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 over 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care 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.

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 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. 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 lunchs 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 the sodium content of the meals (sodium targets must be reached by SY 2014-15, SY 2017-18 and SY 2022-23). 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. (For the period July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2014, 130 percent of the poverty level is $30,615 for a family of four; 185 percent is $43,568 .)

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, 2014 through June 30, 2015) basic cash reimbursement rates if school food authorities served less than 60% free and reduced price lunches during the second preceding school year are:

Free lunches:	**Reduced-price lunches:**	**Paid lunches:**
$2.93	**$2.53**	**$0.28**
Free snacks:	**Reduced-price snacks:**	**Paid snacks:**
$0.80	**$0.40**	**$0.07**

School food authorities that are certified to be in compliance with the updated meal requirements will receive an additional six cents of federal cash reimbursement for each meal served. This bonus will be adjusted for inflation in subsequent years. These above rates exclude the additional six cents. Higher reimbursement rates are also in effect for Alaska and Hawaii, and for schools with high percentages of low-income students.

For the latest reimbursement rates visit FNS website at
http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/rates-reimbursement

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, at a value of 23.25 cents for each meal served in Fiscal Year 2012-2013. 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 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 USDA foods 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?

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 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, 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 National School Lunch Program. Since the modern program began, more than 224 billion lunches have been served.

9. How much does the program cost?

The National School Lunch Program cost $11.6 billion in FY 2012. By comparison, the lunch program's total cost in 1947 was $70 million; in 1950, $119.7 million; in 1960, $225.8 million; in 1970, $565.5 million; in 1980, $3.2 billion; in 1990, $3.7 billion; and in 2000, 6.1 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 http://www.fns.usda.gov/office-type/child-nutrition-programs, select your State from the drop down box and select “apply.”

You may also contact us through the Communication Division at 703-305-2281, or by mail at 3101 Park Center Drive, Suite 926, Alexandria, Virginia 22302.

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