

# Best Practices for Vermont School Meal Programs

## INCREASE ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED PRICE MEALS

- **Encourage ALL students, regardless of eligibility to return free/reduced price school meal applications.** Schools have found that this helps to remove stigma for low-income students and reaches those families who mistakenly think they are not eligible.  
VT schools have gotten all students to return the applications by:
  - Like other mandatory forms, asking all parents to return the free/reduced form, whether or not they have completed the application
  - Provided incentives such as free breakfast for a period of time for any student returning the form
  - Class parties when all students have returned the forms
  
- ***Provide maximum anonymity for students to enroll and participate in free/reduced price meals.***
  - When all students return the application forms, low-income students have more anonymity
  - Install computerized point of sale systems with debit accounts to protect privacy of students obtaining meals (an additional benefit is that these systems greatly reduce staff time spent on record keeping)
  
- ***Ensure that vulnerable populations of students receive the benefit of free school meals***  
***The following students are categorically eligible for free school meals:***
  - Students who are homeless (living doubled up or in campgrounds or shelters)
  - Students enrolled in the Migrant Education Program
  
- ***Provide low-literacy or non-English speaking families assistance with completing applications.***
  - Offer assistance with filling out application by phone, at school, or at home
  - Multi-lingual school meal applications are available on the USDA website:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/FRP/frp.process.htm>

## INCREASE ACCESS TO SCHOOL MEALS

- ***Provide students enough time to eat***
  - 20 minutes for breakfast and 30 minutes for lunch
  
- ***Serve breakfast at snack time in elementary schools***
  - Breakfast later in the morning helps feed those who ate breakfast very early, ate an inadequate breakfast, or who forgot to bring snack

## **INCREASE ACCESS TO SCHOOL MEALS (CONTINUED)**

- ***Offer breakfast in the classroom in elementary schools***
  - Makes the meal part of the school day and reduces stigma
- ***Schedule recess before lunch is served***
- ***Keep the cafeteria open between morning and afternoon classes for middle and high school students***
- ***Offer breakfast free of charge to all students***
  - Schools offering free breakfast have increased participation for all students, including those eligible for free meals. Schools with more than 60% of enrollment eligible for free/reduced price meals may be able to afford loss of student payments by efficiencies gained by increased participation.

## **IMPROVE THE SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT**

- ***Reduce, eliminate and/or improve the quality of competitive foods: vending machines, snack bars, a la carte, fundraisers***
  - Limit the hours when such foods are sold
  - Increasing the price of competitive foods compared to federal meals
  - Remove competitive foods from schools altogether
  - Create nutritional guidelines for competitive foods
- ***Make meals more attractive***
  - Provide more choices of entrée options, vegetables, or fruits
  - Increase the use of locally produced ingredients
  - Make plates more appealing: customize plates, vary color and texture, and use brightly colored wrappings.
- ***Offer menu choices that are convenient***
  - Provide “Grab ‘N Go” meals that students can eat quickly and easily
  - Choose hand-held foods that include all the required meal components: wraps, sandwiches, yogurt/granola parfaits, burritos, calzones, etc.
- ***Use “Offer vs. Serve” option: reduces waste and cost***
- ***Involve the students in the meal program***
  - Encourage student representation on wellness committees
  - Include students in decisions about menu choices
  - Ask students to conduct taste tests or do surveys of new foods to get student input