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Understanding the USDA's National School Lunch Program



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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 provides low-cost or free lunches to more than 30.5 million children each school day.

How did it start?

The Depression years caused childhood malnourishment and as a result many young men were turned down for military service in World War II due to nutritional deficiencies. This led to the establishment of the National School Lunch Program in 1946 under the authority of the National School Lunch Act.

How does it work?

School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the lunch program get cash subsidies and donated commodities 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.

Who can participate?

Any child at a participating school may purchase lunch. 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.

Most of the USDA support to schools in the National School Lunch Program comes from cash reimbursement for meals served. From July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, the cash reimbursement rates if they served less than 60 percent free and reduced price lunches during the second preceding school year were; \$2.68 per free lunch, \$2.28 per reduced-price lunch and \$.25 per paid lunch.

What are the nutrition guidelines?

The National School Lunch Act mandates that participating schools serve lunches that are consistent with recommendations of the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans including: eat a variety of foods; choose a diet moderate in sugars and salt; and choose a diet with 30 percent or less of calories from fat and less than 10% of calories from saturated fat. In addition, school lunches must provide at least 1/3 of the daily Recommended Dietary Allowances for protein, iron, calcium, and vitamins A and C, on average over each school week.

The choices concerning what foods to serve and how they are prepared and presented are made by local school district foodservice professionals.

How are lunch menus planned?

Foodservice directors have menu planning options. Under the Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning Approach, schools must meet specific component and quantity requirements by offering five food items from four food components. These components are: meat/meat alternate, vegetables and/or fruits, grains/breads, and milk. Minimum portion sizes are established by ages and grade groups. Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NuMenus) is a planning system that analyses the nutrient content of menus during the planning process. It is designed to assist menu planners in building meals that meet nutrient standards for calories, fat, protein, calcium, iron, and Vitamins A and C.

For more information about your child's school lunch program, contact your school district's foodservice director. For more information on the National School Lunch Program, please visit the USDA at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/>.