

Results of a pilot program to increase the rate of return of free lunch applications at 11 elementary schools

A project of the
SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee

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The SFUSD's Student Nutrition Services has been operating at a deficit for several years, which causes an encroachment on the district's general fund. About \$500,000 of this deficit is due to what are called "cash shortages." A cash shortage occurs when a student (usually an elementary child) goes through the free lunch line but has neither a free lunch application on file nor money to pay for his lunch. It has long been the policy of the district that "no child is allowed to go hungry", so those students are allowed to have the lunch and SNS absorbs the cost.

In an attempt to reduce the cash shortages, in July 2004, a small working group of the SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee chose a group of elementary schools to target. Schools were selected which had both high cash shortages and also lower numbers of students qualified for free lunch than would have been expected based on the populations traditionally served by those schools.

Committee volunteers contacted the Principals of the targeted schools to explain to them the importance of getting a high rate of return of the free meal applications. Benefits to the school include more Title 1 money, more WSF funding, and eligibility for a wider variety of grants, which are linked to a minimum free lunch population (usually 50%.) In addition, schools can earn a higher rating on the similar schools portion of the API if their reported rate more closely matches the actual poverty rate among their students. Schools that undercount their needy students may find that their school is being compared to other schools that legitimately have much lower rates of impoverished students.

Principals were asked to make the collection of the free lunch applications a priority, and to encourage their teachers to do so. Every family was asked to fill out a form, even if they did not want their child to participate in the lunch program. Families who already knew they did not qualify for free lunch, were told to simply write "not interested" on the form and turn it in anyway. Our belief was that if EVERY child was required to return a form, there would be no stigma attached, because returning the form would then not overtly identify the child as poor.

As a result of the outreach efforts, the group of schools increased, on average, the percentage of applications returned by 17.5 percentage points. The percentage of students who qualified for free lunch increased by an average of 11.9 percentage points. The total reduction of the cash shortage for all 11 schools, for the period from start of school through December, was \$11,448.71.

For comparison, we looked at a group of 10 similar schools, which had been considered for inclusion in the program but were not in fact included. At those schools, which were not contacted by volunteers, the percentage of students who qualified for free lunch dropped by an average of 4.3 percentage points, while the total cash shortage for the 10 school increased by \$23, 048.46.

TEN LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TARGETED SCHOOLS PROJECT

1. **FAMILIES ARE WILLING TO APPLY** – It is possible to get more families to fill out the meal app, even families who already know that they don't qualify for free lunch. It is desirable to get every family in every school to fill out an app, because that is the only way to get an accurate count of how many students qualify for free or reduced lunch district wide. It also helps reduce the stigma around the meal program and the application process. The higher the free/reduced rate, the more grant money is available, both to individual schools and to the district.
2. **TEACHERS NEED TO HELP** – After the initial effort made by Student Nutrition Services (SNS) at the start of the school year, the most efficient way to collect more apps is for the teachers to participate in the effort. Teachers can make sure that families have apps during the parent/teacher conferences, distribute apps specifically to those students with no app on file, ask those students to bring back a completed app as homework, and offer some kind of reward (for example, extra credit points) to those who do so within a set time period.
3. **PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY** – Principals need to ask teachers to participate in a meal app collection effort. The best way to get Principals to do this is to explain that their schools will benefit financially from having a higher free/reduced rate, both through more Title I funding and more Weighted Student Formula money, as well as qualifying for more classroom grants. Principals also need to understand why Provision 2 was discontinued, and why they are now required to collect meal apps every year, when just a short time ago, they didn't have to. They need to understand that a higher free/reduced rate can have a positive effect on their school's API. Finally, Principals can be reminded that better nourished kids perform better in school, and behave better too. More kids qualifying for and eating a free lunch means more revenue for SNS, which can translate into better quality food for students.
4. **SNS MUST MAKE IT EASY** – SNS needs to make it as easy as possible for Principals to participate in the meal app effort. A list of students with no app on file should be sent to each Principal every month, or at least once per quarter. A set of labels coded with the names and HO#s of these students, and a stack of meal applications (in all languages) should accompany this list, facilitating the return of completed apps to the school site and to SNS. Because some Principals do not understand the codes on the meal eligibility lists they currently receive, they should be sent a reminder of how to interpret the codes.
5. **PRINCIPALS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE FISCAL IMPACT** -- Principals don't care that SNS experiences a significant budget shortfall when students with no app on file eat free. They do not see this as their problem, and sending them a report on their monthly cash shortage is a waste of time. Principals understand that it is their

responsibility to make sure every child get a meal app at the start of the year, but they do not currently see any advantage to themselves or their school in making sure that as many apps as possible are returned completed.

6. **CLARIFY THE PROCESS FOR NEWCOMERS** -- No one outside of SNS seems to understand what the process is for qualifying students who enter the district after the start of the school year, or for students who move from one school to another within the same school year. Principals do not understand if a child who arrives at their school after August needs to fill out a new meal form, or if his/her eligibility is automatically transferred to the new school. What is the process for new students who would qualify through direct certification? This needs to be explained.
7. **SCHOOLS MUST PROVIDE THE HO#** -- Every meal app must contain the HO# for every child listed on the app. *Parents do not ever know their child's HO#.* Forms returned to school with no HO# should have that number added by the school office. If the form is sent to SNS with no HO#, their database of over 56,000 student names must be searched to find the number, which is a very slow process. It makes more sense to address this issue at the school site. This is why labels with student info already printed on them are sent to every school, along with the apps, at the beginning of the school year. Schools can request a new set of labels for EVERY meal app collection effort.
8. **THE PROCESS FOR SIBLINGS NEEDS IMPROVEMENT** -- There is currently no easy way for a parent with multiple students (even at the same school) to fill out just one form for all their students, and be certain that all the students on the form will be processed. Filling out the form completely is tedious and time consuming and parents are usually not willing to do more than one, especially when they already know that their child will be fed for free even if they don't fill out a form at all. SNS prefers one form per child, and although there is room on the standard form for multiple children, there is only room for one HO#. In order to convince a parent to fill out a form to receive a benefit which they already know they are going to receive anyway, it is necessary to make it as easy as possible for the parent. Requiring them to find their students' HO#s, or to fill out a form for each child, makes the process more burdensome, not easier. A new form should be designed which allows for multiple students to be listed, and which will accommodate multiple preprinted labels for those students. [Note: A new meal application form which allows a family to fill out just one form for all children in the family was introduced in August 2005.]
9. **ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS FIRST** -- It makes sense to target elementary schools, rather than middle or high schools. The bulk of the cash shortages are generated at the elementary level, and elementary students are more willing to stand in the lunch line. At the elementary level, it is easier for the Principal to involve the teachers in the effort, because each teacher has only one class. Teachers can not only send apps home as homework, but can also ask parents at their parent-teacher conference if they have filled out an app. Parents who understand in elementary school why it is

important to fill out the form, and how to do it, are more likely to continue to do so as their child moves into middle and high school.

10. **IT TAKES A VILLAGE** – While collection of the free and reduced price meal applications is primarily the responsibility of Student Nutrition Services, it is a huge job and they need help. It is in everyone’s best interest to get as accurate a count as possible of the number of students who qualify for free lunch. Schools benefit from increased funding and grant eligibility, as well as a more favorable API similar schools ranking. Parents benefit from not having to provide lunch for their children and students benefit from being better nourished, which leads to higher academic achievement and better behavior at school. Assistant Superintendents (ISOs) can help by making sure Principals understand the benefits to their school from having every child return a completed app; Principals can help by sharing the message with teachers and parents. Parents can help by making sure they return their own kids’ apps promptly, and by helping to spread the word to other parents. Community based organizations (CBOs) often use the school district’s statistics on free and reduced lunch eligibility to measure poverty by neighborhood. CBOs can help ensure that every eligible child is included in those statistics by making the meal apps available to their members and clients, by working with immigrant parents who may fear that filling out the form will affect their immigration status (it won’t!), and by letting people know that **MORE MEAL APPLICATIONS RETURNED MEANS MORE MONEY FOR OUR SCHOOLS.**

For more information on student nutrition within the San Francisco Unified School District, please visit the website of the SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee at www.sfusdfood.org

Results of first 11 targeted schools pilot 03-04 to 04-05

The purpose of this pilot was to try to increase participation in the free lunch program by getting more families to return the meal application. Eleven elementary schools were targeted and various strategies were tried. The initial contact was an informational phone call to the Principal.

School (contacted autumn 04)	Free/ reduced lunch rate 03-04 (API)*	Free/ reduced lunch rate 04-05 (SFUSD, 12/04)**	Increase (decrease)	% apps returned 03-04	% apps returned 04-05	Increase (decrease)	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 03	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 04	Reduction (increase) in cash shortage
Cobb	63%	80.3%	17.3 percentage points	77%	91%	14 percentage points	\$4,762.25	\$1,576.80	\$3,185.45
Golden Gate	41%	82.2%	41.2 points	36%	91%	55 points	\$6,640.55	\$2,589.00	\$4,051.55
21st Century	57%	70.6%	13.6 points	65%	77%	12 points	\$5,670.25	\$2,413.60	\$3,256.65
Ortega	64%	78.8%	14.8 points	75%	98%	23 points	\$5,260.80	\$2,729.20	\$2,531.60
Drew	67%	68.4%	1.4 points	67%	75%	8 points	\$4,128.84	\$4,363.65	(\$234.81)
Milk	49%	52%	3 points	65%	86%	21 points	\$3,609.40	\$5,418.95	(\$1,809.55)
Buena Vista	39%	52%	13 points	56%	71%	15 points	\$3,488.46	\$4,483.40	(\$994.94)

School (contacted autumn 04)	Free/ reduced lunch rate 03-04 (API)*	Free/ reduced lunch rate 04-05 (SFUSD, 12/04)**	Increase (decrease)	% apps returned 03-04	% apps returned 04-05	Increase (decrease)	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 03	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 04	Reduction (increase) in cash shortage
Lakeshore	30%	41.4%	11.4 points	49%	75%	26 points	\$1234.80	\$1486.00	(251.20)

The following schools were not contacted until after December 2004.

School (contacted January 05)	Free/ reduced lunch rate 03-04 (API)*	Free/ reduced lunch rate 04-05 (SFUSD, 12/04)**	Increase (decrease)	% apps returned 03-04	% apps returned 04-05	Increase (decrease)	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 03	Cash shortage Aug.-Dec. 04	Reduction (increase) in cash shortage
Carver	66%	65.7%	(.3 point)	75%	71%	(4 points)	\$6,193.70	\$812.20	\$5381.50
El Dorado	69%	71.6%	2.6 points	73%	84%	11 points	\$9,017.31	\$10,588.35	(\$1,571.04)
Sheridan	65%	78.4%	13.4 points	73%	85%	12 points	\$5,313.40	\$7,409.90	(\$2,096.50)
Total for 11 schools			11.9 points average increase in free/reduced rate			17.5 points average increase in % of apps returned	\$55,319.76	\$43,871.05	\$11,448.71 reduction in total cash shortage

*The API figures are taken from the API report for each school, located on the CDE website at:
http://api.cde.ca.gov/api2003/API/2004Grth_dst.asp?cYear=&cSelect=3868478 -- SAN^FRANCISCO^UNIFIED&cChoice=2004GDst1 (click on school name to see the API report for each school.)

The figures are derived by the CDE from the student answer document for each student whose score was included in the API. These figures generally reflect the overall school f/r rate accurate to within +/- a few percentage points, even though they are derived from only about 66% of an elementary school's enrollment (grades 2-5.) The accuracy of these figures has been confirmed by the SFUSD Office of Assessment & Accountability.

**These figures are the most current available for this school year and have been verified for accuracy by SNS. They were provided by the Office of Assessment & Accountability.

Results at 10 similar schools not targeted (control group)

School	03-04 free/reduced lunch rate (API)	04-05 rate (SFUSD, Dec. 21, 04)	Increase	Cash Shortages	Cash Shortages	Reduction (increase) in cash shortage
			(decrease)	2003-2004	2004-2005	
Taylor	78%	74.60%	(3.4 percentage points)	\$ 5,727.00	\$ 9,202.35	\$ (3,475.35)
Monroe	79%	66.70%	(12.3 points)	\$ 5,059.72	\$ 6,896.56	\$ (1,836.84)
Carmichael	64%	57.60%	(6.4 points)	\$ 4,505.25	\$ 10,466.00	\$ (5,960.75)
Swett	71%	63.50%	(7.5 points)	\$ 4,759.89	\$ 8,371.40	\$ (3,611.51)
Parks	77%	76.10%	(0.9 points)	\$ 4,956.40	\$ 8,611.15	\$ (3,654.75)
Serra	88%	85.90%	(2.1 points)	\$ 4,145.09	\$ 6,178.45	\$ (2,033.36)
Tenderloin	76%	79.30%	3.3 points	\$ 3,868.00	\$ 5,391.50	\$ (1,523.50)
Malcolm X	77%	67.50%	(9.5 points)	\$ 3,926.35	\$ 4,216.00	\$ (289.65)
Sanchez	77%	72.60%	(4.4 points)	\$ 3,522.25	\$ 4,185.00	\$ (662.75)
TOTAL			(4.3 points average decrease)	\$ 40,469.95	\$ 63,518.41	\$ (23,048.46)

NOTES:		
Cash Shortage Report Run	SY 2003-2004	8/25 - 12/31
	SY 2004-2005	8/30 - 12/31