



National School Lunch Program

1. What is the National School Lunch Program?

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in nearly 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 28 million children each school day. In 1998, Congress expanded the National School Lunch Program to include reimbursement for snacks served to children in afterschool educational and enrichment programs to include children through 18 years of age.

The Food and Nutrition Service administers the program at the Federal level. At the State level, the National School Lunch Program is usually administered by State education agencies, which operate the program through agreements with school food authorities.

2. How does the National School Lunch Program work?

Generally, public or nonprofit private schools of high school grade or under and public or nonprofit private residential child care institutions may participate in the school lunch program. School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the lunch program get cash subsidies and donated commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve lunches that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price lunches to eligible children. School food authorities can also be reimbursed for snacks served to children through age 18 in afterschool educational or enrichment programs.

3. What are the nutritional requirements for school lunches?

School lunches must meet the applicable recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommend that no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories come from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. Regulations also establish a standard for school lunches to provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories.

School lunches must meet Federal nutrition requirements, but decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities.

4. How do children qualify for free and reduced-price meals?

Any child at a participating school may purchase a meal through the National School Lunch Program. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (For the period July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$25,155 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$35,798.)

Children from families with incomes over 185 percent of poverty pay a full price, though their meals are still subsidized to some extent. Local school food authorities set their own prices for full-price (paid) meals, but must operate their meal services as non-profit programs.

Afterschool snacks are provided to children on the same income eligibility basis as school meals. However, programs that operate in areas where at least 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals may serve all their snacks for free.

5. How much reimbursement do schools get?

Most of the support USDA provides to schools in the National School Lunch Program comes in the form of a cash reimbursement for each meal served. The current (July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006) basic cash reimbursement rates are:

Free lunches:	\$2.32	Free snacks:	\$0.63
Reduced-price lunches:	\$1.92	Reduced-price snacks:	\$0.31
Paid lunches:	\$0.22	Paid snacks:	\$0.05

Higher reimbursement rates are in effect for Alaska and Hawaii, and for some schools with high percentages of low-income children.

6. What other support do schools get from USDA?

In addition to cash reimbursements, schools are entitled by law to receive commodity foods, called "entitlement" foods, at a value of 17.50 cents for each meal served in Fiscal Year 2005-2006. Schools can also get "bonus" commodities as they are available from surplus agricultural stocks.

Through Team Nutrition USDA provides schools with technical training and assistance to help school food service staffs prepare healthful meals, and with nutrition education to help children understand the link between diet and health.

7. What types of foods do schools get from USDA?

States select entitlement foods for their schools from a list of various foods purchased by USDA and offered through the school lunch program. Bonus foods are offered only as they become available through agricultural surplus. The variety of both entitlement and bonus commodities schools can get from USDA depends on quantities available and market prices.

A very successful project between USDA and the Department of Defense (DoD) has helped provide schools with fresh produce purchased through DoD. USDA has also worked with schools to help promote connections with local small farmers who may be able to provide fresh produce.

8. How many children have been served over the years?

The National School Lunch Act in 1946 created the modern school lunch program, though USDA had provided funds and food to schools for many years prior to that. About 7.1 million children were participating in the National School Lunch Program by the end of its first year, 1946-47. By 1970, 22 million children were participating, and by 1980 the figure was nearly 27 million. In 1990, an average of 24 million children ate school lunch every day. In Fiscal Year 2003, more than 28.4 million children each day got their lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Since the modern program began, more than 187 billion lunches have been served.

9. How much does the program cost?

The National School Lunch Program cost \$7.1 billion in FY 2003. By comparison, the lunch program's total cost in 1947 was \$70 million; in 1950, \$119.7 million; 1960, \$225.8 million; 1970, \$565.5 million; 1975, \$1.7 billion; 1980, \$3.2 billion; 1985, \$3.4 billion; and 1990, \$3.7 billion.

For more information:

For information on the operation of the National School Lunch Program and all the Child Nutrition Programs, contact the State agency in your state that is responsible for the administration of the programs. A listing of all our State agencies may be found on our web site at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd, select "Contact Us", then select "Child Nutrition State Agencies".

You may also contact us through the office of USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Public Information Staff at 703-305-2286, or by mail at 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 914, Alexandria, Virginia 22302.