

USDA School Meals: Healthy Meals, Healthy Schools, Healthy Kids

The mission of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service is to increase food security and reduce hunger in partnership with cooperating organizations by providing children and low-income people with access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.

USDA's 15 nutrition assistance programs are the first line of our Nation's defense against hunger. They include the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the school meals programs, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, which provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches and breakfasts to millions of students every school day.

USDA school meals programs operate under legislation passed by the U.S. Congress. All meals are federally subsidized with low-income children receiving meals at little or no cost. Under the National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act, USDA has authority to govern foods served in school cafeterias but does not have authority over foods available in other areas of schools.

Over the course of one week, school meals must provide 1/3 or more of daily nutrient requirements and be consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. While school meals must meet federal nutrition requirements, decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities. Only about 20 percent of the food served in school meal programs is provided by USDA; the remaining 80 percent is determined at the local level.

[National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#)

During the school year, 30 million students participate each school day in the NSLP in approximately 101,000 schools. Every school day, 17.5 million students receive a free or reduced-price school lunch. More than 2 million children have been added to the National School Lunch Program since 2001.

Children who participate in the National School Lunch Program eat twice as many servings of vegetables at lunch as non-participants.

The NSLP meal pattern requirements are currently being updated to reflect the 2005 Dietary

Guidelines for Americans (DGAs).

School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Nearly 10 million children in 82,000 schools receive a school breakfast every school day. In fiscal year 2006, 7.7 million students received a free or reduced-price breakfast. Since 2001, more than 2 million children have been added to the school breakfast program. The School Breakfast Program operates much like the NSLP.

Research shows that eating breakfast helps children grow up healthy and strong,(i) and do better in school; helps children concentrate better in class and go to the school nurse less frequently;(ii) and children who eat breakfast eat more fruit than children who don't. (iii)

The SBP meal patterns are currently being updated to reflect the 2005 DGA's.

Wellness Policies

Beginning July 1, 2006, the U.S. Congress mandated that all school districts participating in the NSLP and SBP develop and implement a "local wellness policy."

These local school wellness policies must:

Involve parents, students, and representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators, and the public in the development of a local wellness policy.

Include nutrition guidelines, selected by the local educational agency, for all foods available on each school campus during the school day with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity.

Include goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school- based activities that are designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local educational agency determines is appropriate.

Establish a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, including designation of one or more persons within the local educational agency or at each school, as appropriate, charged with operational responsibility for ensuring that the school meets the local wellness policy.

Nutrient Content is Improving

Results from the second School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study (SNDA-II) indicate that in school meals offered during School Year 1998/1999, the percent of calories from total fat and saturated fat were significantly lower than the levels found in the first dietary assessment conducted in 1991/1992. Total fat was reduced from 38 percent to 34 percent over that period.

This improvement in nutrient content has not reduced participation. In each of the past two school years, total participation in our programs has increased. Further, the increase in participation has been greater than the increase in enrollment.

But there is more to be done. While the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II (SNDA-II) data shows that more than 80 percent of elementary schools and over 90 percent of secondary schools offer students the opportunity to select a low-fat lunch, the lunches that students select meet that standard in only 21 percent of elementary schools and 14 percent of secondary schools.

A new study, the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study III, is currently being prepared for release in 2007 and will provide updated data on the nutrient content of school meals and their contribution to children's diets.

FNS is currently updating the NSLP and SBP meal patterns to reflect the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. USDA anticipates publishing a proposed rule in 2007. The proposed rule will allow time for public comment.

[HealthierUS School Challenge](#)

Through the HealthierUS School Challenge, more than 100 schools have been certified Gold or Silver schools since 2004. The School Challenge is an extension of President Bush's HealthierUS initiative and builds on USDA's efforts to improve the nutritional quality of school meals.

The HealthierUS School Challenge was established by FNS to recognize schools that are creating healthy school environments.

Elementary schools are challenged to become certified as either Silver or Gold Team Nutrition Schools, based on criteria for school meals, criteria for other foods and beverages throughout the school, nutrition education and physical activity.

In the first two and a half years of the Challenge, 108 awards have been given to elementary schools in 14 states.

[Team Nutrition](#)

Team Nutrition is an FNS initiative that provides support through training and technical assistance for foodservice, nutrition education for children and their caregivers, and school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity.

Team Nutrition's goal is to improve children's lifelong eating and physical activity habits by using the principles of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid.

Team Nutrition reaches a broad audience with information on nutrition education, healthy eating and physical activity. Schools are the key focal point.

The Healthy Meals Resource System provides technical assistance support and materials for school and childcare foodservice professionals.

[After School Snacks](#)

The National School Lunch Program offers cash reimbursement to help schools serve snacks to children in activities after school that are aimed at promoting the health and well being of children and youth. A school must provide children with regularly scheduled activities in an organized, structured and supervised environment; including educational or enrichment activities (e.g., mentoring or tutoring programs). Competitive interscholastic sports teams are not an eligible after school program.

[Summer Food Service Program](#)

A child's need for good nutrition does not end when school lets out. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free, nutritious meals and snacks to help children in low-income areas get the nutrition they need to learn, play, and grow, throughout the summer months when they are out of school. Meals are served in congregate settings, primarily in low-income areas. SFSP is operated by school districts, local government agencies and other community organizations.

Additional Links

FNS Homepage (www.fns.usda.gov)

Food Stamp Program (www.fns.usda.gov/fsp)

WIC (www.fns.usda.gov/wic)

Dietary Guidelines (www.cnpp.usda.gov/DietaryGuidelines.htm)

HealthierUS (www.healthierus.gov)

MyPyramid (www.mypyramid.gov)

MyPyramid for Kids (www.mypyramid.gov/kids/index.html)
Healthy School Meals (www.healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/)

- i Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. 37(2):163-170, February 1998.*
- ii Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning & University of Minnesota. School Breakfast Programs Energizing the Classroom. March 1998.*
- iii Children's Diets in the Mid-1990s: Dietary Intakes and Its Relationship with School Meal Participation, USDA, 2001.*