



**SCHOOL  
NUTRITION  
ASSOCIATION**

*Making the right food choices, together.*

# School Nutrition Primer

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## History and Background on School Meals

- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in nearly 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. Established under the National School Lunch Act and signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1946, the NSLP provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost and free lunches to more than 29 million children each school day. Nearly 5 billion lunches are served annually and the program receives almost 8 billion federal dollars each year. More than 95% of all U.S. schools participate in the NSLP.



- School districts and independent schools that choose to participate in the NSLP receive cash subsidies and donated commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal served. NSLP meals must be offered for free or at a reduced-price for eligible children. They also must meet the federal nutrition requirements in accordance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. The School Breakfast Program (SBP) was established in this Act but not made permanent until 1975. The SBP is a federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free breakfasts to children in schools. The SBP operates in more than 80,000 schools and child-care institutions and serves approximately 9.7 million children each school day.
- Under the NSLP, schools also can offer snacks served to children in after-school educational or enrichment programs.
- School nutrition programs face many challenges on a daily basis, while striving to offer nutritious meals to children.



- Nutrition Standards
- The Need for Affordable Meals
- Perceptions
- Commercial Influences
- Student Preferences
- The Need for Appealing Choices
- Cultural Diversity
- Food Safety Concerns
- Health Related Concerns

## What's for Lunch?

- School lunches must meet federal guidelines based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans:
  - No more than 30 percent of an individual's calories come from fat
  - Less than 10 percent from saturated fat
  - At least one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories
  - These guidelines apply over the course of one week of school lunch menus.



- Through the National School Lunch Program, children consume twice the servings of fruits and vegetables and greater amounts of grains and dairy than children who eat lunch brought from home or who leave school to eat lunch.
- No super-sizing here. The meals served as part of the NSLP are provided in age-appropriate serving sizes – making schools one of the few places in the U.S. where you can purchase a meal with the recommended serving sizes.
- Many healthy food options are offered in school foodservice and nutrition programs. Fresh fruits and vegetables and fat-free or low-fat milk are offered by more than 95% of school districts, in at least one school. Salad bars and prepackaged salads are available in 88% of school districts and 81% offer yogurt and yogurt drinks.
- About nine out of every ten districts involve students in taste testing new menu items.
- Schools collectively provide over 36 million servings of milk a day – that's 288 million ounces of milk – the majority is 1% or fat free.
- Many food favorites like pizza and french fries are made to specifications unique to school foodservice: crusts may use whole wheat flour or be enriched with soy protein, low-fat or reduced-fat cheeses are used frequently, and healthy cooking techniques like baking instead of frying are often used.
- Another important part of school meals is increased fruit and vegetable intake. Many schools offer salad bars, entrée salads, shaker salads and fresh fruit to help children satisfy their recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Many of the same companies that provide food to grocery stores and restaurants also serve the school market. The school market requires foods to meet specific nutritional guidelines and companies often develop special products just for schools, but with the same or better quality sold to other foodservice establishments. Some of these have now expanded and are sold to the public as well.



## Who's Behind School Lunch?

- There are approximately 325,000 school nutrition professionals working in K-12 schools in the U.S. They are responsible for ensuring each child who wants one receives a nutritious school meal – they are cooks, food preparation employees, cashiers, dietitians, dietary technicians, food service employees, nutrition educators, clerks, trainers, managers, supervisors and directors. About half are full-time employees.
- Many are certified school nutrition professionals who prepare and serve school meals and have received a minimum of 10 hours of sanitation and food safety training, and 10 hours of nutrition training through the SNA certification program. Many school district level directors have received their School Nutrition Specialist (SNS) credential, signifying they have experience in child nutrition program management and have passed a rigorous exam on the child nutrition programs.
- Many school nutrition professionals have college degrees in nutrition, nutrition education, foodservice management, hospitality and restaurant management, business administration and more. Many are Registered Dietitians or hold a Masters in Business Administration and some have received their Doctorate.
- School nutrition professionals administer the National School Lunch Program at the local level, and are therefore responsible for an income verification program second in its scope only to the IRS's federal income tax program. School nutrition professionals must work with parents to have them complete a form to see if their children qualify for a free or reduced price school lunch.
- Schools order food products called commodities from the USDA. Commodities are quality foods that are purchased from farmers in bulk, which schools can then use in preparing meals. Every dollar's worth of commodities used in NSLP meals represents a dollar saved in a school nutrition operation's cash expenditures for commercial food products. Commodities are available in a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, grains, cereals, nuts, as well as dairy and meat products. Many of these are formulated to be low in fat and reduced in sugar and sodium.



## How Much Does It Cost?

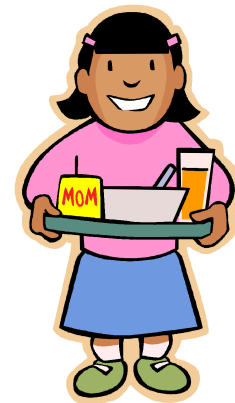
- School foodservice is a business. Foodservice is the only area of the school community that is expected to be self-supporting or provide funds back to the school's general budget. All of the food purchasing, employee salaries and benefits, supplies, equipment, marketing, transportation and even electricity must be covered by the revenue generated or from federal reimbursement. In today's environment of rising costs, this presents a very difficult challenge for each nutrition program.



- How much does a school lunch cost? If your family falls within certain income guidelines your lunch may be free, or it may only be \$0.40. If you don't meet the income guidelines, the school district sets the price. The average lunch, across all schools nationwide, elementary, middle and high school, is sold for \$1.80. Try getting a complete nutritional meal for fewer than two bucks anywhere else!
- How much does it cost to make a lunch? A recent survey estimated that food cost alone for each lunch was \$1.30 for the 100 largest school districts. This does not take into consideration all of the additional non-food expenses schools incur for operation.
- How much are schools reimbursed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture? In 2006, USDA provided schools with \$2.47 for meals provided free to students, \$2.07 for meals provided to students at a reduced price, and \$0.23 for each meal students purchase at full price. Additional reimbursement is available in some states or in schools with severe need.

## Why School Lunch?

- While the school lunch program was started in 1946 to address childhood hunger – it has expanded to become a nutrition program that addresses and educates children on both over nutrition and under nutrition.
- Childhood poverty is more widespread in the U.S. than in any other industrialized country and childhood hunger is still present in the U.S. In fact, twelve million children live in food insecure households in America. The school lunch program is often the first line of defense against childhood hunger and provides the only complete meal many children get each day.
- In response to the growing epidemic of childhood obesity, Congress has required local school districts participating in the NSLP to develop a Local School Wellness Policy (LSWP). This mandate, a key feature in the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, compels school districts to make child health a priority in the areas of food, nutrition education and physical activity.
- According to the law, a district's LSWP must, at a minimum:
  - Include goals for nutrition education and physical education
  - Include nutrition guidelines for all foods available on campus during the school day (including school meals, a la carte cafeteria sales, vending machines, school stores, concession stands, fundraising activities and classroom parties)
  - Involve parents, students and all stakeholders, including the school foodservice department, in the development of a LSWP
  - Establish a plan for measuring implementation of the LSWP
- Of the 97% of school districts that addressed nutrition standards for National School Lunch Program meals in their wellness policies, more than 92% state that they have completed implementation. Similarly, of the 96% of districts that set standards for a la carte foods and beverages sold through school nutrition programs, 72% report that they have completed implementation of the standards.



## What Is SNA?

- SNA has been advancing the availability, quality and acceptance of school nutrition programs as an integral part of education since 1946.
- The Association strives to see that all children have access to healthful school meals and nutrition education. The primary activities of the association are:
  - Providing education and training
  - Setting standards through certification and credentialing
  - Gathering and transmitting regulatory, legislative, industry, nutritional and other types of information related to school nutrition
  - Representing the nutritional interests of all children
- Recognized as the authority on school nutrition programs, SNA has 52 state affiliates, hundreds of local chapters and more than 55,000 members. The School Nutrition Foundation, SNA's sister organization, plays a critical role by raising money for professional development and outreach programs, as well as providing members with scholarship opportunities.
- SNA administers certification and credentialing programs that ensure school nutrition professionals excel on the job. The certification and credentialing programs contain the standards and specifications needed for personnel to serve quality food and provide nutrition education services to America's children.

