

National School Lunch Program

1. What is the National School Lunch Program?

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in over 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman in 1946. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the program at the Federal level. At the State level, the NSLP is administered by Kentucky Department of Education, Division of School and Community Nutrition, which operates the program through agreements with school food authorities.

2. How does the National School Lunch Program work?

Generally, public and non-profit private schools of high school grade or under and public or non-profit 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 USDA foods 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.

3. What are the nutritional requirements for school lunches?

School lunches must meet meal pattern and nutrition standards based on the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The current meal pattern increases 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 enhancements include gradual reductions in sodium content of the meals. While school lunches must meet Federal meal requirements, 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.

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 serves as non-profit programs.

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 basic cash reimbursement rates can be found on the [USDA Website](#). School food authorities that are certified to be in compliance with the updated meal requirements will receive an additional performance based federal cash reimbursement for each meal served. This bonus will be adjusted for inflation in subsequent years. Higher reimbursement rates are also in effect for Alaska and Hawaii, and for schools with high percentages of low-income students.

6. What other support do schools get from USDA?

In addition to cash reimbursements, schools are entitled by law to receive USDA foods, called “entitlement” foods, you can find the value for this School Year on the [USDA FNS website](#). Schools can also get “bonus” USDA foods 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.

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

In 1946, the National School Lunch Act created the modern school lunch program, though USDA had provided funds and food to schools for many years prior to 1946. About 7.1 million children were participating in the NSLP 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, over 24 million children ate school lunch every day. In Fiscal Year 2012, more than 31.6 million children each day got their lunch through the NSLP. Since the modern program began, more than 224 billion lunches have been served.

For more information:

For information on the operation of the National School Lunch Program and all the Child Nutrition Programs, contact the Division of School and Community Nutrition at Kentucky Department of Education. You may contact us by mail at 300 Sower Blvd, Frankfort, KY 40601 or by telephone at (502) 564-5625. More information can be found on the Kentucky Department of Education [website](#).