

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Food & Nutrition Service

Q&As for USDA's
Web-Based Prototype
Application

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1. What is the USDA web-based prototype application for free and reduced price school meals?

The web-based school meal prototype application is a functional model that is meant to illustrate and advance the development of integrity-focused, user accessible, web-based design. Like FNS' paper prototype application, its use is optional, and it can be customized to meet the individual needs of State and local agencies.

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2. Why did FNS develop a web-based prototype application?

FNS developed the web-based prototype to illustrate how an online application can take greater advantage of the dynamic capabilities of an electronic platform. While many SFAs currently offer online applications, most mirror the designs of paper-based applications, which by nature, are static and constrained to the area of an 8 ½" x 11" sheet of paper.

Research conducted by USDA found that household reporting error during the application process can lead to improper certification or mistaken denial of benefits to eligible children. FNS incorporated a number of features into the prototype that research suggests may reduce that error. These include a structured interview to guide applicants through the reporting process with greater certainty, user-tested design standards to improve readability and comprehension, integrated 'help' features to make finding answers as simple as possible, and validation checks to ensure accuracy and completeness.

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3. Is use of the new application required?

No, adoption of the new web-based prototype application is not required. FNS understands that many school districts already offer online applications to their households and that making changes to those applications will require additional time and resources. However, FNS strongly encourages districts and third party software vendors to modify existing online applications to adopt the key integrity features of the new prototype. Districts and their vendors are free to borrow design elements or reuse the prototype's program code.

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4. Why should SFAs adopt the web-based prototype application? What are the benefits?

Districts that already offer online applications recognize their ability to reduce burden and the risk of error at both the household and school district levels. The FNS prototype builds on the best features of existing online applications by incorporating lessons from recent research to further reduce error and improve the user experience (UX, as they say in the tech world). These include guiding applicants through a structured 'interview' to avoid mistakes and prevent the submission of incomplete applications. They also include easy user access to instructions through integrated popup and comprehensive help. These features should help reduce the volume of questions and assistance requests received by districts from households. Also, the prototype is mobile-friendly, so a parent that only has access to a smart phone will get the same high-quality UX when applying as a parent with access to a computer.

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5. The prototype application is longer than my SFA's current online application. Why should we increase the burden on our families?

While FNS' web-based prototype application features an income interview that is more detailed than most existing online applications, it does not necessarily increase applicant burden. Notably, the USDA web-based prototype is designed to prompt households only with questions that are relevant to their specific circumstances. For example, a household indicating that it only has wage income will not be prompted to report other types of income, such as public assistance or retirement payments. Similarly, a household indicating categorical eligibility for all children attending school will not be prompted with the income section at all.

Beyond this 'smart' questioning approach, a number of additional design features have been incorporated to help facilitate quick and accurate reporting from households. Questions are written in concise, plain language and are paired with comprehensive on-screen 'Help,' eliminating the need to reference separate instructional documents or infer the meaning behind each question. The prototype's guided applicant 'interview' is designed to reduce the mistakes that USDA research identifies as the leading cause of incorrect certification or denial of benefits.

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6. My SFA already has an online application. Do we have to modify ours to incorporate the elements in the new prototype application?

No. State and local agencies are not required to modify existing applications to follow the format of the FNS prototype, but FNS encourages a careful review of the *Guide to USDA's Web-Based Prototype Application* to see if and how incorporating some or all of the design elements could improve the free and reduced price application process for certifying officials and households. If applicable, contracted application vendors may also be consulted to determine whether they can incorporate any of the design features into their existing products. Section 3 of the *Guide*, contains information about how to access and customize the code from the FNS prototype.

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7. My SFA does not currently use an online application. Can we use the new web-based prototype application?

The simple answer to this question is 'Yes,' SFAs that do not currently use online applications can adopt the new web-based prototype. The application code is available to download for free from the [FNS website](#). It is important to note that the application is not software that an SFA can download, open, and start using immediately. It will require additional resources before it is ready for household use. See the Q&A, "What are the foreseeable costs to SFAs associated with adopting the new prototype?" for more information.

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8. In what languages will the application be available?

The application will be available in English and Spanish in the initial release. FNS understands that providing pre-translated materials help SFAs meet their obligation to provide application

materials to households in languages they can understand. The agency will offer additional language translations in the future.

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9. Can an SFA tailor the web-based prototype application for its own use?

Yes, the application is highly customizable. SFAs may add their name, logo, contact information, State/and local assistance program names, and additional reporting fields, as needed. The full extent of customization possibilities are detailed in the Section 3 of the *Guide to USDA's Web-Based Prototype Application*.

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10. Who owns the rights to the prototype application's design and program code?

The design and program code are open source, which means no one has exclusive rights to them. To put it another way, *anyone* is allowed to use the design and/or the code.

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11. Can software vendors copy design elements from the application for use in their own products?

Yes, and FNS encourages them to do so. The application code is 'open source' (free to use or copy without charge) and available to download from the FNS website. FNS has made available some tools and tips for developers in Section 3 of the *Guide to USDA's Web-Based Prototype Application* that provide valuable insight and information for programmers to borrow the code verbatim, or write their own code to produce similar results.

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12. Can software vendors use the program code in their products? Is it free?

Yes, software vendors are encouraged to use the program code in products offered to SFAs participating in the school meal programs. The program code is free and available for download from the FNS website.

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13. Where can I find the code for the web-based prototype application?

The code for the web-based prototype application can be found on the [Web-Based Prototype Application for Free and Reduced Price School Meals](#) page.

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14. What are the minimum requirements for an online application?

The minimum requirements for information collected on an application for free or reduced price school meals have not changed. They can be found at 7 CFR 245.2, *Documentation*, (1)(i)-(ii). Additional guidance may be found in the most recent edition of the *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*.

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15. Is the USDA web-based application mobile friendly?

Yes! The application is mobile-friendly, which means it will recognize the type of device the applicant is using and adjust accordingly. That means that families can access and complete the entire application via a smart phone or tablet. This is important for households that only have access to the internet through mobile devices.

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16. Can a family download the application from an app store on their phone?

No, the web-based prototype application is not the type of “app” that can be downloaded from an “app store” onto a mobile device. However, the application is mobile-friendly, which means it will look nice and be easy to use on small devices, like smart phones and tablets.

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17. Can the web-based prototype application integrate with my SFA’s existing student enrollment database and POS system?

Yes, the web-based prototype application was designed to be integrated with other systems, but since every system is different, your district’s IT staff or contractor will have to write the code to make everything work together. SFAs are advised to work with their IT or system support staff to see if or how the web-based prototype application can be adopted. See Section 3 of the “Guide to USDA’s Web-Based Prototype Application” for additional information.

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18. What are the foreseeable costs to SFAs associated with adopting the new prototype?

As mentioned above, the web-based school meal prototype application is a functional model of what an online application could look like. It is analogous to a concept car – it looks like a fully functioning car, but needs additional program code to make it road worthy. At a minimum, the prototype application will need to be connected to a secure school district database that will save the information that households submit through individual applications. Ideally, it would also be connected to other systems, such as a student enrollment database, direct certification database, verification sampling software, and a meal counting and claiming system in order to provide the full benefits of an integrated online environment. If a district already has these systems in place, or has access to IT resources equipped to establish these systems, the cost of adopting the prototype application may be low. Otherwise, SFAs may wish to hire a contractor to assist with this process. See the Q&A, “What funds can SFAs use to set up or modify an online application?” for further information.

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19. What funds can SFAs use to set up or modify an online application?

SFAs may use nonfederal funds or the nonprofit school food service account to cover the costs associated with setting up or modifying an online application. FNS’ Administrative Review & Training (ART) grants and the new Technology Innovation Grants (TIGs) are also possible funding sources.

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20. Where is the application hosted and who handles the security?

The prototype is not a USDA-hosted national application. USDA neither records household application information, nor does it make eligibility determinations on behalf of SFAs. Hosting this or any other online application and ensuring confidentiality of application data remains a school district responsibility. More information can be found in the *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*.

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21. Does the application come with any database management tools for SFAs?

No, the prototype application does not create a database, save applicant information, or include any database management tools. The SFA is responsible for the design and maintenance of its own database and database management system. That includes the storage and retrieval of completed applications, maintenance of SFA or school-level eligibility lists, and the generation of administrative reports.

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22. Does the prototype application feature built-in functionality to make eligibility determinations?

No. The web-based prototype application collects the data from households that is required to make eligibility determinations, but the process of determining eligibility and making certification decisions remains the responsibility of the SFA.

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23. Does the web-based prototype application make income conversion calculations?

The application estimates the monthly reported income on the application's concluding summary screen as a benefit to household applicants. However, any conversions or calculations necessary to make an eligibility determination (i.e. converting income sources with multiple frequencies into a single annual figure) are the responsibility of the SFA. This does not represent a change from current requirements, as detailed in the most recent edition of the *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*.

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24. During an Administrative Review, what is the State Agency's responsibility in terms of reviewing an online application system and the applications that are submitted electronically?

State agency responsibilities for reviewing applications have not changed. The State agency still must ensure that eligibility determinations are accurate, regardless of the mode of application, and that all record keeping requirements are met. Please consult the latest FNS Administrative Review Manual for more information.

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25. Where can I find additional information on FNS policy about electronic systems?

Additional information can be obtained from the following: Eligibility Manual for School Meals (SY 16-17), SP 12-2006 Commercial Software Used in School Nutrition Programs, SP 10-2007

Update on Electronic Transactions in the CNPs, and SP 12-2007 Electronic Record and Reporting Systems.

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If you have other questions, or if you have comments or feedback related to the web-based prototype application, email webapp@fns.usda.gov.