



THE BASICS ABOUT SCHOOL LUNCH

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

SCHOOL LUNCH

THE BASICS

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM?

President Lyndon Johnson enacted the 1946 National School Lunch Act as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children.” In 1998, Congress expanded the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to include cash reimbursement for snacks served in certain afterschool educational and enrichment programs.

The NSLP is part of the Child Nutrition Program (CNP), regulated under the Child Nutrition Act and funded through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The CNP also funds programs for school breakfasts, after school snacks, and a summer meal program for nutritionally needy children. The School Breakfast Program was established by Congress as a pilot in 1966 and became a permanent program in 1975.

All schools that participate in these programs are required to offer free and reduced-price meals to low-income children, adhere to federal nutrition standards, and to implement wellness policies that promote healthy school environments.

Although the Child Nutrition Act has permanent authorization, it is reauthorized on a rolling basis every five years, giving Congress the opportunity to review and amend it. The last reauthorization was in 2004. At the time of this publication in Fall 2010, CNA is being reauthorized by congress under a new name, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Changes to both the nutritional standards and the funding amounts are anticipated as a result of the 2010 reauthorization.

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HOW IS SCHOOL LUNCH FUNDED?

School lunch is paid for through the NSLP, a Federally funded program of the USDA. The cost of the NSLP in 2009 was 9.8 billion dollars.* In addition, the USDA purchases approximately \$1 billion in commodity foods to provide schools with access to low-cost ingredients, and to subsidize farmers unable to sell high volume-crops.

At public schools, meals are paid for by students either at full price, or through the free/reduced price meal program of NSLP. In order to qualify for free or reduced priced meals, families must be at or below the nationally recognized poverty level which states a family of four must earn no more than \$27,560 annually. This number is irrespective of location and it does not take into account cost of living by area.

FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS

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, 2010, through June 30, 2011, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$28,665 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$40,793.) 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.

In 2010/11 the reimbursement rates to schools were \$0.26 for each full-price meal they serve; \$2.32 for each reduced price meal; and \$2.72 for each free meal. Reimbursement amounts are increased annually to account for inflation, at the rate of approximately 4 cents per child.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM?

- 31.6 million kids (50%) in over 101,000 public schools get their lunch through the program (10 million get breakfast).
- About 20 million children participate in the free or reduced price lunch program.

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ARE THERE REGULATIONS AND NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCH?

In order for schools to be reimbursed for meals, those meals must adhere to USDA regulations, and meet very specific standards also outlined by the USDA. Under the regulations, five key meal components must be served. Details about what counts towards these credits are described in specific detail on the USDA website. In summary, the five components include:

- 1 serving meat/meat alternate
- 2 servings fruit or vegetable
- 1 serving grains
- 1 serving fluid milk (250ml/8oz)

Congress has called on the USDA to implement new nutrition standards for the National School Meals Program based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine (IOM). The USDA will then set a date by which schools must comply with the new standards in order to receive the six-cent boost in federal reimbursement rate that Congress has allotted. Some school food experts fear that the increased cost of meeting the new recommendations for servings of fruits and vegetables will not be covered by the six-cent reimbursement. The following chart compares current USDA school lunch standards to the IOM recommendations.

Nutrient	Current Standards	IOM Recommendations for New Standards
Calories	Specifies only a minimum calorie level	Specifies both a minimum and maximum calorie level for each age group, based on current DGAs.
Calcium, Iron, Vitamins A and C	1/3 daily requirement (according to age group)	Specifies amounts per grade group, based on a ratio of nutrient needs vs calorie requirement, rather than RDA.
Fats	Max 30% of calories from fat; of which max 10% from saturated fat	Max 35% from fat; 10% from saturated fat; 0 grams of transfat on label for any food served in school
Sodium	Not specified	Less than 2,300mg/day (1 teaspoon). New recommended levels to be reached by 2020 .
Fiber	Not specified	50% of grains from wholegrain
Water	Not specified	Free and available to students in the cafeteria
Sugar	Not specified	Not specified. However, no food item may contain more than 35 percent sugar by weight
Milk	250ml or 8oz	Fat free or low fat milk; 8 fluid oz offered at each meal
Fruit and Vegetables	1/2 cup – 3/4 cup / day	Doubles the recommended amount

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School lunch is paid for through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The current USDA standards are up for review with the reauthorization of CNA (as of Fall 2010). There will be a three-year transition period to allow states to upgrade. Until then, these are the issues which can prevent a child getting a balanced meal in school:

1. 'Offer vs Serve' rule

Schools must offer the full meal, but students may choose not to take up to two items. This creates an imbalanced meal.

2. Not all food served on campus is Federally regulated

Other food sources, including vending machines and fast food vendors (also known as a la carte or competitive foods), are not regulated, so students who select these offerings rather than a hot lunch may eat only dessert as their full meal if they so choose. These items may "compete" with the federally regulated school meal program, hence the name competitive foods.

3. Foods of minimal nutritional value are available on many campuses

Current federal regulations define a category of foods called "Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value" (FMNV) as items that provide less than five percent of the U.S. RDA per serving for each of eight essential nutrients. These foods may not be sold on campus during mealtime, but may be sold at any other time during the day.

FMNV include soft drinks, water ices (not including fruit juice ices), chewing gum, fondant (a sugar based dessert), coated popcorn and certain candies made largely from sweeteners, such as hard candy and jellybeans.

FMNV does not cover items such as potato chips, chocolate bars, and doughnuts, which can be sold in the cafeteria or elsewhere in schools during the mealtime or at any other time. States, districts, and even schools are free to enact stricter nutrition standards.

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WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO CHANGE SCHOOL LUNCH?

At the local level:

Parent advocacy and commitment

Administrative and school-wide support

Financial resources

At the national level:

Training. Training for nutrition services staff is provided through a program of the USDA called Team Nutrition . Training covers nutrition education, meal planning, and finance. There is no federally-funded program for teaching lunch ladies how to cook.

Equipment. Cafeterias across America will need equipment in order to be able to prepare fresh meals on site. Districts could refurbish just one cafeteria to serve as a central kitchen for all their schools. The necessary equipment includes stoves, sinks, and cooking utensils, as well as proper storage facilities such as walk-in refrigerators.

Eligibility. Wider eligibility for free and reduced meal participation would increase participation in the school meal program and assist more children in need. The poverty level should take into account local cost of living, and should be updated significantly. The applications should be available on-line and the printed applications should be simplified so that families are able to enroll quickly and easily.

State Initiatives. Several states have introduced their own, additional legislation covering things like snack and soda taxes, calorie labeling on menus, higher nutritional standards, regulation of competitive foods and farm to school programs.

Funding. Each school meal costs approximately \$2.92 - \$3.10 to produce, with a shortfall estimated by the School Nutrition Association at 35 - 45 cents per meal. It would cost federal government an additional \$1.7 billion to cover this shortfall. As it stands, the onus is on the schools or states to fund the balance. Legislation currently pending would allocate an additional \$450 million annually to school lunch, 1/3 of which would go towards the actual meal, amounting to 6 cents more per plate per child.

This information was adapted from materials published by: Center for Science in the Public Interest (www.cspinet.org) and The Chez Panisse Foundation (www.chezpanissefoundation.org)