



The [National School Lunch Program](#) makes it possible for all school children in the United States to receive a nutritious lunch each and every school day. It offers parents an affordable, convenient way to ensure their children get the nutrition they need to learn and thrive. Research shows that when a child’s nutritional needs are met, the child is more attentive in class, and has better attendance and fewer disciplinary problems. Studies also show that participation in school lunch reduces food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health.

To increase the number of children participating in school lunch, Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) works at the federal and state level to improve the enrollment process for families and make it easier for schools to offer healthy meals.

School Lunch Today

- Any public school, nonprofit private school, or residential child care institution can participate in the National School Lunch Program and receive federal funds for each meal served. Approximately 95 percent of public schools participate.
- During the 2020–2021 school year, 19.8 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program.
- On a typical school day, 19.6 million of these 19.8 million total children were receiving free or reduced-price lunches.
- Any student attending a school that offers the program can receive a lunch. What the federal government covers, and what a student pays, depends on family income:
 - Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) are eligible for free school meals.
 - Children from families with incomes between 130 to 185 percent FPL qualify for reduced-price meals and can be charged no more than 40 cents per lunch.
 - Children from families with incomes above 185 percent.
 - FPL pay charges (referred to as “paid meals”), which are set by the school.

- For the 2022–2023 school year, 130 percent of the FPL was \$29,939 per year for a family of three; 185 percent for a family of three is \$42,606 per year.

School Lunch Provides the Nutrition Children Need

- Reimbursable meals must meet federal nutrition standards. National School Lunch Program lunches provide one-third or more of the recommended levels for key nutrients.
- Reimbursable meals must provide no more than 30 percent of calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.
- New nutrition standards phased in since the 2012–2013 school year required schools to increase whole grains, fruits, and vegetables served through the National School Lunch Program.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) research indicates that children who participate in the National School Lunch Program have superior nutritional intakes compared to those who bring lunch from home or otherwise do not participate.
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School Lunch Gives Children the Fuel They Need to Keep Learning Throughout the School Day

- Studies show that proper nutrition improves a child's behavior, school performance, and overall cognitive development.
- Properly nourished children more actively participate in the education experience, which benefits them, their fellow students, and the entire school community.
- A healthy eating environment teaches children good nutrition and the elements of a proper diet, which can have positive effects on children's eating habits and physical well-being throughout life.

Community Eligibility Is Making It Easier for High-Poverty Schools to Operate Meal Programs

- Schools with high percentages of low-income students can offer meals at no charge to all students through the [Community Eligibility Provision](#), which increases participation, while also helping schools reduce labor costs and increase their federal revenues.
- Paperwork for schools and families is dramatically reduced. Families no longer have to complete applications and schools no longer have to certify individual student eligibility, which also eliminates the verification process.
- School meal service is streamlined. School meal staff no longer collect payments or do individual student counting and claiming. They simply count total meals served and assure that each student only receives one meal at the point of service.

How the National School Lunch Program Works

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service administers the National School Lunch Program at the federal level. At the state level, the program typically is administered by state education agencies, which operate the program through agreements with school districts.

- The National School Lunch Program provides per meal cash reimbursements to public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions that provide free and reduced-price lunches to eligible children.
- For the 2022–2023 school year, schools are reimbursed by the federal government \$4.35 per free lunch served, \$3.95 per reduced-priced lunch, and 79 cents per “paid” lunch. Free students must not be charged any amount, and reduced-price students must not be charged more than 40 cents for lunch.
- Schools in which 60 percent or more of the lunches served during the second preceding school year were free or reduced-price receive an additional 8 cents reimbursement for each lunch served.
- In addition to cash reimbursements, schools also are entitled by law to receive USDA commodity foods, valued at 30 cents for each lunch served for the 2022–2023 school year. Schools may also receive “bonus” commodities when they are available.
- Federal expenditures for the National School Lunch Program in fiscal year 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) were \$14.2 billion.

FRAC Resources

- [Best Practices for Preventing or Reducing School Meal Debt](#)
- [Strategies to Increase Applications for School Meals](#)
- [Research Brief: School Meals Are Essential for Student Health and Learning](#)
- [Reimbursement Rates & Income Guidelines for the Federal Child Nutrition Programs](#)
- [Healthy School Meals for All Campaign](#)
- [Community Eligibility – Grouping Tools and Calculators](#)

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