

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM



The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or no-cost lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1946.

About 7.1 million children participated in the NSLP in its first year. Since then, the Program has reached millions of children nationwide: 1970: 22.4 million children; 1980: 26.6 million children; 1990: 21.1 million children; 2000: 27.3 million children; 2010: 31.8 million children; and 2016: 30.4 million children.



The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the Program at the Federal level. At the State level, the NSLP is administered by State agencies, which operate the Program through agreements with school food authorities. State agency contact information is available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/school-meals-contacts>.



The NSLP is generally operated by public or non-profit private schools of high school grade or below. Public or non-profit private residential child care institutions may also participate in the NSLP, and charter schools may

participate in the NSLP as public schools. Participating school districts and independent schools receive cash subsidies and USDA Foods for each reimbursable meal they serve. In exchange, NSLP institutions must serve lunches that meet Federal meal pattern requirements and offer the lunches at a free or reduced price to eligible children. School food authorities can also be reimbursed for snacks served to children who participate in an approved afterschool program including an educational or enrichment activity.”



All NSLP lunches must meet Federal requirements, though decisions about the specific foods to serve and the methods of preparation are made by local school food authorities. Information about the NSLP nutrition standards, along with technical assistance and guidance materials, may be found on the School Meals website: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards-school-meals>.



Children enrolled in a federally-funded Head Start Program, or a comparable State-funded pre-kindergarten program, are also categorically eligible for free meals.

Children can also qualify for free or reduced price school meals based on household income and family size. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for reduced price meals. Schools may not charge children more than 40 cents for a reduced price lunch. To see the current Income Eligibility Guidelines, please visit: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/income-eligibility-guidelines>.

