

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in over 100,000 public and non-profit schools and residential childcare institutions. It provided nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day in 2012. 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.

School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the lunch program and breakfast program get cash subsidies and USDA foods from the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve meals that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price meals to eligible children.

School meals and snacks must meet meal pattern and nutrition standards based on the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The current meal patterns increased the availability of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in the school menu. The meal pattern's dietary specifications set specific calorie limits to ensure age-appropriate meals for grades K-5, 6-8 and 9-12. Other meal regulations limit sodium and fat.

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. Parents are encouraged to complete an application for free meals either on paper or on-line.

For more information on the National School Lunch Program and all other Child Nutrition Programs, contact the California Department of Education.