



Children's Defense Fund

SCHOOL LUNCH FACT SHEET

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federal program that provides subsidies to public, parochial, and private schools serving meals to enrolled children. The subsidy is provided as reimbursement for meals served. The amount of the federal subsidy varies according to the family income of participating children.

Low-income children can get meals free or at a reduced price, other students pay "full price" which is determined by the individual school districts. Schools must establish a system that can identify the payment category for each student getting a meal. Participation in the NSLP is voluntary, however, most schools in the United States do participate.

Who is Eligible?

All children enrolled in a participating school are eligible to receive meals, regardless of their income, residency or citizenship status. Children from families with income under 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) get meals free; those with income between 130-185 percent of FPL pay a reduced price, which is 25 cents in New York City. All other students (those with family incomes above 185 percent of the FPL) pay full price, which is \$1.50 for a complete meal in New York City.

Many schools in New York City, however, participate in Universal School Meals, which provides free meals to all children, regardless of family income. Further information on this option is below.

Can Immigrants Participate?

There is no residency or citizenship requirement. The social security number of an adult who signs the application is requested, but if (s)he does not have one, *the person can leave that section blank. There is no further attempt to get this information.*

What are the benefits?

All children are offered five food items for lunch. These must be a protein item (meat, fish, eggs, cheese), bread/grain item, two items in the fruit/vegetable categories (either one of each, or two vegetables or fruits), and milk (whole, low fat, or flavored).

Children should be offered a choice, especially in the protein item, to promote their participation. But, in order to reduce "plate waste", children are allowed to take as few as three of the five items, and they can be any three. Under this "offer vs. serve" option, a fully reimbursable lunch may actually consist of only two items, such as a slice of pizza and a container of milk, because pizza is considered to fulfill both the protein (cheese) and bread requirements.

However, in order to encourage more fruit and vegetable consumption, many New York City schools are now offering more fruit and vegetable options to students, including salad bars in many high schools and some middle schools.

Universal School Meals

Federal regulations allow schools to serve all children meals at no charge under an option called Provision 2. This provision operates on a four year cycle, with a "base year" in which all documentation is undertaken, such as collecting applications with income information from families, and identifying students by income eligibility when they take school meals. During the base year, schools determine monthly participation by percentages of free, reduced price and full price categories (but no money is collected from students). These percentages are then applied to total participation for the next three years, thereby eliminating the need for any paperwork at all. For example, during the base year, if 1,000 students participate in October, and the percentage breakdown is 70 percent free, 10 percent reduced price, and 20 percent paid, in the next three Octobers these are the percentages that are applied to the number of meals served, and determines how much the school is reimbursed, regardless of who the students actually are. Thus, only total number of meals served are counted in the subsequent three years.

Barriers to Participation

Unfortunately, participation in the school lunch program continues to be low. Among the possible reasons: crowded, noisy cafeterias where students do not want to spend time; pervasive stigma that meals are of inferior quality because they come from a cafeteria or is free; school administrators and staff who do not promote the program, which includes not programming students for lunch in some high schools.

In an attempt to increase the number of students receiving a school lunch, the New York City Department of Education's Office of SchoolFood has hired professional chefs to develop and promote new food items; partnered with non-profit organizations to refurbish cafeterias; and developed new marketing strategies to promote the program.

How to Apply

As long as a child is registered in school, (s)he is eligible to participate in the program. For free or reduced price status, families must fill out an application, which determines income eligibility, at the beginning of the school year.

For More Information Contact Children's Defense Fund - New York Child Nutrition Initiative.

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