

# California National School Lunch Program Facts

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## What is the National School Lunch Program?

In 1946, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was created by Congress in the National School Lunch Act. In the Act, Congress declared the program a "measure of National Security to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children." Originally, the program provided surplus farm commodities and a small, general assistance cash grant to all schools operating a lunch program based on the size of the program, regardless of the economic need of the children the school served.

In 1970, however, Congress authorized a new cash subsidy for schools based on the number of low-income children served by the school. In return, schools had to provide their low-income students with free or reduced-price meals, depending on the income status of the child's family. The federal lunch program has always required schools follow national nutrition guidelines so that each meal contains an adequate level of key nutrients. These guidelines were updated to reflect the recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid, and as of July 1997, all California schools must be working toward meeting these new dietary goals.

## Why Is School Lunch Important?

The work by Tufts University School of Nutrition and numerous other studies over the past decade have shown that hungry children do not learn effectively and that even mild malnutrition can impair physical and cognitive growth. And, it is not only important that children eat; what they eat is also crucial to their health. According to the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment study by USDA's Office of Analysis and Evaluation, NSLP meals are much higher in key nutrients than meals purchased by the student outside of school and even more nutritious than bagged lunches brought from home.

Meals served under the NSLP must meet specific federal nutrition standards in order to qualify for federal and state cash reimbursements and federal commodities. Though nutrition standards have been in place since the program began, they were recently changed to reflect the updated nutrition science in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. All participating schools in California are now required to be working toward meeting these new, higher nutrition standards. Specifically, their meals must be based on the federal Food Guide Pyramid so that, when averaged over a week, they meet the recommended values for key nutrients in the Dietary Guidelines and must limit calories from fat to 30% of total calories. Meals may be planned by using computerized nutrient analysis or by following an approved meal pattern.

## Who is Eligible to receive a Lunch?

The NSLP is an entitlement to all school children residing in the United States. This means that all children, regardless of their citizenship status, may receive a discounted meal for which the school receives a federal cash subsidy and federal farm commodities. In addition, children from families with incomes 185% or below the federal poverty line are eligible for free (if the income is 0-130%) or reduced-price (if the income is between 130-185%) meals for which the school is also reimbursed by federal and state funds. The charge to the student for reduced-price meals may not exceed \$0.40.

Children in food stamp or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) households are automatically eligible for free meals. Since 1977, California's state meal mandate has required that schools provide at least one meal per day to all qualifying low-income children. This meal must meet federal nutrition



standards. All public and private non-profit schools and residential childcare institutions can participate in the NSLP

## **How Many Participate in the Program?**

Nationwide, more than 27.4 million children each day got their lunches in more than 98,000 schools and residential child care institutions across the country in FY2000. Nearly 4.6 billion lunches (compared to 24 million in 1990) were served, 57% of which were provided free or at reduced prices to eligible children.

In California's FY 2000, there were 9,285 public and private schools offering school lunch. On average, over 487 million school lunches were served per year, (compared to 448 million in 1997). Of these students served, 67% received a free lunch, 10% received a reduced-price lunch, and 23% participated in the paid meal category. However, of the 1, 164, 426 children in California who were eligible for free or reduced priced school meal benefits in the past 12 months, the average daily participation rate was only 48%. This reflects that more than half of our state's children who need the meals are not receiving the benefits of this program.

## **Who Administers the Program?**

The NSLP is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), at the state level by the California Department of Education's Child Nutrition and Food Distribution Division, and at the local level by individual school districts.

## **How is the Program Funded?**

The Federal government reimburses public and nonprofit schools and licensed residential child care institutions (e.g. juvenile halls, group homes) for providing lunch according to the income level of the child served. At those schools where greater than 60% of students are eligible for free or reduced price meals, the Federal government pays a higher "Needy" reimbursement of two cents per meal. In addition, California's state meal mandate requires the state to reimburse schools for all free and reduced-price lunches served. The Federal government also provides commodities (also known as "entitlement" foods) worth 15.5 cents for each meal served. These commodities are purchased from the USDA and "bonus" commodities are available from agricultural surpluses.

In FY2000, the National School Lunch Program cost \$5.56 billion and served more than 27.4 million children each day. Specifically for federal meal reimbursement payments, estimates in FY 2001 totaled approximately \$944 million. State dollars received for these programs totaled approximately \$61 million.