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School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding

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SUMMARY

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Kara Clifford Billings
Analyst in Social Policy

School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding

The federal government has a long history of investing in programs for feeding children, starting with federal aid for school lunch programs in the 1930s. Today, federal child nutrition programs support food served to children in schools and a variety of other settings. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food and Nutrition Administration (formerly Food and Nutrition Service [FNS]), the child nutrition programs include:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Seamless Summer Option (SSO)
- Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) Program
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)
- Special Milk Program (SMP)

The child nutrition programs vary in terms of size and target population. The largest programs are NSLP and SBP (the *school meals programs*), which subsidize meals for nearly 30 million children in more than 90,000 elementary and secondary schools in a typical school year. CACFP supports food served to children in child care, day care, and after-school settings. SFSP and SSO provide funding for summer meals and snacks. Summer EBT provides grocery benefits for households with school-age children over the summer. FFVP sponsors fruit and vegetable snacks in elementary schools. SMP subsidizes milk in schools and institutions that do not participate in other child nutrition programs. In general, the largest subsidies are provided for free or reduced-price meals and snacks served to qualifying children. Other child nutrition activities include after-school meal and snack programs, farm-to-school initiatives, and school meal equipment grants.

Federal spending on child nutrition programs and activities totaled roughly $32.5 billion in FY2025, the majority of which was mandatory spending. Most child nutrition programs are considered *appropriated entitlements*, meaning that their authorizing statutes establish a legal obligation to make payments, but that obligation is fulfilled through funding that is provided in annual appropriations acts. Most child nutrition funding is provided in the form of per-meal cash reimbursements that states distribute to schools and institutions, which is used toward the cost of operating the programs. A smaller amount of federal funding is provided in the form of federally purchased foods and cash for states' administrative expenses.

The child nutrition programs are primarily governed by two statutes: the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, as amended. These laws were most recently reauthorized by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA; P.L. 111-296), which made several changes to the child nutrition programs. For example, the act created the Community Eligibility Provision, an option for eligible schools to provide free meals to all students. It also required USDA to update nutrition standards in the school meals programs and CACFP within a certain time frame. While certain provisions of the HHFKA expired at the end of FY2015, program operations have continued with annual appropriations. More recently, temporary changes to the child nutrition programs were made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-328) authorized the national Summer EBT program and made changes to the summer meal programs, and the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (P.L. 119-69) added whole milk, 2%, and nondairy milk options to child nutrition programs.

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Background

The child nutrition programs (summarized in **Table 1**) support meals and snacks served to children in schools, child care, summer programs, and other institutional settings in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories.[1] They also support summer grocery benefits for households with school-age children. The programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA)—formerly known as the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)[2]—which provides federal aid to state agencies (often state departments of education) for distribution to school districts and other participating institutions and, in the case of summer grocery benefits, for distribution to households.[3] In general, federal funding largely supports food for children from low-income or otherwise qualifying households.

A related program is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides grocery benefits to pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children. WIC has typically been reauthorized with the child nutrition programs but is generally not considered a child nutrition program because it is funded under a separate account and is not discussed in this report.[4]

The federal child nutrition programs date back to the National School Lunch Act (NSLA) of 1946, which created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).[5] This act formalized federal support for school lunches following early aid beginning in the 1930s. Other child nutrition programs were added in the decades to follow as policymakers expanded feeding programs beyond the school setting. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 formalized the Special Milk Program (SMP) and created the School Breakfast Program (SBP) as a pilot program.[6] Soon after, a program for child care and summer meals was piloted in 1968 and separated into the Child Care Food Program (now the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in 1975.[7] More recently, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)

[1] Virtually all of the child nutrition programs operate in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The term *state* in this report refers to these jurisdictions as well. In the case of Summer EBT, it also includes some tribal entities. The term does not include the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa, which receive block grants in lieu of child nutrition programs. For more information on child nutrition programs in the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa, see U.S. Department of the Interior, *FY2016 Report on Federal Financial Assistance to the U.S. Pacific and Caribbean Islands*, May 1, 2017, p. 10, https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/fy16-report-on-federal-financial-assistance-to-the-insular-areas.pdf.

[2] Effective June 1, 2026, the Secretary of Agriculture, as part of a reorganization of USDA, renamed FNS to FNA. See FNA, "USDA Announces Actions to Better Serve States, Nutrition Program Recipients, and the American Taxpayer," press release, April 30, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/newsroom/usda-0062.26; and FNA, "Reorganization," https://www.fna.usda.gov/reorganization. This report generally uses the term *FNS* when referencing documents published by FNS at the time it was called FNS and *FNA* otherwise (e.g., active websites and guidance documents).

[3] For a list of administering agencies by state, see FNA, "Contact Map," https://www.fna.usda.gov/contacts. In past instances, the federal government (via FNS regional offices) has, for certain states, taken the place of state agencies (e.g., where a state has chosen not to operate a specific program or where there is a state prohibition on aiding private schools).

[4] For more information on WIC, see CRS Report R44115, *A Primer on WIC: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children*.

[5] P.L. 79-396; Gordon W. Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program: Background and Development," 1971, https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLP-program-history.pdf. The 1946 law supported school lunch programs by giving formula grant funding to states based on factors such as per capita income rather than the present-day open-ended entitlements based largely on eligibility and participation rules.

[6] P.L. 89-642.

[7] P.L. 90-302; P.L. 94-105. Adult day care was added in 1987 (Older Americans Act Amendments of 1987; P.L. 100-175). Also see Institute of Medicine, *Child and Adult Care Food Program: Aligning Dietary Guidance for All*, 2011, p. 30; FNS, "Summer Food Service Program History," https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/program-history.

was piloted in 2002 and expanded to all states in 2008.[8] Likewise, following a more-than-decade-long demonstration, the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) program became available as an option to all states starting in summer 2024. (See **Appendix** for a legislative history of child nutrition programs.)

Historically, the child nutrition programs have been aimed at both improving children's nutrition and supporting U.S. agriculture, with the dual mission "to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food."[9]

The child nutrition programs are currently authorized under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966.[10] Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935, also provides a portion of child nutrition funding. Congressional jurisdiction over the underlying three laws has typically been exercised by the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee; the House Education and Workforce (or Labor) Committee; and, to a limited extent (relating to Section 32), the House Agriculture Committee.

Congress has periodically amended the child nutrition programs' authorizing laws and reauthorized expiring authorities. The child nutrition programs were most recently reauthorized by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA; P.L. 111-296). Some of the authorities created or extended in the HHFKA expired on September 30, 2015. However, program operations have continued with annual appropriations.[11] During the 114th Congress, the committees of jurisdiction marked up child nutrition reauthorization bills, but these proposals were not enacted.[12] Likewise, during the 117th Congress, the House Education and Labor Committee reported a child nutrition reauthorization bill (H.R. 8450) out of committee. The 117th Congress ended without further action on the bill. However, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328), was enacted at the end of the 117th Congress, making changes to the summer meals programs and authorizing the national Summer EBT program (discussed further in this report).

This report starts with an overview of child nutrition programs' funding structure and then provides detail on each program, including a discussion of how they are administered, eligibility rules for institutions and participants, nutritional and other program requirements, and recent policy changes. Changes to child nutrition programs that occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are summarized in the next section.

[8] P.L. 107-171; P.L. 110-246.

[9] See declaration of purposes in the NSLA and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966.

[10] In 1999, P.L. 106-78 renamed the NSLA in Senator Richard B. Russell's honor.

[11] Exceptions include a California program to provide SFSP snacks year-round, which was not extended. USDA's authority to conduct food safety audits and funding for a National Hunger Clearinghouse were not extended in FY2016 but were subsequently extended by appropriations acts in each of FY2017-FY2022. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10266, *Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR): An Overview*; or CRS memo CD1304737, *Expiration of the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act of 2010 (*P.L. 111-296*)*, available to congressional clients on request.

[12] For more information, see CRS Report R44373, *Tracking Child Nutrition Reauthorization in the 114th Congress: An Overview*.

Table 1. Child Nutrition Programs: Legislative Authorities and Descriptions

Program	Authorizing Statute	Description	Per-Child Benefit
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA) (42 U.S.C. §1751 et seq.)	Subsidized lunches (free, reduced-price, and paid rate) for children in preschool through grade 12. A smaller number of children in residential child care institutions are also served.[a] Includes an after-school snack program option (the NSLP Afterschool Snack Program) and a summer meals program option (the Seamless Summer Option).	One lunch (option for one snack) daily
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	Section 4 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. §1773)	Subsidized breakfasts (free, reduced-price, and paid rate) for children in preschool through grade 12. A smaller number of children in residential child care institutions are also served.[a]	One breakfast daily
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Section 17 of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766)	Meals and snacks for children in child care centers,[b] day care homes, and emergency shelters, as well as a smaller number of older adults in adult day care homes.	Two meals and one snack (or one meal and two snacks) daily[c]
CACFP At-Risk Afterschool	Section 17(r) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766(r))	After-school meals and snacks for children who attend organized after-school programs in low-income areas.	One meal and one snack daily
Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	Section 13 of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1761)	Summer meals for children who visit community sites or attend summer programs or for delivery/pick-up in rural areas.	Two meals (or one meal and one snack) daily[c]
NSLP/SBP Seamless Summer Option (SSO)	Section 13(a)(8) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(8))	Summer meals for children who visit school sites or programs or for delivery/pick-up in rural areas.	Two meals (or one meal and one snack) daily[c]
Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Program (Summer EBT)	Section 13A of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1762)	Summer grocery benefits for households with children eligible for free and reduced-price meals.	$40 per child in the household per summer month
Special Milk Program (SMP)	Section 3 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. §1772)	Subsidized milk for institutions that do not participate in other child nutrition meal service programs, but school food authorities may use SMP for children in part-day preschool and kindergarten programs that do not have access to school lunches.	Quantity not specified
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)	Section 19 of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769a)	Fresh fruit and vegetable snacks for children in elementary schools, particularly low-income schools. Funding is distributed via formula to states, and not all elementary schools may be covered.	Quantity not specified

Source: CRS, based on current law.

a. *Residential child care institution* is defined in regulations to include "homes for the mentally, emotionally or physically impaired, and unmarried mothers and their infants; group homes; halfway houses; orphanages; temporary shelters for abused children and for runaway children; long-term care facilities for chronically ill children; and juvenile detention centers" (7 C.F.R. §210.2).

b. Child care centers include nonprofit organizations, certain for-profit organizations, and school food authorities providing nonresidential child care services as well as emergency shelters.

c. CACFP emergency shelters, SFSP camps, and SFSP sites that primarily serve migrant children may receive reimbursement for up to three meals or two meals and one snack per child daily.

Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Starting in March 2020 and continuing through school year 2021-2022, many school districts operated the summer meals programs in lieu of the school meals programs.[13] Under USDA policy facilitated by COVID-19 pandemic response laws, the summer meals programs enabled schools to serve free meals to all students without eligibility determinations. With expanded waiver authority and supplemental funding from COVID-19 pandemic response acts, USDA also waived several child nutrition program requirements during the pandemic.[14] For example, USDA allowed parent pick-up and home delivery of meals, waived certain nutritional requirements, and allowed virtual monitoring of program operations.[15]

Some of the COVID-19 pandemic response authorities expired on June 30, 2022, and USDA announced a transition back to normal child nutrition program operations starting in the 2022-2023 school year. However, some waivers remained in effect, and program operators received enhanced funding (approximately $3 billion) in summer 2022 and school year 2022-2023 as a result of the Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-158).[16] Also, in school years 2021-2022 through 2023-2024, USDA distributed approximately $3.7 billion in "Supply Chain Assistance Funds" to states and school food authorities using Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) authority.[17] According to a survey conducted by USDA, 97% of school food authorities reported at least one continuing supply-chain-related challenge as of school year 2022-2023, such as increased costs, staffing shortages, and product shortages.[18]

For further information on child nutrition policies during the pandemic, including the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, see CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Child Nutrition Funding

Federal Funding

Most funding for child nutrition programs is considered mandatory spending. However, unlike some mandatory programs, child nutrition programs require appropriations of funding. This is

[13] In school year 2021-2022, school districts had the option to operate the Seamless Summer Option during the school year. In school year 2020-2021, school districts and other types of meal providers (such as nonprofit organizations) were also allowed to operate SFSP.

[14] For child nutrition waiver authorities, see Section 12(l) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1760(l)) and Sections 2102-2202 of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127).

[15] For more information, see CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

[16] For funding levels, see USDA, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, *2025 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-10, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/34-FNS-2025-ExNotes.pdf.

[17] FNS, "Fourth Allocation of Supply Chain Assistance Funds to Alleviate Supply Chain Disruptions in the School Meals Programs," August 7, 2023, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fourth-allocation-supply-chain-assistance-sca-funds.

[18] FNS, "Results of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service-Administered School Food Authority Survey II on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation," July 25, 2023, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/results-fns-administered-sfa-survey2-supply-chain-disruption.

because the programs' authorizing laws include benefit and eligibility criteria that create the requirement for a certain level of spending, but the statute does not provide the funding directly. Such programs are sometimes referred to as *appropriated entitlements* or *appropriated mandatories*.[19] If the necessary funds are not appropriated and the authorized benefits are not made available, entitled recipients (e.g., states, institutions, and participants) may have legal recourse.[20]

The benefit and eligibility criteria that govern much of the appropriated mandatory spending for child nutrition programs are open-ended. Because there is no specified limit on the number of beneficiaries or the total amount of benefits that will be paid, spending fluctuates based on the number of meals and snacks served in the programs and statutorily set, annually adjusted per-meal reimbursement rates. Congress typically considers USDA's forecast for program needs in its appropriations decisions.

Appropriated mandatory funding in child nutrition programs is generally for per-meal cash reimbursements, commodity assistance, and administrative funds. The programs also have a smaller amount of discretionary funding (determined in annual appropriations acts) and mandatory funding (directly provided in the authorizing law, not annual appropriations acts). These funding streams are discussed in further detail below.

How to Locate Child Nutrition Programs in an Appropriations Bill

Annual appropriations for child nutrition programs are typically contained in a **"Child Nutrition Programs" account** within Title IV, "Domestic Food Programs," of the Agriculture appropriations division of the bill. The explanatory statements and committee reports accompanying appropriations acts often contain additional detail regarding how USDA should use child nutrition appropriations.

For FY2026, child nutrition programs and activities received $37.8 billion under P.L. 119-37. Approximately $23 billion of these funds were transferred to the child nutrition programs from Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935.[21] Separately, Section 32 provided $205 million for FFVP in FY2026.[22]

Figure 1 presents FY2026 child nutrition appropriations by program and activity. Child nutrition appropriations may not match expenditures because most child nutrition funds carry over (they are available for two fiscal years) and because spending fluctuates with participation in the programs.

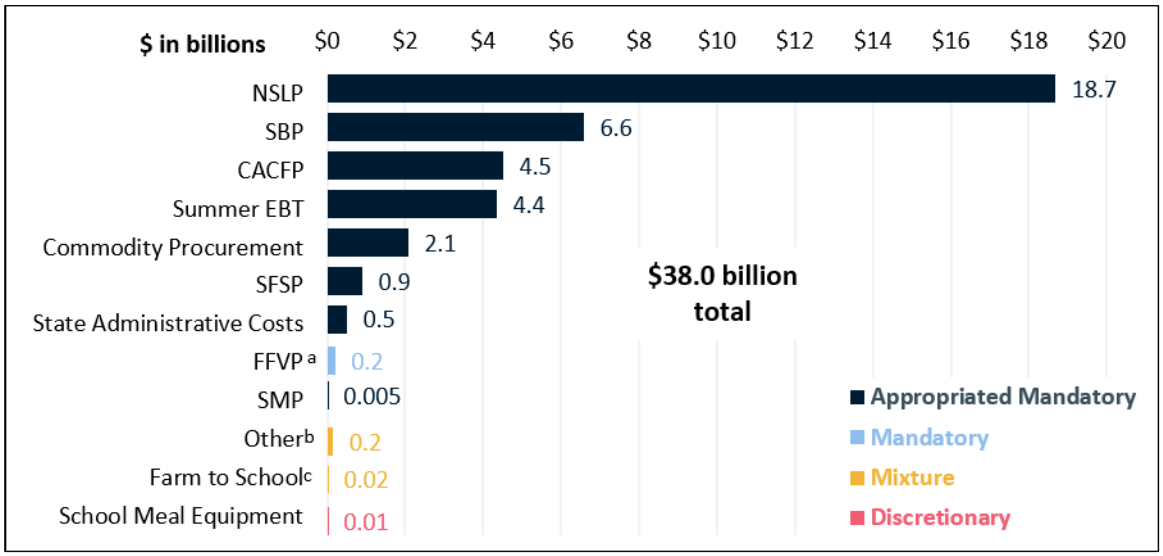
[19] For further discussion of appropriated entitlements, see CRS Report RS20129, *Entitlements and Appropriated Entitlements in the Federal Budget Process*.

[20] U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP, p. 13, http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-05-734SP.

[21] U.S. Congress, Senate, "Explanatory statement to accompany the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026," *Congressional Record,* vol. 171, no. 189, 119th Cong., 1st sess., November 9, 2025, p. S8047, https://www.congress.gov/119/crec/2025/11/09/171/189/CREC-2025-11-09.pdf. Section 32 is a permanent appropriation of 30% of the previous calendar year's customs receipts. For more information on Section 32, see CRS In Focus IF12193, *Farm and Food Support Under USDA's Section 32 Account*.

[22] Excludes carryover funds. FNA, "Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program: Allocation of Funds for FY 2026," June 4, 2025, https://www.fna.usda.gov/ffvp/allocation-funds-fy26.

Figure 1. Appropriations for Child Nutrition Programs, FY2026



Sources: CRS, based on the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-37), and accompanying explanatory statement unless otherwise noted.

Notes: Total available funding for the fiscal year may be higher than appropriations due to carryover funds. NSLP = National School Lunch Program, SBP = School Breakfast Program, CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program, SFSP = Summer Food Service Program, FFVP = Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, SMP = Special Milk Program.

FFVP annual allocation (excluding carryover funds) from Food and Nutrition Administration, "Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program: Allocation of Funds for FY 2026," June 4, 2025, https://www.fna.usda.gov/ffvp/allocation-funds-fy26.

a. "Other" includes funding for administrative reviews, food safety, technology, training and technical assistance, Team Nutrition grants, research, and payment oversight.

b. The Farm to School program received $5 million in annual mandatory funding provided by Section 18(g)(8)(A) of the National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. §1769(g)(8)(A)) and $11.7 million in discretionary funding in FY2026.

Per-Meal Cash Reimbursements

The majority of federal funding in child nutrition programs (including in NSLP, SBP, CACFP, SFSP, and SMP) takes the form of per-meal cash reimbursements. These rates are specified in the programs' authorizing laws with annual inflation adjustments.[23] Although all (including full-price) meals/snacks served by participating providers are subsidized, those served for free or at a reduced price to lower-income children earn higher rates. Meals must meet federal nutritional requirements in order for the school district or institution to receive reimbursement.[24]

[23] For more detail on how inflation adjustment is conducted, see the child nutrition program section of CRS Report R42000, *Inflation-Indexing Elements in Federal Entitlement Programs*. Most reimbursements (including for schools and child care centers) are indexed annually based on the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) Food Away from Home Component. For family child care homes, the annual indexing is based on the CPI-U Food at Home Component.

[24] The authorizing statutes for all four of the main child nutrition programs include nutritional requirements for the meals and snacks served. These are sometimes referred to as "nutrition standards," "nutrition guidelines," or "meal patterns." The nutrition standards differ by program in consideration of different age groups served and the settings in which meals are served, among other factors. See program regulations for nutritional requirements: NSLP, 7 C.F.R. §210.10; SBP, 7 C.F.R. §220.8; CACFP, 7 C.F.R. §226.20; SFSP, 7 C.F.R. §225.16.

Reimbursement rates differ by program based on different criteria. For example, in SBP, schools in high-poverty areas receive an extra 51 cents per meal.[25] Differences in reimbursement rates are highlighted within the subsequent discussions of each program.

In general, FNA distributes per-meal reimbursements to state agencies, which disburse them to participating school districts and institutions. Districts and institutions must record daily counts of meals in each category and report monthly counts to their state agencies in order to receive reimbursement. Once they receive federal funds, participating institutions are allowed to spend these funds on most aspects of their food service operations.

Table 2 provides an example of the per-lunch reimbursement rate for school districts and participant benefits in NSLP. Reimbursement rates for each child nutrition program are listed in the sections to follow.

Table 2. Example: NSLP Per-Meal Reimbursements, School Year 2026-2027

Meal Category	What the School Food Authority Receives (Per-Meal Reimbursement Rate[a])	What the Participating Child Receives
Free	$4.76-$5.02	Free lunch
Reduced-price	$4.36-$4.62	Lunch for $0.40 or less[b]
Paid	$0.45-$0.62	Lunch at full price[b]

Source: Food and Nutrition Administration, "National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates," 91 *Federal Register* 43597, July 16, 2026.

Notes: NSLP = National School Lunch Program.

a. Chart shows reimbursement rates for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia. For rates for Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, see *Federal Register* notice. Ranges reflect variations in reimbursement rates for lunches meeting certain statutory criteria. Average national rates are shown. States may apportion funds among school districts above or below the average rates.

b. Some states and school districts cover the remainder of meal fees for students in the reduced-price and/or paid rate categories.

Summer EBT Benefits

Like most other child nutrition programs, Summer EBT is an appropriated entitlement. The law establishes a set amount of benefits for households—$40 per eligible child per summer month—with an annual inflation adjustment. Federal funding covers 100% of benefit costs and is distributed to state agencies, territories, and tribes for distribution to households. Households redeem benefits for eligible foods at approved retailers over the summer months (as defined by the state agency). For additional program details, see the "Summer EBT" section of this report.

Commodity Assistance

Federal support for child nutrition programs is also provided in the form of USDA-purchased foods (known as *USDA Foods*) and some cash in lieu of commodities. USDA Foods are foods

[25] FNA, "National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates," 91 *Federal Register* 43597, July 16, 2026.

purchased by USDA for distribution to federal nutrition assistance programs, including child nutrition programs.[26]

States, schools, and other institutions are entitled to a certain amount of commodity assistance under the law, referred to as *entitlement commodity* assistance. In NSLP and CACFP, statute provides a per-meal commodity reimbursement (an inflation-adjusted rate of 32 cents per meal in school year 2026-2027).[27] (Commodity assistance is not provided specifically for SBP. However, commodities distributed through NSLP may be used for school breakfasts.[28]) A smaller amount of commodity assistance is also provided to certain types of institutions participating in SFSP.[29]

States (and sometimes school food authorities and institutions, if delegated) use entitlement commodity funds to select commodities from a USDA Foods catalog.[30] USDA then purchases the commodities and works with state distribution agencies to send foods for further processing or distribute them to schools and institutions. NSLP and SFSP program operators may alternatively elect to use some or all of their entitlement commodity funds to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables through the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DOD Fresh), which utilizes the Defense Department's supply chain for military bases and is intended to provide program operators with a wider range of fresh produce than would normally be available through the USDA Foods catalog.[31] An increasing proportion of schools' entitlement dollars have been used toward DOD Fresh purchases in recent years.[32] Schools/institutions and state agencies

[26] For more information, see FNA, "USDA Foods in Schools," https://www.fna.usda.gov/usda-fis.

[27] Section 6(c) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1755(c)) and Section 17(h)(1)(B) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766(h)(1)(B)); and FNA, "Food Distribution Program: Value of Donated Foods from July 1, 2026, Through June 30, 2027," 91 *Federal Register* 43079, July 14, 2026, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/07/14/2026-14123/food-distribution-program-value-of-donated-foods-from-july-1-2026-through-june-30-2027.

[28] Section 6(d) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1755(d)) prohibits commodity support based on the number of breakfasts served through SBP. However, Section 4(b)(4) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1773(b)(4)) authorizes USDA to provide at least 3 cents in commodity assistance per breakfast "whenever stocks of agricultural commodities are acquired by the Secretary or the CCC and are not likely to be sold by the Secretary or the CCC or otherwise used in programs of commodity sale or distribution."

[29] Section 13(h) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(h)). Per program regulations, SFSP sponsor organizations eligible for commodity assistance include "Self-preparation sponsors; sponsors which have entered into an agreement with a school or school food authority for the preparation of meals; and sponsors which are school food authorities and have competitively procured Program meals from the same food service management company from which they competitively procured meals for the National School Lunch Program during the last period in which school was in session" (7 C.F.R. §225.9(b)). Statute does not specify the level of entitlement commodity funding for SFSP. In FY2025, institutions participating in SFSP received approximately $868,000 in commodity assistance, according to FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*, September 18, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/overview/keydata-june26.

[30] For a list of products offered, see FNA, "USDA Foods Available List," https://www.fna.usda.gov/usda-fis/foods-available. Under a Pilot Project for Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables authorized by the 2014 farm bill (Section 4202 of P.L. 113-79) under Section 6(f) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1755(f)), USDA may allow up to eight states to use a portion of their commodity assistance dollars to purchase unprocessed fruits and vegetables from suppliers outside of the federal USDA Foods supply chain. As of 2025, participating states are California, Connecticut, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington, according to USDA, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-29, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FY-2027-Chapter-34-FNS.pdf. An evaluation of the pilot is available at USDA, "Pilot Project for Procurement of Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables," https://www.fna.usda.gov/usda-fis/pilot-project-procurement-unprocessed-fruits-and-vegetables.

[31] FNA, "USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program," https://www.fna.usda.gov/usda-foods/usda-dod-fresh-fruit-and-vegetable-program. Since September 5, 2025, the Department of Defense has been "using a secondary Department of War designation," under Executive Order 14347.

[32] For example, states spent more than $541 million in entitlement commodity funds through DOD Fresh in FY2025—approximately one-third of total NSLP entitlement commodity spending. CRS calculation using figure from USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-29, applied to NSLP entitlement commodity assistance total in FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

may also elect to receive a certain amount of commodity assistance in the form of cash. (This is the case for less than 1% of NSLP commodity aid but nearly all of the commodity aid distributed through CACFP.[33])

According to statute, entitlement commodity assistance must equal at least 12% of the total funding provided for lunch reimbursements and child nutrition commodities.[34] The majority of commodity assistance is distributed through NSLP.[35]

The child nutrition programs can also receive *bonus commodities*, which are commodities that are purchased at USDA's discretion throughout the year to support the agricultural economy using separate budget authorities.[36] In recent years, there have been minimal bonus commodities distributed through child nutrition programs.[37]

Administrative Funds

The NSLA allows USDA to retain up to 3.5% of annual child nutrition funding for its administrative expenses related to child nutrition programs and WIC.[38] In addition, the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 authorizes open-ended funding for USDA's administrative expenses in carrying out the programs and activities under that act (which include SBP, SMP, other child nutrition activities, and WIC).[39]

There is also specific funding authorized for state agencies' expenses related to the administration of child nutrition programs. According to statute, federal funding for states' administrative expenses must equal at least 1.5% of federal expenditures on NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SMP in the second preceding fiscal year.[40] The majority of these funds are allocated to states based on their share of spending on the four programs. Any remaining funds are allocated by the Secretary of Agriculture on a discretionary basis. Per program regulations, states receive additional amounts for CACFP, commodity distribution, and administrative reviews of schools/institutions.[41] Once states receive administrative funds, they can apportion them among child nutrition programs and activities as they see fit.[42]

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[33] 0.9% of NSLP entitlement commodity aid and 98.8% of CACFP entitlement commodity aid was in the form of cash in FY2026, according to FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*. Kansas receives cash payments in lieu of USDA Foods as a result of the NSLA and Child Nutrition Act amendments of 1975. Fewer than 50 school districts also receive cash or commodity letters of credit in lieu of USDA Foods under Section 18(b) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1769(b)) as a result of demonstration projects that began in the 1980s and early 1990s. In CACFP, states may request any amount of cash in lieu of commodities per Section 17(h)(1)(D) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(h)(1)(D)).

[34] Section 6(e) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1755(e)). Not less than 12% of the assistance provided under Section 6 (commodity assistance) and Section 4 and Section 11 (NSLP cash reimbursements) of the NSLA must be provided as Section 6 commodity assistance. Prior to FY2018, bonus commodity assistance was allowed to count toward this requirement.

[35] Entitlement commodity spending totaled $1.66 billion in NSLP, $188 million in CACFP, and $868,000 in SFSP in FY2025. FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

[36] These separate budget authorities are Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935, and the CCC. For more information on Section 32, see CRS In Focus IF12193, *Farm and Food Support Under USDA's Section 32 Account*. For more information on the CCC, see CRS Report R44606, *The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)*.

[37] Bonus food data from FNS, "Child Nutrition Tables: NSLP, SBP and SMP—Program Costs—Cash and Commodities," https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables and FNS Keydata files.

[38] Section 6 of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1755).

[39] Section 14 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1783).

[40] Section 7 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1776).

[41] 7 C.F.R. §235.4.

[42] 7 C.F.R. §235.6.

In addition, states receive separate administrative payments through SFSP that equal at least 2.5% of their summer meal aid.[43] For Summer EBT, states and Indian Tribal Organizations are authorized to receive federal funding to cover half of their administrative expenses. (They must cover the other half through nonfederal sources.[44]) States may also retain a portion of FFVP aid for their administrative expenses.[45]

At the local level, schools and institutions may use per-meal reimbursements to cover their administrative costs. In CACFP, institutions that oversee day care homes receive separate monthly payments for administrative expenses based on the number of day care homes under their jurisdictions.[46]

Other Federal Funding

A few child nutrition programs and activities have mandatory funding provided directly in the authorizing laws. For example, FFVP receives mandatory funding from Section 32, and the Farm to School program receives mandatory funding under the NSLA.[47]

There are also a few child nutrition activities that are funded on a discretionary basis, including the Team Nutrition initiative and school meals equipment grants. The Farm to School program has also received discretionary funding (in addition to its mandatory funding) in recent years.

Other temporary sources of child nutrition funding may be available. For example, in school years 2021-2022 through 2023-2024, USDA distributed "Supply Chain Assistance Funds" to states and school food authorities using CCC authority.[48] In 2022, USDA again used the CCC to distribute $177 million to state agencies and school food authorities to purchase local and regional foods for use in school meal programs under the Local Food for Schools (LFS) Cooperative Agreement Program.[49]

Nonfederal Funding

Federal subsidies do not necessarily cover the full cost of meals and snacks prepared by schools and institutions.[50] Child nutrition programs may also receive funds from participants, states, school districts, local governments, and other entities. NSLP has a cost-sharing requirement that

[43] Section 13(k)(1) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(k)(1)); 7 C.F.R. §225.5.

[44] Section 13A(d) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1762(d)). For further information on the administrative funding process, see FNA, "Summer EBT Administrative Funding Process for FY 2024," October 18, 2023, https://www.fna.usda.gov/sebt/administrative-funding-process-fy24.

[45] Section 19 of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1769(i)(6)(B)).

[46] Section 17(f)(3)(B) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(f)(3)(B)); 7 C.F.R. §226.12.

[47] Other child nutrition activities with mandatory funding include the Institute of Child Nutrition, administrative reviews, technical assistance for program integrity, and professional standards for school food service personnel. See USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*.

[48] USDA, "Fourth Allocation of Supply Chain Assistance Funds to Alleviate Supply Chain Disruptions in the School Meals Programs," August 7, 2023, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/fourth-allocation-supply-chain-assistance-sca-funds.

[49] More information, including funding data, is available at USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, "Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program," https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfs.

[50] Based on a study by USDA of meal costs in school year 2014-2015, the average lunch reimbursement ($2.26) covered 62% of the average reported (direct) cost ($3.66) of producing a reimbursable lunch and 41% of the average full (including indirect) cost ($5.55) of producing a reimbursable lunch. FNS, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*, vol. 3, April 2019, p. 53, https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study. That same study found that, as of school year 2014-2015, approximately 63% of school food service revenues came from federal funds, 31% came from student payments for paid and reduced-price meals and other school foods, and 6% came from state and local funds.

amounts to a contribution of roughly $200 million from all states combined annually.[51] In addition, Summer EBT requires a 50% match on administrative funds.[52] Some states provide additional funding for NSLP and other child nutrition programs beyond the required amount, including some states that provide their own per-meal reimbursements.[53] In addition, nine states (as of the date of this report) have authorized funding to provide universal free school meals to all students.[54]

Spending Trends

Federal spending on child nutrition programs has generally increased over time (see **Figure 2**). When adjusting for inflation, the growth appears much slower (approximately $1.5 billion higher spending in FY2025 compared to FY2019—a pre-pandemic year). There are several reasons for this increase, including annual inflation adjustments to per-meal reimbursement rates, participation changes, spending under pandemic response policies, authorization of the national Summer EBT program, and authorization of rural non-congregate feeding policies in the Summer Food Service Program.[55]

A recent exception to this trend occurred in FY2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation in programs declined as institutions closed, decreasing spending. By FY2021, an increase in summer meal program participation again increased spending. (Pandemic policies are discussed in the "Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic" text box.)

Under current law, the Congressional Budget Office predicts that federal spending on the child nutrition programs will continue to increase over the next decade, with annual outlays of nearly $53 billion by 2036 as a result of food price inflation and other factors.[56]

As shown in **Figure 2**, federal spending on the major child nutrition programs was approximately $32.5 billion in FY2025.[57]

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[51] Section 7(a)(1) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1756(a)(1)). The required contribution in NSLP equals 30% of Section 4 funds (the NSLP base reimbursement) made available to states in school year 1980-1981 (not inflation adjusted), which was $200 million according to U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, *Child Nutrition Programs: Description, History, Issues, and Options*, committee print, 98th Cong., 1st Sess., January 1983, S. Prt. 98-15 (GPO, 1983), p. 8. States must also maintain level funding to the amount expended in FY1977 for state administrative expenses associated with NSLP, SBP, and SMP, per Section 7(f) of Child Nutrition Act (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1776(f)), which amounted to approximately $9 million nationally in FY2024, according to GAO, *Child Nutrition Programs: USDA Could Enhance Its Management and Oversight of State Administrative Expenses*, GAO-25-106977, April 2025, p. 11.

[52] Section 13A(d) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. 1762(d)).

[53] School meal state policy trackers include Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), "School Meals Legislation and Funding by State," updated July 2023, https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf; and School Nutrition Association, "Quarterly State Legislative Reports," https://schoolnutrition.org/LegislationPolicy/StateLegislationPolicyReports.

[54] For a list of states that adopted state funding for universal free meals, see state map available at FRAC, "Healthy School Meals for All," https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all. The nine states that have adopted universal free school meal policies are California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont.

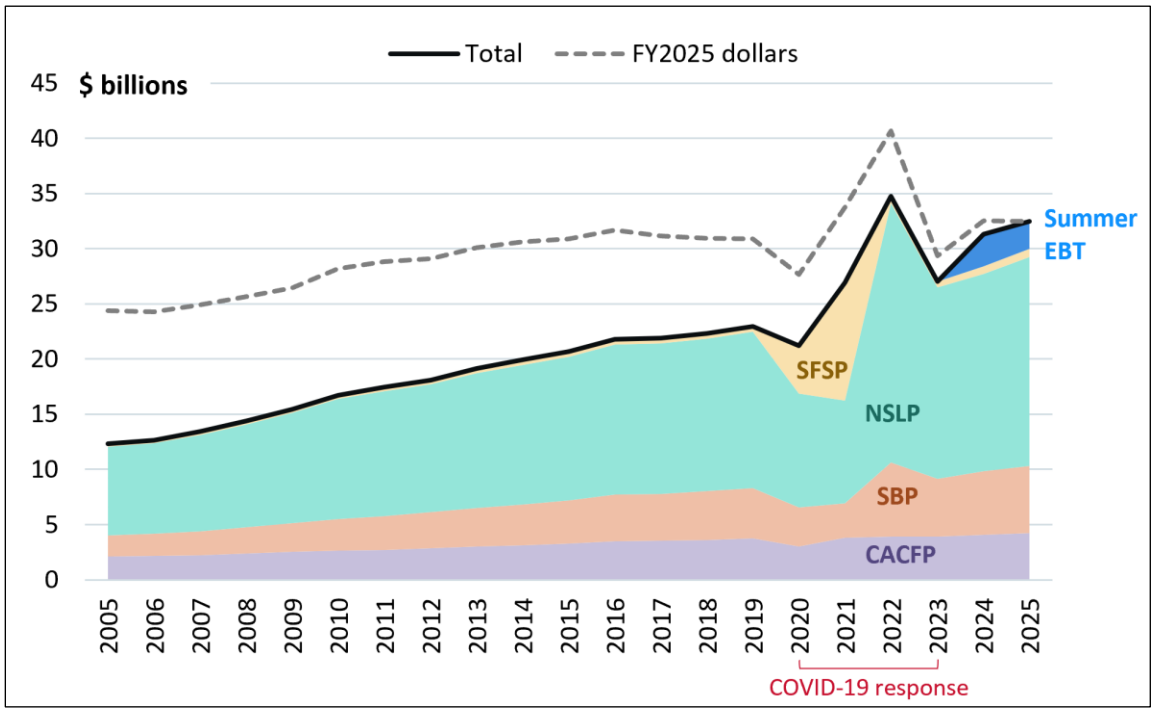
[55] For more information, see CRS Report R48515, *School Lunch and Breakfast Participation: A Snapshot of Recent Trends*.

[56] Congressional Budget Office, *Details About Baseline Projections for Selected Programs: Child Nutrition Programs: February 2026*, February 2026, https://www.cbo.gov/data/baseline-projections-selected-programs.

[57] FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

Figure 2. Expenditures on Major Child Nutrition Programs, FY2005-FY2025

Figure is interactive in HTML report version



Source: Unless otherwise noted, expenditures are from U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA), "Child Nutrition Tables," September 11, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables. Graph displays actual spending except for the inflation-adjusted total, which was calculated by CRS using the Food Away from Home series of the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) (not seasonally adjusted) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Summer EBT expenditures are from FNA's Keydata files, available at https://www.fna.usda.gov/data-research.

Notes: SFSP = Summer Food Service Program, NSLP = National School Lunch Program, SBP = School Breakfast Program, CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. Graph includes commodity costs but excludes other types of child nutrition program spending, such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, state administrative expenses, and discretionary grants. COVID-19 response policies affected spending in FY2020-FY2023 (discussed in the "Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic" text box).

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP)

NSLP and SBP (the *school meals programs*) provide federal support for meals served in more than 90,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools nationwide.[58] They also support meals served in a smaller number of residential child care institutions.[59] Schools receive federal

[58] As of fall 2024, 94,159 schools participated in NSLP, and 91,229 schools participated in SBP (with substantial overlap), according to FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*. This includes private schools. In FY2025, 4,179 private schools participated in NSLP, and 2,906 private schools participated in SBP, according to CRS communication with FNA in September 2025.

[59] In fall 2024, approximately 1,600 residential child care institutions participated in NSLP and SBP (CRS communication with FNA in September 2025). This report refers to "schools," but for NSLP and SBP, it means both schools and residential child care institutions, which are defined as "homes for the mentally, emotionally or physically impaired, and unmarried mothers and their infants; group homes; halfway houses; orphanages; temporary shelters for (continued...)

aid in the form of cash reimbursements for every meal they serve that meets federal nutritional requirements (limited to one breakfast and lunch per child daily). The largest subsidies are provided for free and reduced-price meals served to eligible students based on income eligibility and categorical eligibility rules (discussed below). Schools also receive a certain amount of commodity assistance per lunch served (discussed previously). Schools participating in NSLP have the option of providing after-school snacks through the program, and schools participating in NSLP or SBP have the option of providing summer meals and snacks through the Seamless Summer Option (discussed in the "After-School Meals and Snacks" and "Seamless Summer Option" sections).

Schools are not required by federal law to participate in NSLP or SBP. However, some states require schools to have school lunch and/or breakfast programs, and some require schools to operate such programs through NSLP and/or SBP. Schools that do not participate in the federal school meals programs may still operate locally funded meal programs.[60] Some states also provide state funding for the school meals programs, including nine states (as of the date of this report) that have authorized funding to provide free meals to all students.[61] As of school year 2023-2024, approximately 60% of NSLP schools operated universal school meal programs using state or federal policy options.[62]

The HHFKA (P.L. 111-296) made several changes to the school meals programs. Among those changes was a requirement that USDA update the nutrition standards for school meals and create new nutritional requirements for foods sold in NSLP and SBP schools within a certain time frame. The law also created the Community Eligibility Provision, through which eligible schools can provide free meals to all students. These changes are discussed further within this section.

NSLP and SBP are two separate programs, and schools can choose to operate one and not the other (although most participating schools operate both).[63] The programs are discussed together in this report because they share many of the same requirements. Differences between the programs are noted where applicable. Student participation in SBP tends to be lower than in NSLP for several reasons, including the traditionally required early arrival by students in order to receive meals before school starts.

This section discusses topics specific to the school meals programs. Other food service topics relevant to child nutrition programs more broadly (e.g., the Farm to School program) are discussed in the "Other Child Nutrition Activities" section.

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abused children and for runaway children; long-term care facilities for chronically ill children; and juvenile detention centers. A long-term care facility is a hospital, skilled nursing facility, intermediate care facility, or distinct part thereof, which is intended for the care of children confined for 30 days or more" (7 C.F.R. §210.2). *Nonresidential* child care centers are eligible to participate in CACFP.

[60] There is little research on schools that opt out of the federal school meals programs. A 1993 GAO analysis found that smaller and wealthier schools were more likely to drop out of NSLP. GAO found that common reasons for departure included financial considerations and compliance with federal nutrition standards. See GAO, *Schools That Left the National School Lunch Program*, GAO/RCED-94-36BR, December 1993, https://www.gao.gov/assets/80/78774.pdf.

[61] For a list of states that adopted state funding for universal free meals, see the state map available at FRAC, "Healthy School Meals for All." The states that had adopted universal free school meal policies were California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont. School meal state policy trackers include FRAC, "School Meals Legislation and Funding by State," and School Nutrition Association, "Quarterly State Legislative Reports."

[62] For more information, see CRS Report R48515, *School Lunch and Breakfast Participation: A Snapshot of Recent Trends*.

[63] USDA estimated that 94% of schools operating NSLP also operated SBP in FY2020 (USDA, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, *2023 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 35-14, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/35-2023-FNS.pdf).

Administration

Locally, school districts usually administer the school meals programs. Statute and regulations designate *school food authorities* as the local authorities in charge of operating the school meal programs. Typically, these are food service departments within school districts.[64] Local educational agencies—the broader school districts or school boards—also play a role in administering the school meal programs.[65] This report sometimes uses the term *school district* to refer informally to the local administrative entities in the school meals programs.

In general, regulations charge school food authorities with handling food service operations and accounting responsibilities—such as food procurement, preparation, service, and tracking meals for reimbursement—while local educational agencies are tasked with handling administrative duties, such as processing applications and certifying children for free and reduced-price school meals.[66]

At the state level, state departments of education most often administer the school meals programs.[67] State administrative agencies are responsible for distributing federal reimbursements to school food authorities and overseeing school districts' administration of the school meal programs, including by conducting administrative reviews of school districts.[68]

At the federal level, FNA provides ongoing guidance and technical assistance to state agencies and school food authorities through seven regional offices. FNA also provides oversight of state agencies, including by conducting management evaluations.[69]

Figure 3 depicts the federal, state, and local roles in administering the school meals programs.

[64] See definitions of *school food authority* and *local educational agencies* at 7 C.F.R. §210.2 and 7 C.F.R. §220.2.

[65] 7 C.F.R. §210.2 and 7 C.F.R. §220.2.

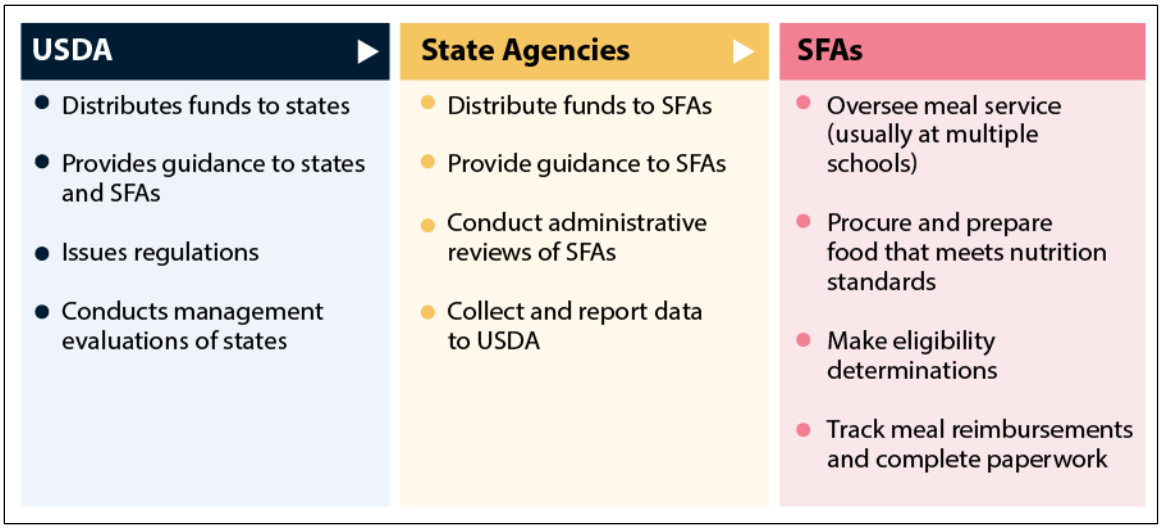
[66] In practice, many school food authorities handle these administrative duties as well. FNA, *Eligibility Manual for School Meals: Determining and Verifying Eligibility*, July 2017, p. 5, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/eligibility-manual-school-meals.

[67] For a list of state administrative agencies, see FNA, "Contact Map," https://www.fna.usda.gov/contacts/contact-map.

[68] Section 22(b)(1)(C)(i) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1769c(b)(1)(C)(i)). The HHFKA required states to "conduct audits and reviews during a three-year cycle or other period prescribed by the Secretary." Regulations require reviews once every three years, with the potential for a one-year extension (a four-year cycle) (7 C.F.R. §210.18(c)). On February 22, 2019, USDA published a policy memorandum allowing state agencies to request waivers to extend the review cycle for up to two additional years (a five-year cycle). See USDA, "Flexibility for the Administrative Review Cycle Requirement," https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/guidance-documents/fns.sp12-2019-flexibilityAdminReviewCycleReq.pdf.

[69] GAO, *USDA Has Reported Taking Some Steps to Reduce Improper Payments but Should Comprehensively Assess Fraud Risks,* GAO-19-389, May 2019, p. 7.

Figure 3. Federal, State, and Local Roles in the School Meals Programs



Source: CRS, based on current law and regulations.

Eligibility and Reimbursement

The school meals programs do not exclusively serve low-income children. Any student in an NSLP or SBP participating school may purchase a school meal. However, children must meet program eligibility rules in order to receive free or reduced-price meals.

In most schools (excluding schools that participate in the Community Eligibility Provision or other special options), children are certified for free or reduced-price school meals through one of two pathways (shown in **Figure 4**):

- Household application (based on income eligibility or *categorical eligibility*, meaning that the child participates in another qualifying program or has a certain qualifying status)
- *Direct certification* (automatic enrollment in free meals for categorically eligible children without additional means testing—with the exception of Medicaid, in which case income data are considered and children may be enrolled in free *or* reduced-price meals)

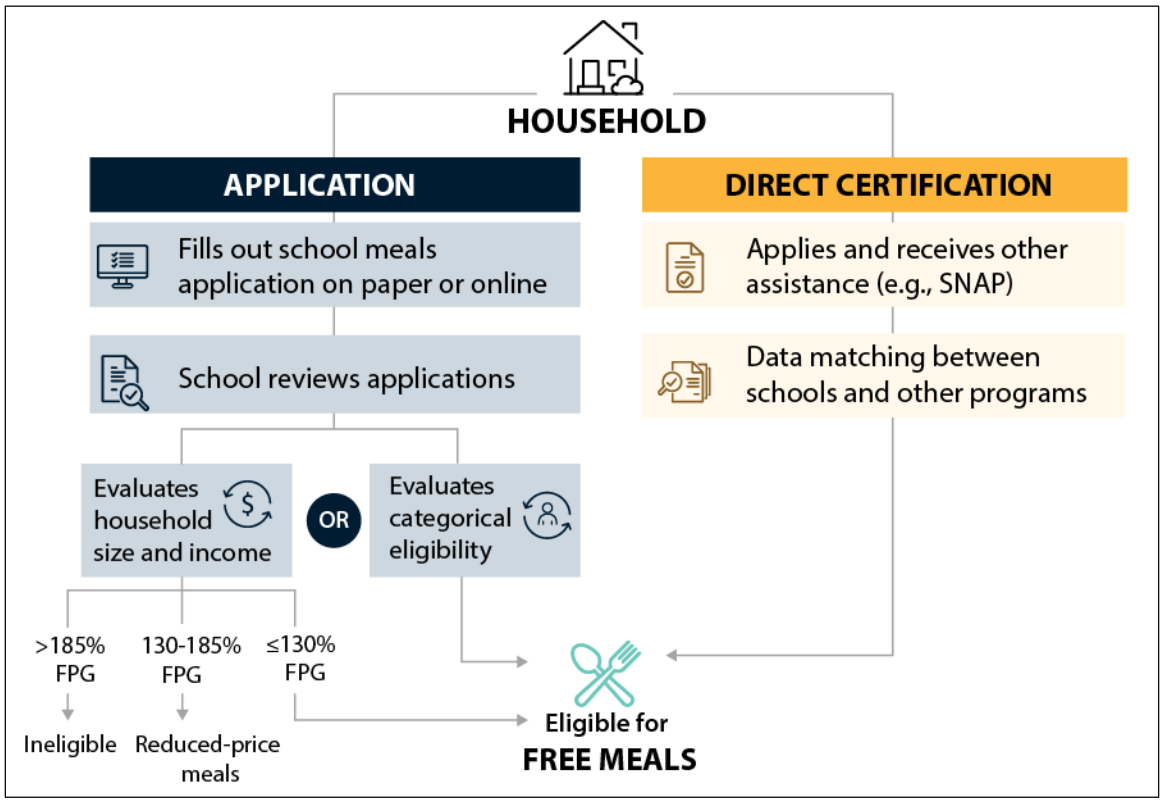
If children are certified for free meals, the school food authority receives the free meal reimbursement for those meals. If children are certified for reduced-price meals, the school food authority receives a slightly lower reimbursement. School food authorities also receive a much smaller paid-rate reimbursement for meals served to children who pay for "full price" meals. School food authorities must follow federal guidelines in setting prices for paid meals.[70]

Certain schools follow different eligibility and reimbursement procedures because they participate in the Community Eligibility Provision or other special options (discussed below in the "Special Options" section).

[70] The HHFKA set requirements around the price of paid meals, amending Section 12(p) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1760(p)). However, appropriations laws from FY2018 forward waived these requirements for many schools. For more information, see FNA, "Paid Lunch Equity: Guidance for SY 2026-2027," April 14, 2026, https://www.usda.gov/guidance-documents/child-nutrition/fns/paid-lunch-equity-guidance-school-year-2026-2027; and CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*.

Figure 4. Certification Pathways for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals

Household Application and Direct Certification Processes



Source: CRS adaptation of figure from U.S. Government Accountability Office, *School Meals Programs: USDA Has Enhanced Controls, but Additional Verification Could Help Ensure Legitimate Program Access*, GAO-14-262, May 2014, p. 13.

Notes: Graphic does not depict direct certification of children for reduced-price meals through Medicaid in demonstration states or practices used in Community Eligibility Provision schools and other schools using special options. FPG = federal poverty guidelines; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Income Eligibility

Children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals if their households' incomes fall within the following ranges:

- **Free meals:** household income at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines[71]
- **Reduced-price meals** (charges of no more than 40 cents per lunch and 30 cents per breakfast): household income above 130% and less than or equal to 185% of the federal poverty guidelines[72]

These thresholds are based on the annual federal poverty guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and are updated annually for inflation. FNA publishes the corresponding income limits by household size for free and reduced-price meals in the

[71] For the purposes of school meal eligibility, *household* is defined as "a group of related or nonrelated individuals, who are not residents of an institution or boarding house, but who are living as one economic unit" (7 C.F.R. §245.2).

[72] Section 9(b)(1) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1758(b)(1).

Federal Register on an annual basis.[73] **Table 3** provides an example of the income limits for free and reduced-price meals for a household of four.

To become income eligible for school meals, a parent or guardian must complete a paper or online application that includes the income of each household member, the household size, and other information.[74] Household income is defined as total gross income (before taxes or deductions), including earnings and wages, certain public assistance benefits (such as unemployment compensation, social security benefits, and child support payments), and retirement and pension income.[75] Households are asked to provide current weekly, biweekly (every two weeks), twice monthly, or monthly income, which school district officials compare to the federal poverty guidelines to determine eligibility for free meals, reduced-price meals, or neither.[76] A household needs to fill out one application if it has multiple children in the same school district.

Table 3. School Meals Income Eligibility Guidelines for a Household of Four

For the 48 Contiguous States, DC, and Territories, School Year 2026-2027

Meal Type	Income Eligibility Threshold (% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines)	Annual Income for a Household of Four
Free	Less than or equal to 130%	Less than or equal to $42,900
Reduced-price	Greater than 130% and less than or equal to 185%	Greater than $42,900 and less than or equal to $61,050
Paid	N/A	N/A

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA), "Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines," 91 *Federal Register* 17932, April 9, 2026.

Notes: The school year is defined as July 1 through June 30. For guidelines for other years, household sizes, and Alaska and Hawaii, see FNA, "Child Nutrition Programs Income Eligibility Guidelines," https://www.fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/income-eligibility-guidelines.

Categorical Eligibility

Children can also become eligible for free school meals if they fall into a certain category (called *categorical eligibility*). Per statute, children are automatically eligible for free lunches and breakfasts (without consideration of household income) if they:

[73] Links to *Federal Register* notices for recent school years are available at FNA, "Child Nutrition Programs Income Eligibility Guidelines," https://www.fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/income-eligibility-guidelines.

[74] There is a requirement that the adult household member filling out the application provide the last four digits of his or her Social Security number (Section 9(d)(1) of the NSLA) or, according to program regulations, indicate that the individual does not have one (7 C.F.R. §245.6(a)(6)). The law does not allow for citizenship eligibility restrictions. Section 742(a) of P.L. 104-193 states that individuals who are eligible for free public education benefits under state and local law shall remain eligible to receive school lunch and school breakfast benefits.

[75] 7 C.F.R. §245.6(a)(5)(ii). Also see FNA, "Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines," 91 *Federal Register* 17932, April 9, 2026; FNA, *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*; and FNA, "Applying for Free and Reduced Price School Meals," https://www.fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/model-application.

[76] Ibid. Each household is asked to report this income for the most recent period prior to the application, unless it does not reflect the household's typical income, in which case it can provide the amount of income it normally receives in a month.

- are in households receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR, a program that operates in lieu of SNAP on some Indian reservations); or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF);
- are enrolled in Head Start; or
- qualify as foster, migrant, runaway, or homeless children.[77]

Categorical eligibility for free meals may be determined via a case number on the household's application or through direct certification (discussed in the next section). The vast majority of categorically eligible children are certified for free meals through direct certification.[78]

Categorical eligibility for free school meals with SNAP and TANF began in the 1980s (then, the Food Stamp and Aid to Families with Dependent Children programs, respectively).[79] Categorical eligibility enabled schools to make use of other programs' more in-depth certification processes and reduced the number of applications that families had to fill out.[80] Other programs and categories were added over time.

Direct Certification

Direct certification is a process through which a state agency or school district automatically certifies a child for free meals based on documentation of the child's status in a program or category without the need for a household application.[81] States are required to conduct direct certification with SNAP and have the option of conducting direct certification with the other programs and categories that convey categorical eligibility.

For SNAP and other federal programs, the direct certification process typically involves state agencies (e.g., state SNAP and state educational agencies) cross-checking program rolls.[82] A list of matched children is sent to the school district, which certifies children for free meals without the need for household applications.[83] For foster, homeless, migrant, and runaway children, direct certification typically involves school district communication with local or state officials who can provide documentation of the children's status in these categories.[84]

The 2004 child nutrition reauthorization act (P.L. 108-265) required states to conduct direct certification with SNAP, with nationwide implementation taking effect in school year 2008-2009.

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[77] See Section 9(b)(12)(A) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1758(b)(12)(A)) for the more specific definitions of these categories. SNAP, FDPIR, and TANF have income limits, but the other qualifications as defined in the statute are not limited by income.

[78] According to CRS calculations using USDA administrative data for FY2025, 97% of categorically eligible students were directly certified for free school meals, compared to 3% certified by household application.

[79] FNS, *Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress: Report to Congress*, December 2008, p. 3.

[80] See, for example, GAO, *School-Meals Programs: USDA Has Enhanced Controls, but Additional Verification Could Help Ensure Legitimate Program Access*, GAO-14-262, May 2014, pp. 16-19, http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-262.

[81] Direct certification authority is in Section 9(b)(4)-(5) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1758(b)(4)-(5)). The term *direct certification* is defined in NSLP/SBP program regulations at 7 C.F.R. §245.2.

[82] FNS, *Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2014–2015: Report to Congress*, December 2016, p. xiii.

[83] Parents and guardians are notified of their children's enrollment in free meals and are allowed to opt out.

[84] FNA, *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*.

As of school year 2018-2019 (the most recent data available), USDA reported that 98% of children in SNAP households were directly certified for free school meals.[85]

The HHFKA made further policy changes to expand direct certification. One of those changes was a demonstration project to test direct certification with Medicaid (see the text box below). The law also funded performance incentive grants for high-performing states and authorized corrective action plans for low-performing states in direct certification activities.[86]

Direct Certification with Medicaid Demonstration

The HHFKA initiated a demonstration project to conduct direct certification of children individually participating in Medicaid and children in Medicaid households. Unlike the other programs used to directly certify children for school meals, Medicaid does *not* convey categorical eligibility for free school meals but rather identifies children in households that would meet the income eligibility thresholds for either free or reduced-price school meals.[87]

Since school year 2012-2013, USDA has used the demonstration authority in the HHFKA as well as separate pilot authority in the NSLA to enable selected states to directly certify children based on Medicaid data.[88] As of school year 2025-2026, 44 states operated direct certification with Medicaid.[89] Over time, the demonstration has shifted from using Medicaid to directly certify children only for free meals (130% of the poverty guidelines or below) to certifying children for both free and reduced-price meals (up to 185% of the poverty guidelines).

FNA has published several evaluations of the demonstration projects.[90] These evaluations found that in states with available data, direct certification with Medicaid led to more children being certified through direct certification rather than application and to some newly certified children. They also found that state administrative costs were "modest" during start-up and declined over time.

Verification of Eligibility

Each fall, each school district is required to verify a sample of approved household applications on file, with a focus on applications close to the eligibility threshold ("error-prone" applications).[91] School districts may also conduct verification of questionable applications.

[85] FNS, *Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program State Implementation Progress Report to Congress School Year 2017-2018 and School Year 2018-2019*, June 2021, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-state-implementation-progress-report.

[86] See CRS Report R41354, *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization: P.L. 111-296*, for further discussion of these and related policies.

[87] FNA, "National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid," https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-medicaid-demonstration-project.

[88] Section 9(b)(15) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1758(b)(15)), as added by Section 103 of P.L. 111-296; Section 18(c) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1769(c)).

[89] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*; and FNA, "National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid." The six remaining states that do not participate in the demonstration are Alaska, Hawaii, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, and South Dakota.

[90] FNS, Office of Policy Support, *Evaluation of Demonstrations of National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Direct Certification of Children Receiving Medicaid Benefits: Year 1 Report*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, January 2015, https://www.fns.usda.gov/evaluation-demonstrations-national-school-lunch-program-and-school-breakfast-program-direct; FNS, *Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCMF/RP) Demonstration, Year 1*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, August 2019, https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/cn/evaluation-dcm-free-reduced-price-meals; FNS, *Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP) Demonstration, Year 2*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, September 2020, https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/nslp/evaluation-dcm-free-reduced-price-meals-frp; and FNS, Office of Policy Support, *Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP) Demonstration, School Year 2019-2020 Report*, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, March 2022, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-dcm-frp-demonstration.

[91] In general, a local educational agency must review the smaller of 3,000 of all applications or 3% of error-prone (continued...)

Verification is not required for children who are directly certified for free or reduced-price meals. (Districts participating in Provisions 1, 2, and 3—see the "Provisions 1, 2, and 3" section—must meet verification requirements for the years in which they administer household applications.)

Many districts employ *direct verification* (matching data from other low-income programs) to conduct their verification activities, but if data cannot be verified in this way, schools must contact households to verify the information provided on the applications. A child's eligibility status may stay the same or change (e.g., from free meals to reduced-price meals or loss of eligibility) as a result of verification of household income or if the household does not respond to verification outreach (in which case eligibility would be lost, though that decision can be appealed).

Reimbursement

School food authorities must keep track of the daily number of meals they serve in each category (free, reduced-price, and paid) that meet federal nutrition requirements. School food authorities then submit claims for reimbursement to their state agencies, which submit the claims to FNA. Approved reimbursements are distributed to school food authorities by the state agencies, usually on a monthly basis. Per statute, reimbursement rates are adjusted for inflation annually.[92] **Table 4** shows NSLP and SBP reimbursement rates for school year 2026-2027. (School food authorities also receive a per-lunch commodity reimbursement, discussed previously under "Commodity Assistance".)

The law provides a higher reimbursement rate for meals meeting certain criteria. For example, school food authorities that are compliant with the updated federal nutrition standards for school meals (nearly all school food authorities as of school year 2023-2024[93]) receive an additional 9 cents per lunch.[94] School food authorities also receive an additional 2 cents per lunch if they serve 60% or more of their lunches at a free or reduced price.[95] For breakfasts, school food authorities receive higher reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals (an additional 47 cents per breakfast) if they serve 40% or more lunches at a free or reduced price (referred to as *severe need* schools).[96]

Once school food authorities receive the cash reimbursements, they can use the funds to support almost any aspect of the school food service operation. However, federal cash reimbursements must go into a nonprofit school food service account that is subject to federal regulations.[97] Payments for non-program foods (e.g., vending machine sales) must also accrue to the nonprofit school food service account.[98]

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applications. If the agency has a nonresponse rate below 20% or has more than 20,000 children approved by application for free/reduced-price meals and a recently improved response rate, it may use alternative sampling approaches. See Section 9(b)(3)(D) of the NSLA or program regulations at 7 C.F.R. §245.6a.

[92] See Section 4 and Section 11 of the NSLA for the lunch reimbursement rates and Section 4 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 for breakfast reimbursement rates.

[93] FNA, "SFA Certification of Compliance with Meal Requirements Data by State," July 30, 2024, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/coc-meal-requirements-state-data.

[94] The HHFKA provided an additional 6 cents per-lunch reimbursement (adjusted annually for inflation) to schools meeting the updated nutritional guidelines requirements. See 91 *Federal Register* 43597 (which separately lists rates for Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands).

[95] Section 4(b)(2) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1753(b)(2)).

[96] Section 4(d) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1773(d)).

[97] 7 C.F.R. §210.14.

[98] Section 12(p) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1760(q)).

FNA periodically studies the costs of producing a reimbursable meal. In April 2019, FNA released a *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*, which found that the average reported cost of producing a reimbursable lunch was $3.81 in school year 2014-2015 (reported costs were defined as those charged to the school food service account).[99] This exceeded the average federal cash reimbursement ($3.32) for lunches in school year 2014-2015. When unreported costs were included (costs outside of the food service account—for example, labor costs associated with processing applications), the cost of producing the average reimbursable lunch was $6.02. As noted previously, children's payments and state and local funds may also cover meal costs.

Table 4. Reimbursement Rates: NSLP and SBP

Per-Meal Reimbursements for the 48 Contiguous States and the District of Columbia, School Year 2026-2027

	Lunch Rate			
	Base Rate	*Bonus for School Food Authorities (SFAs) That Served 60%+ Lunches at F/RP*	*Bonus for SFAs Certified as Compliant with Nutrition Standards*	*Maximum Rate (Includes Bonuses)*
Free	$4.76	+$0.02	+$0.09	$5.02
Reduced-price	$4.36	+$0.02	+$0.09	$4.62
Paid	$0.45	+$0.02	+$0.09	$0.62
	Breakfast Rate			
	SFAs That Served Less Than 40% of Lunches at F/RP		*SFAs That Served 40%+ Lunches at F/RP*	
Free	$2.54		$3.05	
Reduced-price	$2.24		$2.75	
Paid	$0.42		$0.42	

Sources: FNA, "National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates," 91 *Federal Register* 43597, July 16, 2026 (separately lists rates for Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands). For historical rates, see https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/rates-reimbursement.

Notes: NSLP = National School Lunch Program; SBP = School Breakfast Program; F/RP = free or reduced price. The percentage of lunches served at free or reduced price is based on the percentage of lunches served two school years prior. The federal per-meal reimbursement rates are averages. States can apportion funds among school food authorities above or below the average rates. However, in NSLP they can do so only up to the maximum rate. States may also supplement federal reimbursements with state funding.

Special Options

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

The HHFKA authorized CEP, which allows eligible schools, groups of schools, and school districts to offer free meals to all enrolled students.[100] To participate in CEP, the school(s) must have an identified student percentage (ISP) of at least 25%. (USDA lowered the eligibility

[99] USDA, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*.

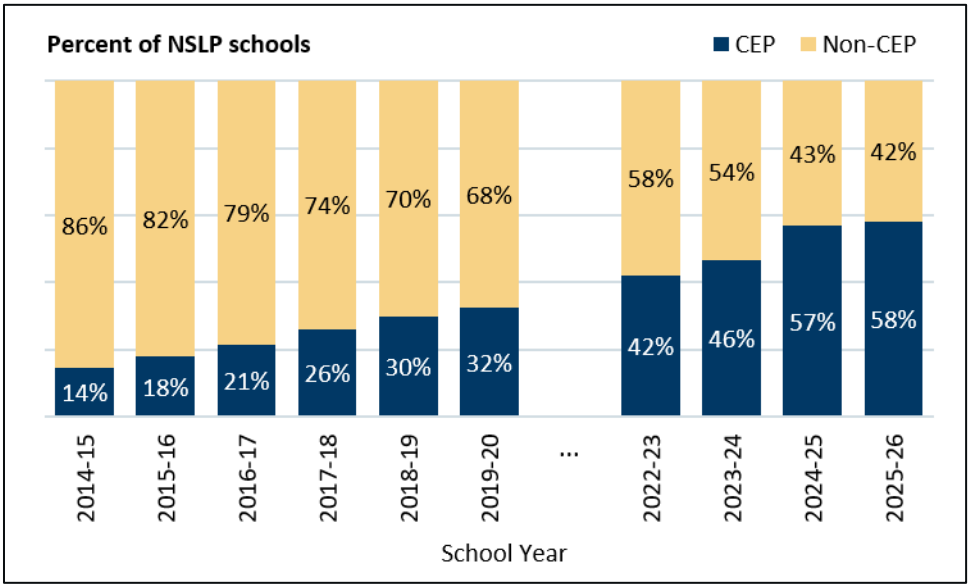
[100] For further detail on CEP, see CRS Report R46371, *Serving Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP): Background and Participation*.

threshold from 40% to 25% as of school year 2023-2024.[101]) The ISP is the percentage of students in the school(s) who are certified for free meals without household applications (i.e., who are directly certified for free meals through SNAP or another program/category).[102] In addition, the school(s) must operate both NSLP and SBP in order to participate in CEP, and they must opt in to CEP.

Based on the statutory parameters, USDA piloted CEP in various states over three school years and expanded the option nationwide in school year 2014-2015. Eligible schools, groups of schools, and entire school districts may participate. If participation is as a group, the ISP is calculated on a group basis. Local educational agencies have until June 30 of each year to notify USDA of the schools in their jurisdictions that will participate in CEP.[103] According to a database maintained by the Food Research and Action Center (a research and advocacy organization), more than 55,300 schools participated in CEP in school year 2025-2026, up from approximately 40,200 schools in school year 2022-2023.[104] **Figure 5** displays the estimated proportion of CEP schools out of all NSLP schools since school year 2014-2015 (the first year of nationwide implementation) using USDA administrative data.

Figure 5. Trend in Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Adoption

CEP Schools as a Proportion of NSLP Schools, School Years 2014-2015 to 2025-2026



Source: CRS-calculated proportions using Department of Agriculture administrative data.

[101] FNS, "Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision-Increasing Options for Schools," 88 *Federal Register* 65778, September 26, 2023.

[102] A school's number of identified students is essentially the same as its number of directly certified students, except that the number of identified students does not include students who are directly certified for reduced-price meals through the Medicaid demonstration. For the definition of *identified students* in regulations, see 7 C.F.R. §245.9(f)(1)(ii).

[103] 7 C.F.R. §245.9(f)(4); FNS, "National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Eliminating Applications Through Community Eligibility as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010," 81 *Federal Register* 50194, July 29, 2016.

[104] FRAC, "Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools, School Year 2025-2026," July 2026, https://frac.org/community-eligibility.

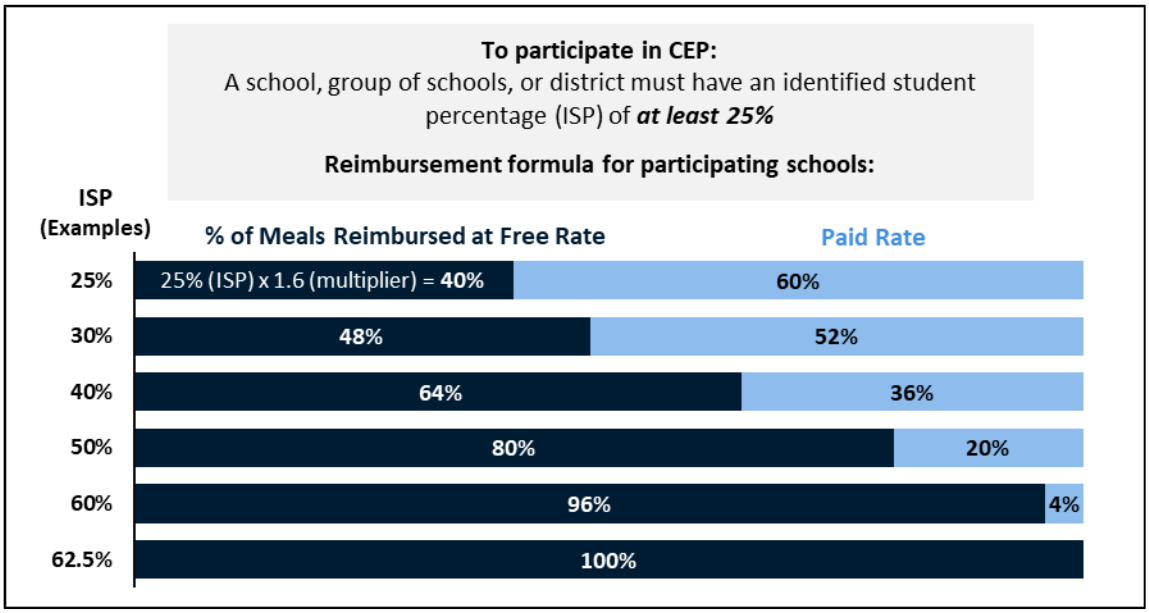
Notes: NSLP = National School Lunch Program. Includes CEP schools in states operating universal free meal policies. Data not shown for school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 due to COVID-19 response policies that enabled schools to receive reimbursement for universal free meal service.

Though CEP schools serve free meals to all students, they are not reimbursed at the free rate for every meal served. Instead, the ISP is multiplied by a factor of 1.6 to estimate the proportion of students who would be eligible for free or reduced-price meals had they been certified via application.[105] The result is the percentage of meals served that will be reimbursed at the free-meal rate, with the remainder reimbursed at the much lower paid-meal rate. For example, if a CEP school has an ISP of 40%, then 64% of its meals served would be reimbursed at the free-meal rate and 36% would be reimbursed at the paid-meal rate. Schools that identify 62.5% or more students as eligible for free meals receive the free-meal reimbursement for all meals served (62.5% multiplied by 1.6 equals 100%). **Figure 6** provides a visual representation of the CEP reimbursement formula for participating schools, groups of schools, and school districts.

CEP participating schools must recalculate their ISPs at least once every four years, but they can choose to do so more frequently.[106] While eligibility determinations occur every four years, schools can drop out of CEP at any time.[107]

CEP is intended to reduce paperwork for families and schools and enable schools to provide more free meals. However, the option may or may not be financially beneficial for schools depending on their proportions of identified students.

Figure 6. Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Reimbursement Formula



Source: Graphic created by CRS based on current law.

Notes: The ISP is the percentage of enrolled children who are certified for free meals without household applications. The ISP is multiplied by 1.6 to calculate the proportion of meals reimbursed at the free rate. The

[105] Statute allows USDA to set the reimbursement multiplier between 1.3 and 1.6. USDA has set the multiplier at 1.6. FNS, "National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Eliminating Applications Through Community Eligibility as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010," 81 *Federal Register* 50194, July 29, 2016, p. 50201.

[106] 7 C.F.R. §245.9(f).

[107] 7 C.F.R. §245.9(j).

remainder of meals are reimbursed at the lower paid rate. For free and paid reimbursement rates in a recent school year, see **Table 4**.

Provisions 1, 2, and 3

Schools, groups of schools, and school districts can also use Provisions 1, 2, and 3 to establish alternative certification and reimbursement procedures. These options are intended to reduce paperwork for school administrators and families.[108] The options predate CEP, and unlike CEP, they still require some household applications. A school's decision to participate in a special option may depend on financial considerations. There were 4,440 schools operating Provisions 1, 2, or 3 in school year 2024-2025.[109]

Provision 1 allows schools with high proportions (80% or more) of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals to make free meal eligibility determinations that remain in effect for two school years. This reduces the number of applications they have to process (though they still have to process reduced-price meal applications annually).[110]

Provision 2 and **Provision 3** are open to all schools. As with CEP, schools, groups of schools, or school districts must agree to provide free meals (lunches *or* lunches/breakfasts) to all students in order to participate in Provision 2 or Provision 3. Under Provision 2, schools are reimbursed over a four-year period by applying the proportion of meals served at a free/reduced-price/paid rate during the first year to total meals served in subsequent years. Eligibility determinations in the first year are based on direct certification *and* household applications (a difference from CEP). Under Provision 3, schools are similarly required to make eligibility determinations in the first year of a four-year period. However, in this case, schools receive the same level of federal assistance over the next three years, which is adjusted for enrollment and inflation. (There are no separate payments for free/reduced-price/paid meals.[111])

Nutrition Standards and Food Service

Nutrition Standards for School Meals

Nutritional requirements for school meals have changed throughout the history of the school meals programs.[112] The most recent child nutrition reauthorization, the HHFKA in 2010, required USDA to update the nutrition standards for school meals within 18 months of the law's enactment based on recommendations from the Food and Nutrition Board at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.[113] The law also provided a "performance-based" bonus reimbursement of 6 cents per lunch (adjusted annually for inflation) for school food authorities certified as compliant with the updated standards (which nearly all school food authorities receive, as discussed in the "Reimbursement" section).[114]

[108] FNS, "Provisions 1, 2, and 3," May 6, 2014, https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/provisions-1-2-and-3.

[109] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*.

[110] Section 11(a)(1) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1759a(a)(1)); 7 C.F.R. §245.9; FNS, "Provisions 1, 2, and 3."

[111] Ibid.

[112] The current nutrition standards for school meals are located at 7 C.F.R. §210.10 (lunches) and 7 C.F.R. §220.8 (breakfasts).

[113] Section 201 of P.L. 111-296. Institute of Medicine, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children*, 2010.

[114] The rate is 9 cents in school year 2026-2027. See 91 *Federal Register* 43597.

USDA published the updated nutrition standards for school meals in 2012.[115] They were based on the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (per an existing statutory requirement) as well as the recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.[116] The standards required increased servings of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and meats/meat alternates in lunches and breakfasts. They also restricted milk to unflavored low-fat (1%) and flavored and unflavored fat-free varieties, set limits on calories and sodium in school meals, and prohibited trans fats in school meals, among other changes. Separate from the final rule, USDA also implemented a requirement in the HHFKA that schools make water available to children during meal service in the cafeteria.[117]

The revised nutrition standards largely took effect in school year 2012-2013 for lunches and in school year 2013-2014 for breakfasts. A few requirements phased in over multiple school years.[118] Some schools experienced difficulty implementing the new standards.[119] Subsequent changes to the whole grain, sodium, and milk requirements were made through appropriations acts and USDA rulemaking (for example, to reinstate flavored 1% milk in the programs).[120]

USDA and Congress have initiated other changes to the nutrition standards for school meals, sometimes in response to updated versions of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. For example, in an April 2024 rule—following the release of the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans—USDA set new limits on added sugars in school meals.[121] More recently, in January 2026, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (P.L. 119-69) was enacted, allowing schools to offer whole milk, 2% milk, and certain non-dairy beverages to students.[122]

States and school districts are allowed to implement additional nutritional requirements for school meals so long as they meet the federal standards.[123]

Table 5 provides an overview of the federal nutrition standards for school lunches.

[115] FNS, "Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs," 77 *Federal Register* 17, January 26, 2012, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2012/01/26/2012-1010/nutrition-standards-in-the-national-school-lunch-and-school-breakfast-programs.

[116] The 1994 child nutrition reauthorization (P.L. 103-448) required schools to serve meals consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are food-based recommendations developed jointly by USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and updated every five years. For more information, see CRS Report R44360, *Dietary Guidelines for Americans: Frequently Asked Questions*.

[117] FNS, "Revised Child Nutrition Reauthorization 2010: Water Availability During National School Lunch Program Meal Service," July 12, 2011, https://www.usda.gov/guidance-documents/child-nutrition/fns/child-nutrition-reauthorization-2010-water-availability-during-national-school-lunch-program-meal. Also see FNS, "Clarification on the Milk and Water Requirements in the School Meal Programs," September 23, 2019, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/clarification-milk-and-water-requirements-school-meal-program.

[118] See "Implementation Timeline" in FNS, "Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs," 77 *Federal Register* 17, January 26, 2012, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2012/01/26/2012-1010/nutrition-standards-in-the-national-school-lunch-and-school-breakfast-programs.

[119] For further background, see CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*.

[120] For more information, see CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

[121] See CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*. Among other changes, starting in school year 2027-2028, added sugars are limited to less than 10% of weekly calories in school meals.

[122] For more information, see CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*.

[123] FNS, "Enhancing Child Nutrition Program Meal Standards," June 2, 2025, https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/enhancing-meal-standards.

Table 5. Summary of the Nutrition Standards for School Lunches as of October 2026

	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12
Required offerings per week (minimum per day)[a]			
Fruits (cups)	2.5 (0.5)	2.5 (0.5)	5 (1)
Vegetables (cups) (subgroup requirements not shown)[b]	3.75 (0.75)	3.75 (0.75)	5 (1)
Grains (ounce equivalents)[c]	8-9 (1)	8-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Meats/meat alternates (ounce equivalents)	8-10 (1)	9-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Fluid milk (cups)[d]	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
Daily amount based on average weekly requirement			
Minimum-maximum calories (kcal)[e]	550-650	600-700	750-850
Saturated fat (percentage of total calories)	<10%	<10%	<10%
Added sugars (percentage of total calories): must be implemented by July 1, 2027	<10%	<10%	<10%
Sodium limit: in place through June 30, 2027	≤1,110 mg	≤1,225 mg	≤1,280 mg
Sodium limit: must be implemented by July 1, 2027	≤935 mg	≤1,035 mg	≤1,080 mg

Source: Table adapted from 7 C.F.R. §210.10(c) as of October 2026.

a. School food authorities must allow high school students—and can optionally allow students at the middle and elementary school levels—to decline up to two components at lunch, except that the students must select at least a 0.5 cup of the fruit or vegetable component.

b. Requirements related to vegetable subgroups (dark green, red/orange, legumes, starchy, other) are not shown. Up to half of the fruit or vegetable offerings may be in the form of 100% juice.

c. At least 80% of grains offered weekly must be whole-grain-rich (defined as containing at least 50% whole grains, and the remaining grain, if any, must be enriched).

d. Schools must offer at least two varieties of milk daily. Milk options include whole milk, reduced-fat (2%) milk, low-fat (1%) milk, and fat-free (skim) milk. Milk may be flavored or unflavored, but unflavored milk must be offered and added sugars in flavored milk cannot exceed 10 grams per 8 fluid ounces as of school year 2025-2026. With milk and with other foods, schools *must* make substitutions for students who are considered to have disabilities and whose disabilities restrict their diets. Schools *may* make substitutions for medical or special dietary needs.

e. Discretionary sources of calories may be added to the meal pattern if within the specifications for calories, saturated fat, and sodium.

Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods

The HHFKA also required USDA to develop nutrition standards for other foods sold in NSLP- and SBP-participating schools on campus during the school day. These foods are known as *competitive foods* (i.e., foods sold in competition with school meals). Competitive foods include foods and drinks sold in vending machines, a la carte lines, snack bars and concession stands, and school fundraisers. These foods do not receive federal reimbursement. The HHFKA required USDA to publish proposed nutrition standards for competitive foods within one year of the law's enactment and align the standards with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Relying on recommendations made by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, FNA promulgated a proposed rule in April 2013 and then an interim final rule in June 2013, which went into effect in school year 2014-2015.[124] The interim final rule created nutrition standards for all non-meal foods and beverages that are sold during the school day (defined as midnight until 30 minutes after dismissal). The final rule, published in July 2016, maintained the interim final rules with minor changes.[125] Under the final standards, competitive foods must have certain primary ingredients; meet whole-grain requirements; and comply with calorie, sugar, sodium, and fat limits, among other criteria. Schools are also limited to a list of specific beverages they may sell (with larger portion sizes and caffeine allowed in high schools).[126] The April 2024 final rule (discussed previously) further limited added sugars in milks sold as competitive beverages and exempted bean/hummus dips from fat limits.[127] Subsequently, rulemaking in May 2026 implementing the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (P.L. 119-69) added whole milk and 2% milk as allowable competitive beverages.[128]

Fundraisers held outside of the school day and fundraisers in which the food sold is clearly not intended for consumption on campus during the school day are not subject to the competitive food nutrition standards. In addition, the law and the final rule provided states with discretion to exempt infrequent fundraisers selling foods or beverages that do not meet the nutrition standards.

The federal standards are minimum standards, and states and school districts are permitted to issue more stringent policies. Many districts already had local competitive food standards prior to the HHFKA because of the 2004 child nutrition reauthorization law (P.L. 108-265), which required local educational agencies to implement local school wellness policies (discussed in the next section) that included nutritional guidelines for foods sold in schools.

Local School Wellness Policies

A local educational agency participating in the school meals program is required to have a local school wellness policy, which sets nutrition and health-related goals and guidelines for schools within the jurisdiction.[129] A local school wellness policy must include goals related to nutrition and physical activity, nutrition standards for school foods that meet or exceed federal nutrition standards, and an implementation plan, among other content. Local educational agencies must provide opportunities for input from parents, students, school nutrition professionals, physical

[124] Institute of Medicine, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*, 2007, https://www.nap.edu/catalog/11899/nutrition-standards-for-foods-in-schools-leading-the-way-toward; FNS, "Interim Rule: NSLP and SBP Nutrition Standards for All Foods Sold in Schools as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010," 78 *Federal Register* 79567, December 31, 2013, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2013/12/31/2013-31350/national-school-lunch-program-and-school-breakfast-program-nutrition-standards-for-all-foods-sold-in.

[125] FNS, "National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Nutrition Standards for All Foods Sold in School as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010; Final Rule," 81 *Federal Register* 50131, July 29, 2016, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/07/29/2016-17227/national-school-lunch-program-and-school-breakfast-program-nutrition-standards-for-all-foods-sold-in. Related resources are available at the FNA website at https://www.fna.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards/smartsnacks.

[126] 7 C.F.R. §210.11.

[127] For more information, see CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

[128] For more information, see CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*.

[129] The 2004 child nutrition reauthorization created the requirement that local educational agencies establish school wellness policies, and the HHFKA expanded requirements around local school wellness policies. Section 9A of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1758b); 7 C.F.R. §210.31.

education teachers, school health professionals, school administrators, and the general public in developing and updating local school wellness policies.

Food Procurement and Preparation

The majority of foods used in the school meal programs are purchased by school food authorities using federal cash reimbursements or other funds. School food authorities also receive USDA Foods (as discussed previously). School food authorities must comply with federal procurement rules when purchasing foods for the school meals programs.[130] In addition, there is a "Buy American" requirement in statute that requires schools participating in the school meal programs to purchase domestic commodities and products "to the maximum extent practicable."[131] There are also flexibilities pertaining to local foods. Specifically, when procuring unprocessed agricultural products, schools and other child nutrition program operators are allowed to restrict bids or give preference to locally grown, raised, or caught products (as defined by their school food authorities or state agencies).[132]

Many school food authorities purchase and prepare their own meals, either at a centralized district kitchen or on-site at individual schools.[133] Alternatively, school food authorities may contract with private food service management companies to contract out procurement and/or meal preparation.[134] A contracted company must comply with all school meal regulations, and the school food authority must retain general control over the operation of the school meals programs, including financial oversight and compliance with nutrition standards.[135]

[130] 7 C.F.R. §210.21.

[131] Section 12(n) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1760(n)); also see 7 C.F.R. §210.21(d). USDA has issued guidance on the implementation of this provision. For example, see FNA, "Buy American Accommodation Process for School Year 2026-2027," June 25, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/buy-american-sy26-27; and FNS, "Buy American Provisions Related to the Final Rule - CNP Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-25 DGAs," May 29, 2024, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/buy-american-provisions. Recent changes to the regulations are discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

[132] 7 C.F.R. §210.21(g); Section 9(j) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1758(j)), added by the 2008 farm bill (discussed in CRS Report R43950, *Local Food Systems: Selected Farm Bill and Other Federal Programs*). USDA expanded local procurement options in a 2024 rule, as discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*. More recently, a 2026 USDA rule aimed to clarify such options (FNA, "Simplified Geographic Preference Procurement in Child Nutrition Programs," 91 *Federal Register* 57245, September 9, 2026).

[133] A nationally representative study by USDA in school year 2014-2015 found that nearly 80% of public schools participating in NSLP cooked meals on-site, with the remainder receiving partially or fully prepared meals from central kitchens or other production facilities (USDA, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*, p. A.45).

[134] The USDA *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study* (p. A.59) found that 19.7% of public school food authorities used food service management companies. They were most commonly tasked with menu planning, preparing and serving meals, and overseeing private employees. A more recent, nationally representative survey conducted by USDA in school year 2016-2017 found that 26.2% of public school food authorities used food service management companies (FNS, *Study of School Food Authority Procurement Practices*, prepared by 2M Research, September 22, 2021, p. 44, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/study-school-food-authority-procurement-practices).

[135] FNS, "Contracting with Food Service Management Companies: Guidance for School Food Authorities," May 2016, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/updated-guidance-contracting-food-service-management.

Meal Times and Settings

In general, lunches and breakfasts are intended to be consumed on-site during the school day.[136] Surveys have found that schools typically provide roughly 20 minutes for breakfast and 25-30 minutes for lunch.[137]

Under SBP, students were traditionally required to arrive early for breakfast and eat it in the cafeteria. However, in recent years, schools and states have increasingly adopted alternative models of breakfast service such as breakfast in the classroom, grab-and-go carts, and breakfast during morning breaks. Anti-hunger advocacy groups have encouraged new models of breakfast service as a way to increase SBP participation.[138] According to a 2018 survey by the School Nutrition Association (SNA), a membership and advocacy organization, more than half of surveyed school districts offered both a traditional cafeteria line and alternative modes of breakfast service, while 43% of schools offered a cafeteria line only. Common alternatives were grab-and-go stations (particularly in middle and high schools) and breakfast in the classroom (particularly in elementary schools).[139]

School Meal Equipment Assistance Grants

At different points in the school meals programs' history, specific funds have been provided for cafeteria equipment purchases. (Per-meal reimbursements may also cover equipment costs.) Since FY2013, annual appropriations acts have provided funding for school meal equipment assistance grants to help schools prepare meals that comply with updated nutrition standards; improve food safety; and support the establishment, maintenance, or expansion of school breakfast programs.[140] FNA awards these grants on a formula basis to state agencies, which distribute funds to school food authorities on a competitive basis.[141]

In FY2026, USDA distributed $20 million in equipment assistance grants to states using appropriated (including carryover) funds.[142] In October 2026, USDA made available an additional $50 million in American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2) funding for use over a two-year period through its Harvest to Hallways initiative.[143]

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[136] FNS, "Clarification of the Policy on Food Consumption Outside of Foodservice Area, and the Whole Grain-Rich Requirement," April 2014, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/clarification-policy-food-consumption-outside-foodservice-area-and-whole-grain-rich-requirement.

[137] FNS Office of Policy Support, *Special Nutrition Program Operations Study: State and School Food Authority Policies and Practices for School Meals Programs School Year 2011-12*, March 2014, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/SNOPSYear1.pdf; and School Nutrition Association, "School Nutrition Operations Report: The State of School Nutrition 2018," August 2018.

[138] For example, see FRAC, "School Breakfast Expansion Strategies," http://www.frac.org/programs/school-breakfast-program/school-breakfast-expansion-strategies.

[139] School Nutrition Association, "School Nutrition Operations Report."

[140] The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5) provided $100 million for school meals equipment assistance grants, which was spent in FY2009-FY2011. Appropriations acts in FY2010 and FY2013-FY2026 have provided subsequent funding for these grants (The amount has varied by year. FY2027 annual appropriations are not available as of the date of this report.)

[141] See, for example, FNA, "National School Lunch Program Equipment Assistance Grants," https://www.fna.usda.gov/nslp/equipment-assistance-grants.

[142] FNA, "Fiscal Year 2026 National School Lunch Program Equipment Assistance Grants," https://www.fna.usda.gov/grant/schoolmeals/equipment-assistance-fy26.

[143] FNA, "Harvest to Hallways: National School Lunch Program, Equipment Assistance Grants," October 28, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/grant/schoolmeals/h2h-equipment-assistance.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

CACFP provides federal reimbursements for meals and snacks served in approximately 134,000 child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers nationwide in a typical year. (See **Table 6** for participation by type of institution.[144]) Reimbursements are generally provided for meals and snacks served to children ages 12 and under and chronically disabled and elderly adults.[145] CACFP also supports free meals and snacks for children ages 18 and under in emergency shelters and after-school programs in low-income areas (discussed in the "After-School Meals and Snacks" section).[146]

In general, CACFP provides cash reimbursements for up to two meals and one snack or one meal and two snacks per participant daily (a meal may be a breakfast, lunch, or supper).[147] A smaller share of federal aid takes the form of commodity assistance (or cash in lieu of commodities) and funds for administrative costs (discussed previously).[148] The eligibility and funding rules of CACFP differ for centers (facilities or institutions) and day care homes (private homes). Day care homes must be overseen by sponsoring organizations, which handle the financial and administrative functions of the program for local providers. Centers have the option of operating independently or under sponsors.

Both centers and day care homes must comply with government-established standards for other child care programs and meet federal CACFP nutrition standards.[149]

Table 6. CACFP Participation: Centers and Day Care Homes, FY2025

	Outlets	Participants	Average Number of Participants per Institution
Day care homes	67,800	637,000	9
Child care centers	64,000	4,070,500	64
Adult day care centers	2,300	125,000	54
Total	**134,100**	**4,832,500**	**36**

Source: Food and Nutrition Administration, *June 2026 Keydata Report*, September 18, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/overview/keydata-june26.

[144] FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

[145] Reimbursements are also available for meals/snacks served to migrant children ages 15 or under and children with disabilities of any age. *Elderly* is defined as individuals age 60 or older. 7 C.F.R. §226.2.

[146] For more information on CACFP for emergency shelters, see FNA, "CACFP in Emergency Shelters," https://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/emergency-shelters.

[147] Section 17(f)(2)(B) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766(f)(2)(B)). Emergency shelters can receive reimbursement for up to three meals per day per child. Federal regulations (7 C.F.R. §226.20(k)) permit states to set requirements around meal times and spacing between meals.

[148] CACFP operators are entitled to the level of commodity assistance specified in Section 17(h) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(h)). Per paragraph (D) of that section, states may request any amount of their commodity allotments as cash (referred to as *cash in lieu* of commodities).

[149] Section 17(a)(5) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(a)(5)); 7 C.F.R. §226.6(d). All CACFP-participating child care centers and homes must be licensed child care providers. If federal, state, or local licensing is not available, the institution must comply with federal, state, or local child care standards. Emergency shelters are not subject to this requirement, but they must meet state or local health and safety standards.

Notes: CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. Participation estimated by U.S. Department of Agriculture based on average daily meals served. Average number of participants per institution calculated by CRS. Total number of outlets and participants are rounded to the nearest hundreds.

Administration

At the local level, sponsor organizations administer CACFP for all participating day care homes and centers that elect to have sponsors. Sponsors are responsible for conducting audits of providers, distributing federal reimbursements, and (in some instances) preparing and distributing meals.[150] They can be public or nonprofit institutions or, in some cases, for-profit institutions.[151] Centers that choose to handle their own administrative responsibilities are referred to as independent centers.

Unlike centers, day care homes are required to have sponsor organizations. Sponsors receive monthly federal administrative payments based on the number of homes for which they are responsible. (Sponsors, on average, have more than 100 day care homes under their supervision.[152]) A sponsor may also receive a portion of the per-meal reimbursement if it has an agreement with the day care home to prepare meals.[153] If a center opts to have a sponsor, the sponsor may retain a portion of the per-meal reimbursements for its administrative expenses.[154]

In CACFP, the state administering agency is typically the state department of education or department of health and/or human services.[155] The state agency distributes federal funds and conducts reviews of CACFP sponsor organizations and independent centers.[156]

As with the school meals programs, FNA provides oversight of state agencies and issues guidance and regulations to states and providers.

Eligibility and Reimbursement

CACFP Centers

The following institutions are eligible to participate as centers in CACFP:

[150] Per statute, a sponsor must make at least one scheduled visit to its sponsored day care home or center each year and periodic unannounced site visits at not less than three-year intervals (Section 17(d)(2) of the NSLA [codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(d)(2)]). Per regulations, a sponsor must make at least three site visits each year, two of which must be unannounced, with some exceptions (7 C.F.R. §226.16(d)(4)(iii)). CACFP has a "serious deficiency" process that outlines the procedures for terminating an institution or provider from CACFP, which involves corrective action plans and hearings (Section 17(d)(5) of the NSLA [codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(d)(5)]).

[151] A for-profit institution may be sponsor of a for-profit center if they are part of the same legal entity. Section 17(a)(2)(D) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(a)(2)(D)).

[152] The number of day care homes divided by the number of sponsors of day care homes. FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

[153] See program regulations at 7 C.F.R. §226.13.

[154] Sponsors of centers may retain up to 15% of the per-meal reimbursements for administrative expenses. They may also request state waivers to exceed this limit. See program regulations at 7 C.F.R. §226.7(g).

[155] For a list of CACFP state administering agencies, see FNA, "FNA Contacts," https://www.fna.usda.gov/contacts.

[156] State agencies must annually review at least one-third of sponsors/independent centers. Further rules are specified at 7 C.F.R. §226.6(m).

- Public or private *nonprofit* (tax exempt) organizations providing nonresidential child care or adult day care (including school food authorities and Head Start centers)[157]
- Private *for-profit* organizations providing nonresidential child care or adult day care that enroll a certain proportion of low-income participants[158]
- Emergency shelters for homeless families[159]

Adult day care centers and outside school hour centers fall under the first two categories, but they are subject to specific federal regulations.[160]

Income eligibility rules for CACFP centers are the same as the school meals programs: Participants in households at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines qualify for free meals and snacks, and those between 130% and 185% of the poverty guidelines qualify for reduced-price meals and snacks (a charge of no more than 40 cents for a lunch or supper, 30 cents for a breakfast, and 15 cents for a snack).[161] CACFP centers also use similar categorical eligibility criteria, including participation in Head Start, foster child status, and household participation in SNAP, FDPIR, or TANF assistance. Adults are categorically eligible if they participate in SNAP, FDPIR, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicaid.[162] Eligibility is determined through paper applications or, in some states, direct-certification-like processes.

For CACFP centers, the reimbursement rates for breakfasts and lunches/suppers are the same as the SBP breakfast reimbursement rate and NSLP lunch reimbursement rate, respectively.[163] The largest subsidies are provided for free and reduced-price meals and snacks, while paid meals receive a lower reimbursement.[164] Unlike the school meals programs, CACFP allows centers certain flexibilities for tracking meal counts and submitting claims for reimbursement.[165]

Compared to school meals, CACFP centers are also less likely to collect meal payments from participants and more likely to incorporate meal costs into tuition. Centers are not required to adjust tuition and fees to account for CACFP funding. Centers are also allowed to charge families

[157] Section 17(a)(2) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(a)(2)). Private nonprofit institutions must have tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 per program regulations (7 C.F.R. §226.15).

[158] Section 17(a)(2) and Section 17(d)(1)(B) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(a)(2), (d)(1)(B)). Private for-profit institutions qualify if at least 25% of enrolled children meet the income eligibility criteria for free or reduced-price school meals, if the institutions receive compensation under the Social Services Block Grant for at least 25% of their enrolled children, or if at least 25% of enrolled adults are Medicaid or Social Services Block Grant beneficiaries.

[159] Section 17(a)(2) and Section 17(t) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(a)(2), (t)). Emergency shelters are facilities that provide temporary housing as defined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §11351).

[160] 7 C.F.R. §226.19; 7 C.F.R. §226.19a.

[161] Section 17(c)(4) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(c)(4)); 7 C.F.R. §226.2.

[162] See definition of *free meal* at 7 C.F.R. §226.2. Statute provides categorical eligibility for adults who are members of households receiving assistance under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. §2011 et seq.) and recipients of Supplemental Security Income or Medicaid. Section 17(o)(5) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(o)(5)). For a summary of CACFP eligibility rules, see FNA, "Why CACFP Is Important," http://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/why-cacfp-important.

[163] *Federal Register* notices for recent school years are available at FNA, "CACFP Reimbursement Rates," https://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/reimbursement-rates.

[164] Section 17(c) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(c)).

[165] 7 C.F.R. §226.9. Also see FNA, *Independent Child Care Centers: A Child and Adult Care Food Program Handbook*, May 2014, pp. 46-51, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/independent-centers-handbook.

separately for meals and snacks so long as there are no charges for children who qualify for free meals and limited charges for those who qualify for reduced-price meals.[166]

CACFP Day Care Homes

Day care homes are private homes that provide nonresidential child care services. In general, any day care home that meets local, state, or federal child care standards may participate in CACFP.

Unlike centers, day care homes generally do not make eligibility determinations and receive the same reimbursement rate for every meal served (a lower rate compared to centers). As shown in **Table 7**, the rates for day care homes are split into two tiers:

- **Tier I:** Day care homes located in low-income areas or with low-income providers receive a higher, Tier I reimbursement rate. To receive the Tier I rate, a home must be located in an area in which at least 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals or be operated by a provider whose household income level meets the free or reduced-price income standards.[167]
- **Tier II:** Day care homes that do not qualify for Tier I rates receive Tier II (lower) rates. However, Tier II providers may seek the higher Tier I subsidies for individual low-income children for whom household income information is collected and verified.

Like centers, CACFP-participating day care homes may incorporate meal costs into tuition. Unlike centers, federal rules prohibit any separate meal charges.[168]

Table 7. Reimbursement Rates: CACFP Centers and Day Care Homes

Per-Meal/Snack Reimbursement for the 48 Contiguous States and the District of Columbia, School Year 2026-2027

	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Centers			
Free	$2.54	$4.76	$1.30
Reduced-price	$2.24	$4.36	$0.65
Paid	$0.42	$0.45	$0.12
Day Care Homes			
Tier I	$1.74	$3.31	$0.98
Tier II	$0.62	$1.99	$0.27

Sources: Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA), "CACFP: National Average Payment Rates, Day Care Home Food Service Payment Rates, and Administrative Reimbursement Rates for Sponsoring Organizations of Day Care Homes for the Period July 1, 2026 Through June 30, 2027," 91 *Federal Register* 46894, July 27, 2026.

[166] 7 C.F.R. §226.6(f)(1)(i). Also see FNA, *Independent Child Care Centers*.

[167] Section 17(f)(3)(A)(ii)(I) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1766(f)(3)(A)(ii)(I)). A sponsoring organization may use school data (provided by the state agency) to demonstrate that at least 50% of children in the day care home's area are eligible for free/reduced-price meals, or it may use Census Bureau data (provided by FNS) to demonstrate that at least 50% of children in the area are members of households that meet the income standards for free or reduced-price meals. See FNA, "Area Eligibility in Child Nutrition Programs," December 1, 2016, https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/area-eligibility-memo.

[168] 7 C.F.R. §226.18(d).

Note: CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. For historical reimbursement rates; rates for Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; and administrative payment rates for sponsors of day care homes, see FNA, "CACFP Reimbursement Rates," http://www.fna.usda.gov/cacfp/reimbursement-rates.

Nutrition Standards and Food Service

Nutrition Standards

The HHFKA required the Secretary of Agriculture to update CACFP's meal patterns. USDA's final rule, effective October 1, 2017, revised the meal patterns for meals and snacks served in centers and day care homes.[169] It also aligned nutrition standards for meals served to preschool-age children through NSLP and SBP.

For infants (under 12 months of age), the revised meal patterns eliminated juice, encouraged breastfeeding, and set guidelines for the introduction of solid foods, among other changes. For children ages one and older and adult participants, the new meal patterns increased whole grains, fruits, and vegetables; limited fat content and flavorings in milk; limited sugar in cereals and yogurts; and prohibited deep-fried foods.[170] They also required that potable water be available to children throughout the day. Subsequent laws and regulations expanded milk varieties, allowing flavored milks to be served to children ages six and older and allowing higher-fat milks for all children.[171]

Procurement and Meal Service

CACFP institutions may purchase their own foods and prepare their own meals, or they may contract with school or food service management companies that prepare meals for them. In either case, institutions must comply with federal, state, and local procurement regulations.[172] As noted previously, CACFP institutions may also receive USDA Foods. However, most receive cash in lieu of USDA commodities.[173]

Meals must comply with state or local health, safety, and sanitation requirements for storing, preparing, and serving food, and institutions must undergo annual food safety inspections. Family-style meal service (where children can serve themselves from shared bowls or platters) is encouraged in CACFP.[174]

[169] FNS, "Child and Adult Care Food Program: Meal Pattern Revisions Related to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010: Final Rule," 81 *Federal Register* 24348 et seq., April 25, 2016, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/04/25/2016-09412/child-and-adult-care-food-program-meal-pattern-revisions-related-to-the-healthy-hunger-free-kids-act.

[170] The original rule limited milk to unflavored whole milk for one-year-olds, unflavored low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk for two- to five-year-olds, and flavored or unflavored fat-free milk or unflavored low-fat milk for children six years and older. USDA's April 2024 rule changed the product-specific "total" sugar limits to "added" sugar limits, as discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

[171] Since 2018, CACFP operators have been allowed to serve flavored 1% milk to children ages six and older (discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*). As of 2026, CACFP operators may serve whole milk to any child and 2% milk to any child age two and older (including flavored whole and 2% milk for children ages six and older), as discussed in CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*.

[172] 7 C.F.R. §226.22; FNA, *Independent Child Care Centers*, pp. 38-39.

[173] In FY2025, 98.8% of CACFP entitlement commodity aid was in the form of cash, according to FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

[174] FNA, *Independent Child Care Centers*, p. 37.

Summer Food

The SFSP and the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) provide federal reimbursements for summer meals served to children ages 18 and under.[175] SFSP is open to school food authorities, local public agencies, and private nonprofit organizations, while SSO is specifically for school food authorities, allowing them to continue operating under certain NSLP/SBP requirements into the summer. The programs share many of the same requirements, including a requirement that children consume meals on-site—known as the *congregate feeding* requirement—except in rural areas (discussed further below).[176] Summer food benefits for households with school-age children are also available through the Summer EBT program, which was permanently authorized by the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-328).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer meals programs were deployed during the regular school year to facilitate free meal service (not discussed in this section).[177]

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

The SFSP provides federal aid to school food authorities and other local public and nonprofit organizations that serve meals and snacks to children during the summer months.[178] Federal aid is provided in the form of per-meal cash reimbursements and a smaller amount of commodity foods and administrative funds (discussed previously). In July 2026 (the peak month of participation), the program served roughly 2.9 million children at approximately 35,500 meal sites.[179]

Similar to CACFP, SFSP is administered at the local level by sponsor organizations that operate the program at one or more meal sites (the physical location where food is served and eaten). Each SFSP meal site is required to have a sponsor. Sponsors may operate meal sites at a variety of locations, including schools, recreation centers, parks, churches, and public libraries.

Unlike the other child nutrition programs, SFSP participation is generally limited (with the exception of camps and certain rural areas) to meal sites that serve children from *areas in which poor economic conditions exist*—defined as areas or sites in which at least 50% of children are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals (discussed further below).[180]

[175] For an overview of summer meal benefits for children, see CRS In Focus IF11633, *Summer Food for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid*.

[176] 7 C.F.R. §225.6(e)(15). USDA issued waivers of this requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA has also provided exemptions from the congregate feeding requirement to SFSP and SSO outdoor meal sites experiencing excessive heat.

[177] Pandemic response policies are discussed briefly in the "Background" section of this report and in detail in CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

[178] Sponsors may operate SFSP from May through September for children on school vacation. Sponsors may also receive SFSP reimbursements for meals during unanticipated school closures, and sponsors administering SFSP under a continuous school calendar system may operate SFSP at any time (7 C.F.R. §225.6(e)).

[179] FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*. According to a May 2018 GAO report, estimates of participation in SFSP may be unreliable because they have been calculated inconsistently across states and years. See GAO, *Actions Needed to Improve Participation Estimates and Address Program Challenges,* GAO-18-369, May 2018, https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-369.

[180] Section 13(a) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. §1761(a)).

Administration

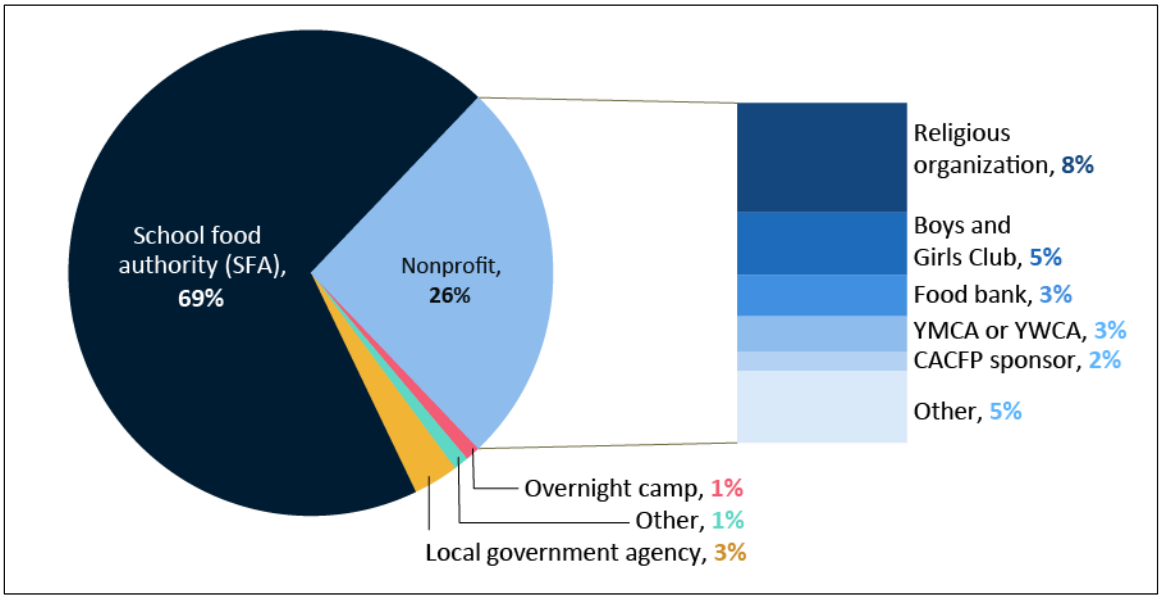
The following public and private nonprofit institutions are eligible to participate in SFSP as sponsors:

- Nonprofit organizations
- School food authorities
- State and local governments (including tribal governments)
- Public or nonprofit summer camps (overnight and day camps)
- Public or nonprofit colleges and universities participating in the National Youth Sports Program[181]

Figure 7 displays the proportion of summer meal sponsors by institution type as of summer 2018 (the most recent year of data).

Figure 7. Summer Meal Sponsors by Type, 2018

Estimated Percentage of Sponsors in Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option by Organization Type



Source: Food and Nutrition Administration, *USDA Summer Meals Study Volume 2. Sponsor and Site Operational Characteristics*, prepared by Westat, October 2021, pp. 3-4 to 3-7, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-summer-meals-study.

Note: Numbers may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Eligible sponsors must also provide year-round services to their communities, with some exceptions.[182] In addition, all sponsors except camps must "conduct a regularly scheduled food

[181] Section 13(a)(7) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(7)). *Nonprofit* means tax exempt under Section 501(a) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (7 C.F.R. §225.2). While SFSP sponsors are limited to nonprofit or public institutions, state agencies may approve open meal sites located at for-profit institutions. Federal funding for the National Youth Sports Program expired in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, *The National Youth Sports Strategy*, October 2019, p. 31).

[182] Residential camps are not subject to this requirement. Section 13(a)(3)(D) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(3)(D)).

service for children from areas in which poor economic conditions exist" (discussed further in the next section).[183]

According to statute, when selecting sponsors, states must give priority to school food authorities, public and nonprofit organizations that have demonstrated successful program performance in prior years, new public sponsors, and new nonprofit sponsors (in that order). States must also prioritize sponsors located in rural areas.[184]

Sponsors are responsible for selecting meal sites, distributing meals to sites, and monitoring sites.[185] Officials at meal sites are responsible for distributing meals to children, monitoring the food service, and keeping track of meals served for reimbursement. At times, a sponsor may also be a site. (For example, camps are both sponsors and meal sites.)

State administering agencies (often state departments of education) approve sponsors, distribute federal funds, and conduct reviews of sponsors and sites.[186] State agencies receive SFSP funds for administrative costs in addition to general child nutrition program administrative funds (discussed previously in the "Administrative Funds" section).

FNA distributes funds and commodities to state agencies, oversees states' implementation of SFSP, and provides guidance and technical assistance to states and participating institutions.

Eligibility and Reimbursement

SFSP's eligibility and reimbursement rules differ based on the type of meal service or meal site:

- **Non-congregate (off-site) meal service** is an option that sponsors may use in rural areas.[187] All meals are served for free, but the meal service must either (1) be located in a low-income area (defined as at least 50% of children qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals)[188] or (2) serve children who, on an individual basis, qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.[189] Sponsors may receive reimbursement for up to two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child daily. (However, sponsors may seek state approval to distribute up to 10 days' worth of meals at a time.) This policy became effective in summer 2023. According to USDA, more than 50 states and territories used the rural non-congregate feeding option in summer 2025, serving more than 73 million meals (out of 164 million total SFSP meals) at more than 16,000 rural points of service.[190]

[183] Section 13(a)(3)(C) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(3)(C)).

[184] Section 13(a)(4) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(4)).

[185] Most sponsors are responsible for overseeing one to 10 sites according to FNA, *USDA Summer Meals Study*, vol. 2, prepared by Westat, October 2021, p. 3-1, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-summer-meals-study. A sponsor must conduct at least one site visit during the first week of program operation, review food service operations at least once during the first four weeks of program operation, and then maintain "a reasonable level of site monitoring" (7 C.F.R. §225.15(d)).

[186] State agencies must review sponsors at least once every three years, with more frequent reviews of certain sponsors. Further details are available at 7 C.F.R. §225.7(d)(2)(ii).

[187] SFSP regulations define *rural* at 7 C.F.R. §225.2. USDA publishes a map of such rural areas at FNA, "Rural Designation," https://www.fna.usda.gov/sfsp/rural-designation.

[188] FNA, "Area Eligibility in Child Nutrition Programs."

[189] FNA, "Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service," https://www.fna.usda.gov/sfsp/state-agency/non-congregate.

[190] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-26. USDA notes that this may be an underestimate of rural non-congregate meals due to recent changes in reporting requirements.

- **Open sites** are meal sites that are open to all children in the community.[191] Open sites are the most common type of physical site in SFSP, comprising an estimated 83% of summer meal sites in summer 2018 (the most recent year of data).[192] To participate in SFSP, open sites must be located in areas in which at least 50% of the children would be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals as demonstrated through school data, Census Bureau data, or other approved data sources.[193] Meals must be served free to all children at these sites, and the sponsors of the sites receive reimbursement for every meal served (up to two meals or one meal and one snack per child daily).
- **Closed enrolled sites** are meal sites (other than camps) that serve only enrolled children. For the site to participate in SFSP, closed enrolled sites must establish that at least 50% of children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals based on area eligibility data or individual eligibility information for enrolled children.[194] As with open sites, meals are served free to all children, and sponsors receive reimbursement for every meal served (up to two meals or one meal and one snack per child daily).
- **Camps** include residential and day camps that provide organized programs for enrolled children. Unlike open and closed enrolled sites, camps do not have to demonstrate that a certain percentage of children meet the free and reduced-price eligibility standards in order to participate in SFSP. Instead, eligibility works like NSLP and SBP: Camps make eligibility determinations using similar income and categorical eligibility criteria for free and reduced-price meals.[195] However, unlike with the school meals programs, camps receive the same reimbursement rate for free and reduced-price meals. Camps may receive reimbursement for up to three meals or two meals and one snack per eligible child daily.[196] Camps are not required to serve meals for free to all children, and there is no paid reimbursement provided for full-price meals.
- **Migrant sites** must demonstrate that they serve predominantly migrant children as certified by migrant organizations or sponsors.[197] They follow the same eligibility and reimbursement rules as do open sites, except that they may receive reimbursement for up to three meals or two meals and one snack per child daily.[198]

SFSP reimbursement rates (inflation-adjusted rates displayed in **Table 8**) are based on a statutory formula that takes into account operating costs (e.g., food, storage, and labor costs) and

[191] Open sites may become "restricted open sites" if they need to restrict attendance for reasons related to security, safety, or control (7 C.F.R. §225.2). According to USDA guidance, a sponsor of a restricted open site must publicly announce the restriction. FNA, *Summer Food Service Program Administration Guide*, 2024, p. 12, https://www.fna.usda.gov/sfsp/administration-guide.

[192] FNA, *USDA Summer Meals Study*, vol. 2, p. 3-7.

[193] Section 13(a)(1)(A) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(1)(A)). For more information on area eligibility, see FNA, "Area Eligibility in Child Nutrition Programs."

[194] 7 C.F.R. §225.2, as amended by FNS, "Streamlining Program Requirements and Improving Integrity in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)," 87 *Federal Register* 57304, September 19, 2022.

[195] Section 13(a)(5) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(5)).

[196] Section 13(b)(2) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(b)(2)).

[197] 7 C.F.R. §225.6(g)(1)(xiii).

[198] Section 13(b)(2) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(b)(2)).

administrative costs.[199] While such factors are taken into account in calculating the rates, once sponsors receive the funds they can use them for any allowable program cost. Higher reimbursements are provided for sponsors of rural meal sites and *self-preparation* sites (meal sites in which sponsors rather than vendors prepare food).

Table 8. Reimbursement Rates: Summer Food Service Program

Per-Meal/Snack Reimbursement Rates for the 48 Contiguous States and the District of Columbia, Calendar Year 2026

	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snack
Rural or Self-Prep	$3.20	$5.60	$1.33
All Other Sites	$3.14	$5.51	$1.30

Source: For program reimbursement rates as well as rates for Alaska, Hawaii, and U.S. territories, see FNA, "Summer Food Service Program: 2026 Reimbursement Rates," 91 *Federal Register* 5105, February 4, 2026, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/02/04/2026-02216/summer-food-service-program-2026-reimbursement-rates.

Notes: Rates are rounded to the nearest cent. *Rural* means "(a) any area in a county which is not a part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area or (b) any 'pocket' within a Metropolitan Statistical Area" that is geographically isolated from urban areas (7 C.F.R. 225.2). *Self-Prep* means that meals are prepared by the sponsor or site (not by a vendor).

Nutrition Standards

Meals and snacks served through SFSP must meet federal nutrition standards. In contrast to the child nutrition programs discussed thus far, SFSP's nutrition standards are not required to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans but are "prescribed by the Secretary on the basis of tested nutritional research."[200] Program regulations outline the nutrition standards for breakfasts, lunches/suppers, and snacks.[201] The standards prescribe minimum servings of fruits and vegetables, meats/meat alternatives, breads/bread alternatives, and milk. Unlike school meals and CACFP, there are no limits on calories, saturated fats, and milk varieties in SFSP. Participating school food authorities may instead choose to use the NSLP and/or SBP nutrition standards for SFSP.[202]

Meal Service

As noted, children are required to consume meals on-site in SFSP unless they receive meals under the rural non-congregate feeding policy. There are also requirements around the timing of congregate meals in SFSP, including at least one hour between meals.[203] Like the other child nutrition programs, SFSP sponsors must comply with local or state health and sanitation requirements.

[199] The authority for operating cost reimbursements is provided in Section 13(b)(1) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1761(b)(1)), and the authority for the administrative cost reimbursement is provided in Section 13(b)(3) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1761(b)(3)).

[200] Section 13(f) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(f)).

[201] 7 C.F.R. §225.16(d).

[202] 7 C.F.R. §225.16(f).

[203] 7 C.F.R. §225.16(c).

Seamless Summer Option (SSO)

School food authorities may participate in SFSP, or they can choose to offer summer meals through SSO. SSO allows school food authorities to continue operating under certain NSLP/SBP requirements into the summer.[204] For example, it allows them to use the school meals programs' nutrition standards, administrative review process, and reimbursement rates (see **Table 4** for NSLP/SBP reimbursement rates). Other requirements are the same as SFSP, including rural area and site eligibility rules.[205] School food authorities are the only eligible sponsors in SSO, but they can operate the program at a variety of meal sites (e.g., parks, recreation centers, libraries) and through meal delivery and other off-site feeding mechanisms in rural areas.[206]

The school lunch and breakfast reimbursement rates used in SSO are lower than SFSP's reimbursement rates. However, school food authorities participating in SSO also receive the NSLP commodity reimbursement (discussed in the "Commodity Assistance" section). School food authorities may also have a reduced administrative burden under SSO. A 2018 study by USDA found that three-quarters of sponsors operated SFSP and one-quarter operated SSO.[207]

Summer EBT

Following a more-than-decade-long demonstration (discussed below), the Summer EBT program was permanently authorized by the FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117-328), which gave all states and territories and some Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) the option to operate Summer EBT starting in summer 2024.[208] According to the law, participating jurisdictions are to distribute federal funds to eligible households in an amount of $40 per child per summer month (adjusted annually for inflation), which households can redeem at SNAP-authorized retailers for groceries.[209] Children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year are automatically enrolled in the program, though families may opt out. A state participating in the program must also establish an application process—using the same eligibility criteria as free or reduced-price school meals—for other children.

P.L. 117-328 establishes separate program options for ITOs participating in WIC (some of which previously operated the Summer EBT demonstration through WIC); territories that do not operate SNAP (American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the Northern Mariana Islands); and children who attend year-round schools.

The law requires grantees to cover at least half of administrative costs and authorizes federal funding to cover the other half.

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[204] Section 13(a)(8) of the NSLA (codified at 42 U.S.C. §1761(a)(8)).

[205] For a comparison of SFSP and SSO, see FNS, "Comparison of Programs: SFSP/NSLP/Seamless Option," January 22, 2015, https://www.fna.usda.gov/summer/comparison-programs.

[206] For USDA's guidance on the rural non-congregate feeding policy, see FNA, "Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service," https://www.fna.usda.gov/sfsp/state-agency/non-congregate.

[207] FNS, *USDA Summer Meals Study*, vol. 2, pp. 3-4 to 3-7.

[208] The Summer EBT program is codified at Section 13A of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1762) and in regulations at 7 C.F.R. §292.

[209] In practice, USDA has instructed participating entities to provide three months of benefits per summer—$120 per child (adjusted annually for inflation)—as discussed in the interim final rule, FNS, "Establishing the Summer EBT Program and Rural Non-Congregate Option in the Summer Meal Programs," 88 *Federal Register* 90230, December 29, 2023, https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2023-28488/p-566 and noted in FNS, "Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Program; 2026 Benefit Levels," 91 *Federal Register* 21396, April 22, 2026.

In FY2025, 37 states, DC, four territories, and five ITOs operated Summer EBT, providing benefits to roughly 24 million children.[210] Federal spending totaled approximately $2.4 billion on benefits and $147 million on administrative costs.[211] USDA also made an additional $100 million available in discretionary funding under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-42), for noncompetitive technology grants for implementation of Summer EBT (not subject to the administrative match requirement).[212]

Summer Meal Demonstration Projects

Summer meal demonstration projects were first authorized and funded by the FY2010 appropriations law (P.L. 111-80).[213] Using such funds, USDA tested a number of summer meal delivery alternatives, including Summer EBT, food backpacks, food boxes, and meal delivery for children in rural areas.[214] Findings from Summer EBT were among the most promising, showing significant impacts on reducing food insecurity and improving nutrient intake.[215] Starting in FY2015, appropriations acts designated summer meal demonstration funding for Summer EBT.[216]

Using appropriated funds, the Summer EBT demonstration operated during the summers of 2011-2023 in selected states and ITOs.[217] The project provided electronic food benefits to households with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Depending on the site and year, either $30 or $60 per month was provided on an EBT card. States and jurisdictions had the option to administer the project through SNAP or WIC. Participants in jurisdictions providing benefits through SNAP redeemed benefits for SNAP-eligible foods at SNAP-authorized retailers, while participants in the WIC EBT jurisdictions were limited to a smaller set of eligible foods at WIC-authorized retailers.[218]

[210] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-28. USDA notes in its *June 2026 Keydata Report* that this might be an overestimate.

[211] FNA, *June 2026 Keydata Report*.

[212] FNS, "Summer EBT Technology Grants," August 7, 2024, https://www.fns.usda.gov/grant/summer-ebt-technology-grants and FNS, *2026 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, pp. 34-35, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/34-2026-CJ-FNS.pdf. Grantees may obligate funds through September 30, 2028.

[213] Section 749(g) of P.L. 111-80. The FY2010 appropriation was $85 million, which funded demonstration activities in summers 2011-2014. For more information, see CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*.

[214] For further discussion, see CRS In Focus IF11633, *Summer Food for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid*; FNA, "Summer Food for Children Demonstrations," https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/pilot-grant-projects/summer-food-children; and Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, "History of the Meals-to-You Initiative," https://hungerandpoverty.web.baylor.edu/our-work/innovation/mty.

[215] Ann M. Collins et al., Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Full Implementation Year: 2012 Final Report, prepared by Abt Associates, Mathematica Policy Research, and Maximus August 2013, p. 105, https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/SEBTC2012.pdf. Improvements in food insecurity varied significantly among Summer EBT sites. For evaluations of other approaches tested through the Enhanced Summer Food Service Program, see FNS, "Enhanced Summer Food Service Program (eSFSP)," November 8, 2013, https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/sfsp/enhanced.

[216] Additional appropriations for the Summer EBT demonstration were provided in each of FY2015-FY2023.

[217] Grantees in various years included Connecticut, the Cherokee Nation, the Chickasaw Nation, Delaware, the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. In the summers of 2021-2023, state grantees did not operate Summer EBT demonstrations due to the availability of the P-EBT. However, the Cherokee Nation, Chickasaw Nation, and Inter Tribal Council of Arizona operated Summer EBT demonstration projects.

[218] For more information on the Summer EBT demonstration, see FNS, *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report*, prepared by Abt Associates, May 2016, https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/sebt/demonstration-summary.

Special Milk Program (SMP)

SMP provides funding for milk served in approximately 1,500 schools, child care institutions, summer camps, and other institutions.[219] Generally, schools and other participating institutions may not participate in other child nutrition meal service programs along with SMP. However, schools may administer SMP for pre-kindergartners and kindergartners who are in part-day sessions and do not have access to the school meals programs.[220]

In SMP, participating institutions provide milk to children for free and/or at a subsidized paid price. Institutions are reimbursed differently based on whether they decide to provide milk for free to all children, sell milk to all children, or combine these options (provide free milk to eligible children and sell milk to other children) (see **Table 9**). If institutions choose the combined option, they must establish eligibility rules for free milk.[221]

SMP's nutritional requirements for milk are consistent with the other child nutrition programs: Whole milk is required for children under the age of two, and children ages two and older may be served whole, 2%, 1%, or fat-free milk.[222] For children ages six and older, milk may be flavored or unflavored. Previously, USDA restricted fat content and flavorings in milk following the HHFKA (P.L. 111-296).[223] SMP also allows reimbursement of non-dairy milk substitutes in cases of medical or special dietary needs.

[219] FNA, "National Level Annual Summary Tables FY1969-2025: Special Milk Program (SMP)—Outlets and Milk Served," September 11, 2026, https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables.

[220] Section 3 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. §1772).

[221] Institutions can set eligibility at or below the income threshold for free school meals (130% of the poverty guidelines) (7 C.F.R. §215.13a).

[222] Since 2018, CACFP operators have been allowed to serve flavored 1% milk to children ages six and older (discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*). As of 2026, CACFP operators may serve whole milk to any child and 2% milk to any child age two and older (including flavored whole and 2% milk for children ages six and older) (discussed in CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*).

[223] The final rule, which took effect on October 1, 2017, required unflavored whole milk for one-year-olds, unflavored low-fat (1%) or unflavored fat-free milk for children ages two to five, and unflavored low-fat (1%) or flavored/unflavored fat-free milk for children ages six and older (subsequent rules have allowed flavored low-fat milk for the six-and-older age group). FNS, "Child and Adult Care Food Program: Meal Pattern Revisions Related to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010," final rule, 81 *Federal Register* 24347, April 25, 2016, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/04/25/2016-09412/child-and-adult-care-food-program-meal-pattern-revisions-related-to-the-healthy-hunger-free-kids-act. For a summary of previous changes to the flavored 1% milk requirement, see CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

Table 9. Reimbursement Rates: Special Milk Program

Per Half-Pint Reimbursement, 50 States and the District of Columbia, School Year 2026-2027

	All Milk Served	Paid Milk	Free Milk to Low-Income Children
Schools that only sell milk	$0.28	N/A	N/A
Schools that provide only free milk	$0.28	N/A	N/A
Schools that sell milk and provide free milk	N/A	$0.28	Average cost per half-pint of milk

Source: Food and Nutrition Administration, "National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates," 91 *Federal Register* 43597, July 16, 2026.

Note: The average cost per half-pint of milk is determined based on receipts submitted by the institution.

After-School Meals and Snacks

CACFP and NSLP both provide federal support for snacks and meals served during after-school programs.[224] The CACFP At-Risk Afterschool component provides reimbursement for up to one snack and one meal (usually supper) per child daily, whereas the NSLP Afterschool Snack option provides reimbursement for snacks only. Reimbursement rates for CACFP At-Risk Afterschool meals/snacks and NSLP after-school snacks are the same as CACFP reimbursement rates (listed in **Table 7**).

CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals and Snacks

The CACFP At-Risk Afterschool component was authorized as a demonstration project in 1994 (P.L. 103-448), expanded over time, and made available to all states by the HHFKA (P.L. 111-296).[225] At-Risk Afterschool meal providers include the same types of institutions that are eligible to become CACFP centers. (See the institutional eligibility rules in the "CACFP Centers" section.) However, they do not need to operate the child/day care component of CACFP in order to operate the At-Risk Afterschool component. Additionally, At-Risk Afterschool providers must be located in the attendance areas of schools in which at least 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.[226] The after-school program must also have "an educational or enrichment purpose."[227] Unlike the traditional CACFP, which is available to children ages 12 and under, the At-Risk Afterschool component allows participation through age 18.

Participating institutions receive reimbursement for up to one snack and one meal (e.g., supper) per child daily, and meals and snacks are provided for free to all children. Meals and snacks must meet federal nutrition standards.[228] Institutions may operate the At-Risk Afterschool program in the after-school hours and on weekends, holidays, and breaks during the school year.

[224] The CACFP At-Risk Afterschool snack/meal program is authorized in Section 17(r) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766(r)). The NSLP snack program is authorized in Section 17A of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766a).

[225] Prior to the HHFKA (P.L. 111-296), 13 states were permitted to offer CACFP At-Risk After-School meals (instead of just a snack). The law allowed all CACFP state agencies to offer such meals. S.Rept. 111-178, p. 7.

[226] Emergency shelters do not need to meet this requirement.

[227] Section 17(r) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1766(r)).

[228] 7 C.F.R. §226.20.

In FY2025, the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool component served a daily average of 2.8 million children.[229]

NSLP Afterschool Snacks

The NSLP Afterschool Snack option was authorized in the 1998 child nutrition reauthorization act (P.L. 105-336). It allows NSLP-participating schools to receive federal reimbursement for one snack per child daily in eligible after-school programs during the school year.[230] According to USDA guidance, eligible after-school programs must provide "organized, regularly scheduled activities in a structured and supervised environment," including an educational or enrichment activity.[231]

Schools that choose to operate the NSLP Afterschool Snack component may do so in one of two ways:

1. As with the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool component, if at least 50% of students in the school are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, the school may provide free snacks to all children.
2. If this criterion is not met, the school may offer free, reduced-price, or full price snacks based on household income eligibility (as with the school meals programs).

Historically, the vast majority of snacks provided through this program have been provided under the first option.[232] Snacks served through the NSLP Afterschool Snack component must comply with federal nutrition standards.[233]

As of FY2025, the NSLP Afterschool Snack component served 1.4 million snacks on average daily in approximately 18,000 schools.[234]

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)

FFVP provides formula grants to states to fund fresh fruit and vegetable snacks in selected elementary schools.[235] Under a statutory formula, about half the funding is distributed equally to each state, and the remainder is allocated by state population. States must prioritize funding for schools with high proportions of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Schools must participate in NSLP in order to receive FFVP grants. States set annual per-student grant amounts (between $50 and $75). Schools may provide fresh fruit and vegetable snacks to

[229] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 34-25.

[230] Schools may also operate the NSLP Afterschool Snack component in the hours after summer school sessions.

[231] FNA, "NSLP Afterschool Snack Service—FAQs," https://www.fna.usda.gov/school-meals/afterschool-snacks-faqs.

[232] Joanne Guthrie, "Feeding Children After School: The Expanding Role of USDA Child Nutrition Programs," USDA, Economic Research Service, March 1, 2012, https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2012/march/feeding-children-after-school.

[233] 7 C.F.R. §210.10(o). An April 2024 final rule aligned required nutrition standards in the NSLP Afterschool Snack program with those used in the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool meal and snack program starting in school year 2025-2026, as discussed in CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*.

[234] FNA, *June 2026 Keydata* and communication with FNA in September 2026.

[235] Section 19 of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769a). FFVP currently operates according to statute and USDA guidance. USDA issued a proposed rule in 2012 to codify statutory requirements in regulations, but a final rule has not been published.

students at any time of day outside of the breakfast or lunch service.[236] Schools offer snacks to all children in attendance regardless of family income.

As noted previously, FFVP's funding structure differs from the other child nutrition programs. FFVP is funded by a mandatory transfer of funds from Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935. The authorizing law provided $150 million for school year 2011-2012, which is adjusted annually for inflation.[237] For FY2026, FNA allocated approximately $243 million (including carryover funds) for FFVP to states.[238]

FFVP has been amended over time both by farm bills and by child nutrition reauthorization bills. FFVP was created by the 2002 farm bill (P.L. 107-171) as a pilot project. The 2004 child nutrition reauthorization act (P.L. 108-265) made the program permanent and provided funding for a small number of states and Indian reservations. The 2008 farm bill (P.L. 110-246) expanded FFVP's mandatory funding through Section 32 and enabled all states to participate in the program. The 2014 farm bill (P.L. 113-79) essentially made no changes to FFVP but provided $5 million for a demonstration project to test offering frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables in the program. Four states (Alaska, Delaware, Kansas, and Maine) participated in the pilot in school year 2014-2015, and an evaluation was published in 2017.[239]

Other Child Nutrition Activities

Federal child nutrition laws authorize, and child nutrition funding supports, several additional initiatives and activities, such as studies and evaluations, training and technical assistance, technology improvements, and food safety initiatives.[240] Selected initiatives and activities are discussed below.

Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program

The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program—which includes grants to organizations, technical assistance, and research—was authorized by the HHFKA (P.L. 111-296).[241] It expanded upon FNA's existing farm-to-school efforts, defined broadly as "efforts that bring regionally and locally produced foods into school cafeterias," with a focus on enhancing child nutrition.[242] The goals of these efforts include increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among students, supporting local farmers and rural communities, and providing nutrition and agriculture education. The Farm to

[236] FNA, *Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program: A Handbook for Schools*, December 2010, https://www.fna.usda.gov/ffvp/handbook-schools.

[237] Section 19(i) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769a(i)).

[238] FNA, "Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program: Allocation of Funds for FY 2026," June 4, 2025, https://www.fna.usda.gov/ffvp/allocation-funds-fy26.

[239] Ronette Briefel et al., *Evaluation of the Pilot Project for Canned, Frozen, or Dried Fruits and Vegetables in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP-CFD)*, FNS, prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, January 2017, https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/evaluation-elementary-schools-pilot-project-canned-frozen-or-dried-fruits-and-vegetables-fresh. For more information on proposals to include frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables in FFVP, see CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*.

[240] This section does not list all related child nutrition activities. For further details on these and other functions funded by the child nutrition programs account, see USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, pp. 34-21 to 34-37.

[241] Section 243 of P.L. 111-296, adding Section 18(g) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769(g)).

[242] FNS, *The Farm to School Program: 2012-2015: Four Years in Review*, p. 3, https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/f2s/Farm-to-School-at-USDA--4-Years-in-Review.pdf.

School program has mandatory funding of $5 million, which has been supplemented with discretionary funds in recent years.[243]

One component of the Farm to School program is farm-to-school grants, which FNA awards on a competitive basis to schools, nonprofit entities, and agricultural producers and processors to improve schools' access to locally produced foods. They may be used for training, supporting operations, planning, purchasing equipment, developing school gardens, nutrition education, developing partnerships, and other activities.[244] In FY2026, FNA awarded $47 million to 149 grantees in 47 states.[245]

In FY2022, FNA used American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-2) funding to provide an additional $60 million in non-competitive Farm to School program funding to states for use over a four-year period. FNA distributed the funding using a formula based on states' NSLP participation.[246]

Institute of Child Nutrition

The Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) provides technical assistance, instruction, and materials for nutrition and food service professionals and other local administrators of child nutrition programs on a variety of topics. The ICN receives $5 million a year in mandatory funding appropriated in statute.[247] It has also received additional discretionary funding in recent fiscal years.[248] The ICN is currently located at the University of Mississippi.

Team Nutrition

The Team Nutrition initiative supports federally and state-developed nutrition education and promotion initiatives. This includes grants for state agencies to develop programs to improve school meal quality, such as by training school nutrition professionals. From 2004 to 2018, Team Nutrition also included the HealthierUS Schools Challenge, which was a voluntary certification initiative designed to recognize schools that create healthy school environments through the promotion of nutrition and physical activity.[249]

[243] Mandatory funding for the Farm to School program is provided under Section 18(g)(8)(A) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769(g)(8)(A)). The program also received $5 million in annual appropriations in FY2026, consistent with FY2025 and FY2024 but a decrease from $14 million in FY2023.

[244] For more information, see FNA, "The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program," https://www.fna.usda.gov/f2s; and CRS Report R46538, *Local and Urban Food Systems: Selected Farm Bill and Other Federal Programs*.

[245] FNA, "FY 2026 Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Awardees List," https://www.fna.usda.gov/f2s/grant/awards/fy26. USDA made changes to the grant program in FY2025 and did not award any funds that cycle, instead adding the FY2025 funds to FY2026 grants. USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, pp. 34-36. The FY2026 cycle also included additional funds under USDA's Harvest to Hallways initiative.

[246] USDA, *2024 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, p. 35-40, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/35-2024-FNS.pdf.

[247] Section 21(e)(1)(A) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769b-1(e)(1)(A)).

[248] The FY2026 appropriations act (P.L. 119-37) provided $1 million for the ICN, consistent with FY2025 and FY2024 but down from $2 million in FY2023.

[249] White House Archives, "The HealthierUS School Challenge," https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/healthierus-school-challenge.

Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative

In 2022, USDA announced it would use $100 million in COVID-19 response funding under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260), to implement a *Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative*.[250] The initiative includes (1) grants for small and/or rural school food authorities to invest in staffing, training, and kitchen improvements, among other changes intended to improve nutrition in school meals; (2) *School Food System Transformation Challenge* grants to "stimulate innovation … in the K-12 school food marketplace" through collaborative projects between school districts, food producers, suppliers, distributors, and/or community partners; (3) nonmonetary recognition awards for school food authorities that have made significant improvements to nutrition in school meals; and (4) summits for grant recipients to share best practices.[251]

FNA contracted with Boise State University, the Chef Ann Foundation, Full Plates Full Potential, and the Illinois Public Health Institute to carry out the *School Food System Transformation Challenge* grants and with Action for Healthy Kids to carry out the other three components of the initiative.

Food Safety

Foods served in any child nutrition program must comply with state or local health, safety, and sanitation standards for food storage, preparation, and service. A school participating in the school meals programs must obtain food safety inspections by a state or local government agency at least twice a year.[252] There are also food safety inspections for USDA Foods.[253] FNA also receives annual funding to carry out food safety training for state and local program operators, which are required to conduct such training annually under federal law.[254]

FNA Activities

Approximately $160 million was provided in FY2026 for FNA activities including technology, research, training and technical assistance, and payment oversight.[255] This funding supports, for

[250] FNA, "Healthy Meals Incentives for Schools," https://www.fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/hmi. Broadly, Division N, Title VII, Section 751, of P.L. 116-260 provided funding for the Secretary of Agriculture "to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus by providing support for agricultural producers, growers, and processors impacted by coronavirus, including producers and growers of specialty crops, non-specialty crops, dairy, livestock, and poultry, producers that supply local food systems, including farmers markets, restaurants, and schools." According to USDA, these activities "are expected to result in increased demand for nutritious agricultural products and therefore benefit the producers that supply SFAs with these products."

[251] Action for Healthy Kids, "Healthy Meals Incentives Grants for Small and/or Rural School Food Authorities: Request for Applications," April 6, 2023, https://healthymealsincentives.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HMI_SubGrantRFA_4623_FINAL.pdf; FNS, "USDA Makes Available More Than $60 Million in School Meals, Launches New Partnership," press release, October 11, 2023, https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2023/10/11/usda-makes-available-more-60-million-school-meals-launches-new-partnership; and FNS, "Development and Implementation of Healthy Meals Incentives School Food System Transformation Challenge Sub-Grants—Cooperative Agreement: Fiscal Year 2023 Request for Applications (RFA)," CFDA 10.579, November 10, 2022.

[252] Section 9(h) of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1758(h)).

[253] Section 29 of the NSLA (42 U.S.C. §1769j).

[254] USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, pp. 34-38 to 34-39. P.L. 119-69 (January 2026) added food allergy safety as a required topic in annual trainings, as discussed in CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*.

[255] U.S. Congress, Senate, "Explanatory statement to accompany the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, (continued...)

example, computer systems such as the USDA Foods ordering and purchasing application, FNA technical assistance, and guidance to states in implementing corrective actions to payment errors.[256]

Resources and Further Information

Program-related resources:

- USDA's FNA program landing page: https://www.fna.usda.gov/programs
- The FNA page of the *Federal Register*: https://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/food-and-nutrition-administration
- USDA's Congressional Budget Justifications: https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-budget-and-program-analysis/congressional-justifications
- FNA's top-line child nutrition program data: https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables
- USDA Economic Research Service's child nutrition programs research: https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs

CRS reports:

- CRS In Focus IF10266, *Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR): An Overview*
- CRS In Focus IF11633, *Summer Food for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid*
- CRS Report R42353, *Domestic Food Assistance: Summary of Programs*
- CRS Report R48515, *School Lunch and Breakfast Participation: A Snapshot of Recent Trends*
- CRS Report R49345, *Implementation of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 (P.L. 119-69): In Brief*
- CRS Report R47522, *USDA's 2024 Update to Nutrition Standards for School Meals*
- CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*
- CRS Report R46888, *Amending Eligibility Rules for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals: Background and Policy Options*
- CRS Report R47199, *The School Foodservice Workforce: Characteristics and Labor Market Outcomes*
- CRS Report R48141, *Trends in USDA Procurement of U.S. Food and Agricultural Products*
- CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*

Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026," *Congressional Record*, vol. 171, no. 189, 119th Cong., 1st sess., November 9, 2025, p. S8050, https://www.congress.gov/119/crec/2025/11/09/171/189/CREC-2025-11-09.pdf.

[256] For more information on these and other FNA activities, see USDA, *2027 USDA Explanatory Notes—Food and Nutrition Service*, pp. 34-21 to 34-37.

- CRS Report R44373, *Tracking Child Nutrition Reauthorization in the 114th Congress: An Overview*
- CRS Report R41354, *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization: P.L. 111-296* (summarizes the HHFKA [P.L. 111-296])
- CRS In Focus IF12193, *Farm and Food Support Under USDA's Section 32 Account*
- CRS Report RL33299, *Child Nutrition and WIC Legislation in the 108th and 109th Congresses* (summarizes the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004)

Appendix. A Brief History of Federal Child Nutrition Programs

This section provides a high-level summary of the federal child nutrition programs from their inceptions through 2010, when the most recent child nutrition reauthorization law was enacted.[257]

Other Historical Resources

The National Food Service Management Institute (now the ICN), with funding from USDA, produced a 15-minute video documenting the history of the child nutrition programs through 2007. "A Journey Through the History of Child Nutrition Programs" is available on the ICN's YouTube page (https://youtu.be/9E29Qg5G0g4).

The Emergence of School Lunches and the National School Lunch Program

When the first federal aid for school lunches was provided in the 1930s, local school lunch programs were already operational in many cities and localities across the United States. Many of these early lunch programs were started by charitable women's organizations at the turn of the century in an effort to feed hungry children. Over time, they transitioned to school boards and school districts. These programs received a combination of private, local, and state funding.[258]

The federal government became involved in school lunch programs during the Great Depression to both feed hungry children and support the farm economy. Initially, federal aid was provided in the form of cafeteria equipment and labor. In 1932, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation began providing loans to states and school districts to cover the cost of cafeteria space and equipment for school lunch programs.[259] In 1935, the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency, began sponsoring women's employment in school lunchrooms. Federal food support for school lunches began that same year, when Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935 (P.L. 74-320), was enacted. The act provided 30% of customs receipts to USDA to purchase surplus commodities from farmers impacted by the depression. These commodities were donated through various outlets for domestic consumption, including school lunch programs.

With commodity aid came the first federal regulations for school lunch programs. USDA required recipient organizations, through their agreements with state agencies, to operate school lunch programs on a nonprofit basis, maintain any existing local funding for school lunches, keep records of foods received, serve meals free to poor children, and ensure that such children would not be identified to their peers, among other requirements.[260]

The availability of federal aid contributed to a rapid increase in the number of school lunch programs. However, in 1943, federal commodity aid declined as Section 32 surplus commodities

[257] The HHFKA (P.L. 111-296). Child nutrition policies have been included in certain laws since then, including Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328), which amended summer meal programs and permanently authorized the Summer EBT program.

[258] The first cities to institute school lunch programs included Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis. Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program"; A. R. Ruis, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), pp. 22-27; Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 22.

[259] Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, p. 44.

[260] Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program"; USDA, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, "The School Lunch Program and Agricultural Surplus Disposal," Miscellaneous Publications No. 467, October 1941.

were diverted to feed U.S. servicemembers in World War II. In addition, federal support for lunchroom labor disappeared with the elimination of the Works Progress Administration.[261] In the midst of declining aid, Congress provided the first cash assistance—$50 million in Section 32 funds—for "a school milk and lunch program" in the 1944 Department of Agriculture Appropriation Act (P.L. 78-129). The introduction of cash assistance marked a shift in the lunch program.[262] For the first time, schools could purchase their own foods in addition to receiving federally purchased commodities.

Annual appropriations acts continued cash support for school lunches until 1946, when the National School Lunch Act (P.L. 79-396) was enacted. Signed into law on June 4, 1946, by President Truman, the act permanently authorized appropriations of "such sums as may be necessary" for the National School Lunch Program. (The act would later be renamed the "Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act," recognizing Senator Russell's role in the passage of the legislation and his earlier support for the school lunch program within New Deal programs and during his tenure as chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations subcommittee.[263]) The law required participating schools to serve lunches for free or at a reduced price to students whom local school authorities deemed unable to pay the full cost of a lunch. Funds were to be distributed to states based on the number of school-age children in the state and the state's need, as measured by per-capita income, and states were to match federal funds dollar for dollar. States were to distribute funding on a monthly basis to schools based on the number of meals served that met "minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the Secretary on the basis of tested, nutritional research" (P.L. 79-396).[264] Cash assistance could not be used for cafeteria equipment, and separate funds were authorized for this purpose ($10 million annually). However, Congress subsequently prohibited appropriations for equipment assistance from FY1948 to FY1967.[265]

NSLP remained relatively unchanged from 1946 to 1960. However, during this time frame, concerns emerged over the funding formula. One concern was that the formula prioritized funding for schools with large numbers of school-age children rather than actual participants in the program. There was also concern that schools with high proportions of needy children received the same amount of aid as those with wealthier families, even though they had to serve a larger number of meals for free or at a reduced-price.[266] In 1962, P.L. 87-823 changed the funding formula to be based on the number of school lunches served in the state in the preceding school year instead of the number of school-age children. The law also authorized additional "special assistance" for state-selected schools in poor economic areas. (However, special assistance was not funded until 1966.[267])

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[261] Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program."

[262] Commodity assistance continued to make up a large share of federal support for school lunches and exceeded cash assistance until 1970. Jean Yavis Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs: A Narrative Legislative History and Program Analysis," in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues for the 103d Congress*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., Serial No. 103-H (GPO, 1994).

[263] J. T. Gay, "Richard B. Russell and the National School Lunch Program," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 4 (1996), pp. 860-863.

[264] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 41. USDA provided the highest reimbursement (up to 9 cents) for a "complete" Type A meal that was designed to provide one-third to one-half of a child's daily nutritional intake; up to 6 cents was provided for an "incomplete" Type B meal; and up to 2 cents for a Type C meal, which was simply a half-pint of milk. To see the original nutritional requirements for each type of meal, see Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program."

[265] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," pp. 59-61.

[266] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," pp. 41, 63-64; Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, p. 128.

[267] CRS DL741517, "Brief History of Child Nutrition Legislation," by Kathryn Michelman and Joe Richardson, 1974. (continued...)

Other notable changes to NSLP occurred in the 1970s. In 1970, P.L. 91-248 extended special assistance to all schools participating in NSLP.[268] The law also reduced the state matching requirement and established the first national eligibility guidelines for free and reduced-price meals at 100% of the federal poverty guidelines (later in the decade increased to 125% for free lunches and 195% for reduced-price lunches). In 1971, another significant change occurred with the enactment of P.L. 92-153, which guaranteed states a certain level of federal cash assistance by specifying average per-meal reimbursement rates for free, reduced-price, and paid lunches.[269]

The Addition of Other Child Nutrition Programs

In the 1960s, federal child nutrition efforts expanded beyond school lunches.[270] On October 11, 1966, the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-642) was enacted.[271] It formally authorized the SMP and authorized the SBP as a pilot program. The SMP was based on predecessor USDA school milk programs that had operated since the 1940s.[272] SBP was a newer concept that USDA had piloted in the 1965-1966 school year.[273] In a House Agriculture Committee hearing on the Child Nutrition Act, then-Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman testified:

> These proposals will permit us to begin a comprehensive effort to broaden child nutrition programs in this country. They are based on what we have learned in 20 years of administration of the National School Lunch Act, and they reflect a careful assessment of gaps which now exist in the nutritional needs of children in this country.[274]

The SMP provided reimbursements for milk in schools, nonprofit child care centers, summer camps, and other nonprofit institutions. At the time, schools and institutions could participate in both SMP and NSLP. Meanwhile, SBP was authorized for two fiscal years and required states to prioritize funds for "schools drawing attendance from areas in which poor economic conditions exist and to those schools to which a substantial proportion of the children enrolled must travel long distances daily."[275] (Congress later expanded priority to include "schools in which there is a special need for improving the nutrition and dietary practices of children of working mothers and

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According to Gunderson, "The selection of the schools for receiving the special reimbursement from Section 11 funds was to be based upon five factors: The economic condition of the area from which the schools draw attendance; The need for free or reduced-price lunches; The percent of free or reduced-price lunches being served in such schools; The price of the lunch in such schools as compared with the average price of lunches served in the State; [and] The need for additional assistance as evidenced by the financial position of the lunch program in such schools."

[268] CRS Memorandum 831481, *Chronology of Major Federal Food Assistance Legislation (Food Stamps, Child Nutrition Programs and Elderly Nutrition) 1932-1983*, by Jean Yavis Jones, November 1983.

[269] CRS Memorandum 831481; Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 43.

[270] Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, p. 127; Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 64.

[271] Section 2 provided the purpose of the act: "In recognition of the demonstrated relationship between food and good nutrition and the capacity of children to develop and learn, based on the years of cumulative successful experience under the National School Lunch Program with its significant contributions in the field of applied nutrition research, it is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress that these efforts shall be extended, expanded, and strengthened under the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture as a measure to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children, and to encourage the domestic consumption of agricultural and other foods, by assisting States, through grants-in-aid and other means, to meet more effectively the nutritional needs of our children."

[272] Gunderson, "National School Lunch Program."

[273] U.S. Congress, House Committee on Agriculture, *Hearing on H.R. 13361 and Bills to Amend and Make Permanent the Special Milk Program for Children*, committee print, 89th Cong., 2nd Sess., June 23 and June 24, 1966, H. Prt. 66-126 (GPO, 1966), p. 16.

[274] Ibid., p. 12.

[275] P.L. 89-642.

children from low-income families."[276]) The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 also gave the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to provide higher reimbursements to schools with "severe need." As with NSLP, the law specified that breakfasts "meet minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the Secretary on the basis of tested nutritional research" and be served for free or at a reduced price to children unable to pay the full price of a meal, as determined by local school authorities (P.L. 89-642).

In 1968, child nutrition efforts were further expanded with the authorization of the Special Food Service Program for Children (SFSPC), a pilot program to fund meals in summer and child care settings (P.L. 90-302). SFSPC provided the first federal assistance for summer meals for children and the first dedicated assistance for meals served in child care settings.[277] Similar to SBP, SFSPC was targeted to areas with poor economic conditions and a high number of working mothers.

In 1975, the program was split into the separate Child Care Food Program (CCFP) and the SFSP (P.L. 94-105). CCFP was open to public and nonprofit institutions that met child care licensing or other official child care standards, while SFSP retained a focus on institutions in low-income areas.[278] Meals were provided for free to all children at SFSP sites, whereas CCFP conducted free and reduced-price eligibility determinations like NSLP.

1980-2010

The long-standing growth of child nutrition programs contrasted with budget cuts in the early 1980s, which were part of larger efforts to reduce federal domestic spending.[279] The Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-499) reduced FY1981 funding for child nutrition programs by approximately $400 million (9%) of the child nutrition budget.[280] The law achieved savings by lowering reimbursement rates in the programs and eliminating commodity assistance for breakfast, among other changes.[281] Larger spending cuts followed with the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981, which made changes that collectively cut $1.4 billion (25%) of the child nutrition budget (Title VIII of P.L. 97-35).[282] Many of the policy changes made by the law remain in place today. For example, the law restricted eligibility from 195% of the federal poverty guidelines to 185% for reduced-price meals and set eligibility at 130% for free meals in the NSLP, SBP, and CCFP. It also raised allowable charges for reduced-price lunches from 20 cents to 40 cents and for reduced-price breakfasts from 10 cents to 30 cents.[283] In a major change to SMP, the law excluded schools/institutions that participated in other child nutrition meals programs from participating in SMP—cutting SMP's budget by 77%.[284] In CCFP, the law restricted participation from children ages 18 and under to children ages 12 and under and reduced the maximum number of reimbursable meals from three meals and two snacks per child

[276] P.L. 92-32.

[277] Early appropriations for school lunches in 1944 and 1945 had allowed states to spend a small percentage of funds on food served in child care centers. The National School Lunch Act of 1946 made permanent support for meals served in residential child care institutions only.

[278] *Low-income areas* was defined as areas in which at least one-third of children qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

[279] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 44.

[280] CRS Memorandum 831481; Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 44.

[281] CRS Memorandum 831481; Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 86.

[282] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 44.

[283] CRS Memorandum 831481.

[284] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," pp. 44-45.

daily to two meals and one snack per child daily. The law also eliminated equipment assistance for school meals.

Child nutrition programs were subsequently excluded from budget deficit reduction measures in the late 1980s and 1990s, and new policies led to the expansion of the programs during this time frame.[285] For example, amendments to the programs in these years authorized start-up grants for school breakfast programs, expanded CCFP to adult day care centers (and renamed it the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or CACFP), and provided new funding for after-school snacks through NSLP and CACFP.[286] But what had potentially the longest-term impact on expansion was a policy change intended to reduce paperwork in the school meals programs: automatic (categorical) eligibility for free meals for children in food stamp (now SNAP) and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (now TANF) households, which was enacted in 1986—and direct certification of such children for free meals without household applications, which was enacted in 1989.[287]

Other policies in the late 1980s and 1990s focused on improving program integrity. The 1989 child nutrition reauthorization (P.L. 101-147) required USDA to create a standardized process through which states would review school food authorities' administration of NSLP and SBP (known as administrative reviews).[288] In CACFP, following USDA inspector general audits in the 1990s that found instances of abuse and mismanagement, the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-224) made a number of changes aimed at improving program integrity in CACFP.[289] The act required CACFP sponsors to conduct more frequent and unannounced site visits of sponsored centers and homes, restricted nonprofit institutions' eligibility to those with tax-exempt status, and excluded institutions deemed ineligible to participate in any other public program based on violations of program requirements. Other legislation was aimed at improving program integrity in the school meals programs.

Program integrity continued to be a focus in the 2004 child nutrition reauthorization (P.L. 108-265), which made changes to school food authorities' verification of household applications for free and reduced-price meals. Specifically, the law set a sample size of applications that schools must review, established a focus on "error-prone" applications (applications near the income eligibility thresholds), and authorized direct (automatic) household application verification processes.[290] In addition, the law required states to conduct additional administrative reviews of school food authorities with a high level of administrative error or risk of error.[291]

The 2004 child nutrition reauthorization also continued the expansion of free school meals to new categories of children. Specifically, the law extended categorical eligibility and direct certification

[285] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 45.

[286] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," pp. 46-47.

[287] FNS, Office of Research and Analysis, *Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress Report to Congress*, December 2008, p. 3, https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-state-implementation-progress.

[288] Jones, "Appendix A: Child Nutrition Programs," p. 68.

[289] See, for example, USDA, Office of Inspector General, *Food and Nutrition Service: Child and Adult Care Food Program: National Report on Program Abuses*, August 1999, https://usdaoig.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2023-07/27601-7-SF.pdf.

[290] USDA, FNS, "Verification of Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs," 73 *Federal Register* 76847, December 18, 2008.

[291] For more information, see CRS Report RL33299, *Child Nutrition and WIC Legislation in the 108th and 109th Congresses*.

for free school meals to homeless children, migrant children, and children served under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

The most recent child nutrition reauthorization as of the date of this report was the HHFKA (P.L. 111-296), which continued the expansion of school meals in a few ways. It made foster children categorically eligible for free school meals, and allowed direct certification of such children. It also included a pilot project for direct certification (but not categorical eligibility) of children in Medicaid households for free and reduced-price meals based on an income test. In addition, the HHFKA created the Community Eligibility Provision, through which eligible schools can provide free meals to all students.

As discussed in this report, the HHFKA also made changes to nutritional requirements in the school meals programs and CACFP. Specifically, the law required USDA to update the nutrition standards for school meals within a certain time frame and align the standards with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (per an existing statutory requirement).[292] The law also required USDA to issue new nutrition standards regulating all foods sold on school campuses during the school day ("competitive foods"). (Previous standards applied only to competitive foods sold during meal service.) In addition, the HHFKA required USDA to update the nutrition standards for CACFP meals and snacks within a certain time frame and align them with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.[293]

Author Information

Kara Clifford Billings
Analyst in Social Policy

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[292] The 1994 child nutrition reauthorization (P.L. 103-448) required schools to serve breakfasts and lunches that were consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

[293] For more information, see CRS Report R45486, *Child Nutrition Programs: Issues in the 115th Congress*. Also see Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (University of California Press, 2010).

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