhar, R., Nowlis, S. "Opportunity Cost Neglect." *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 553-561. 2009.
- 7 Kurth-Nelson, Z., Redish, A. D.. "Don't Let Me Do That! – Models of Precommitment." *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. 6 : 138. 2012.
- 8 Torche, F., Valenzuela, E. "Trust and reciprocity: A theoretical distinction of the sources of social capital." *European Journal of Social Theory*. Vol 14, Issue 2, pp. 181 - 198. 2011.
- 9 Smith, S.C., Bost, L.W. "Collecting Post-School Outcome Data: Strategies for Increasing Response Rates." National Post-School Outcomes Center. 2007.
- 10 Dillman, DA. "The Design and Administration of Mail Surveys." *Annual Reviews of Sociology*. 1991.