

# **NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM**

## **What is the National School Lunch Program?**

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in over 101,000 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 2010. 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.

## **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.

## **What are the nutritional requirements for school lunches?**

School lunches must meet the applicable recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommend that no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories come from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. Regulations also establish a standard for school lunches to provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories. School lunches must meet Federal nutrition requirements, but decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities.

## **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, 2011, through June 30, 2012, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$29,055 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$41,348.)

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.