

National School Lunch Program

Overview

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act in 1946 to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children. Congress designed NSLP to provide nutritious meals to children at a moderate price; to help them develop healthy eating habits and to promote nutrition education.

USDA administers the NSLP in cooperation with state departments of education. In Wisconsin the School Nutrition Team within the Department of Public Instruction (DPI-SNT) enters into agreement with school districts, private schools, and residential child care institutions for all the school nutrition programs. In addition to financial assistance, DPI-SNT offers technical assistance and guidance to establish and operate programs.

USDA sets a basic reimbursement rate for all income categories. Additional financial assistance is provided for the reduced price and free category meals served to low-income children. These rates are adjusted annually by Congress. The state matching payment is calculated at the end of the school year based on the lunches served in the prior school year.

Eligibility

USDA publishes an income scale based on household size which is sent with the annual contract materials. Participating schools must distribute information to households and the news media explaining how to apply for free and reduced price meals. Eligibility decisions are made by an official designated by the school or institution. Direct certification allows schools to more easily certify many low-income families for free meals by obtaining a list of households that are categorically eligible, such as FoodShare and W-2 recipients.

A child institutionalized in a residential child care institution is considered to be a household of one. Personal income available to the child to pay for meals is the only income source. In most cases, they are eligible for free meals. Institutions must document eligibility for children receiving free meals for which reimbursement is being claimed.

Access/Participation

School Participation. DPI reports a total of 2,525 schools/sites participating in the National School Lunch program in 2005-2006 school year. This is 98% of eligible public agencies and 47% of eligible private agencies.

Student Participation. Out of the total student enrollment in NSLP schools 32% of students (301,152) were approved for free or reduced price meals. An average 218,929 low-income students participated daily in NSLP – about 73% of all low-income students – who received 40% of the meals served. The average daily attendance of all students was 547,324.

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Benefit Details

The USDA reimburses schools \$2.40 for each free meal; \$2.00 for each reduced-price meal and \$.23 per each full price meal. High risk schools (over 60% low-income student enrollment) receive an extra 2 cents per meal for all meal categories. Additionally schools receive federal commodities valued at 17.5 cents per meal served and DPI provides an additional 4.5 to 5 cents in state funds per meal served. The value of federal/state contributions per child is estimated at \$51/month for free lunches; \$43/month for reduced-price lunches and nearly \$9/month for full-price lunches.¹ Schools served a total of over 96 million lunches to students worth \$102 million dollars. Of these meals low-income students consumed over 38 million lunches worth \$87 million dollars – or 85% of all federal and state reimbursements paid to participating agencies.

Program Impact

NSLP meals provide excellent nutrition consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. By ensuring that all students have access to healthy meals NSLP has contributed significantly to reducing childhood hunger, and has improved children's health, attentiveness and readiness to learn. Through the technical assistance provided by DPI and the implementation of USDA's program standards, NSLP has contributed notably to improving the quality, nutrition and safety of school meal programs.

Positive Developments & Trends

- The average daily participation for the 2005-2006 school year increased 1.9%.
- Many schools now use direct certification through the Dept. of Workforce Development to electronically compare children eligible for FoodShare and W-2 with student enrollments.
- Congress has provided increased funding based on the Consumer Price Index.
- Paper work has been significantly reduced for schools as a result of the Department of Public Instruction's development of a web based claim and contract submission process.

Concerns, Problems, & Negative Trends

- There are increasing reports that students receiving reduced-price meals have difficulties paying their share of costs. Some schools have secured private funds to aid these families.
- Increasingly Second Harvest food banks and local food pantries send home backpacks filled with food to provide meals for students over the weekend when they lack access to NSLP.
- Further improvements to the nutritional quality of meals to fight the rising incidence of obesity.

School Lunch would be more effective if...

- USDA reduced the required paperwork.
- There were more resources and opportunities to buy food locally – such as the Farm-To-School Programs.
- The successful USDA fruit & vegetable pilots were available to all school districts.
- NSLP continued to improve nutritional quality to increase the impact on childhood obesity

¹ Based on a student attending 20 days per month at a non-high risk school.