

# The Value of School Meals



Photo Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

School meals can have a major purpose in the nation's schools as well as in the lives of families and communities. They nourish millions of students daily helping them get the nutrients they need for growth and development.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true for the 1 in 6 children who lives in a food insecure household.<sup>2</sup> The nutritional impact and value of school meals can make them a vital resource for our nation's children.



Photo Courtesy of the Urban School Food Alliance

## Nutritional Value

Nutrition standards for school meals are science based. In 1994 Congress required that nutrition standards for school meals must reflect the most recent edition of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.<sup>4</sup> In 2010 the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences recommended standards for several child nutrition programs.<sup>5</sup> In broad terms, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) adopted most of the IOM's recommendations as they implemented the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. As a result of this law, federal nutrition standards were updated to include more fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and whole grains and less saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and calories.<sup>6</sup>

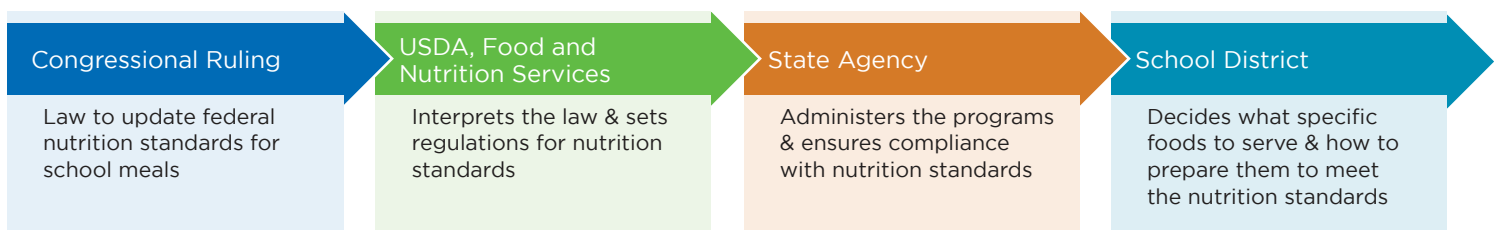
## Highlights from the Standards of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs

<b>More Fruits &amp; Vegetables</b>	Fruits & vegetables are offered to students daily and they are required to take at least one half-cup serving of fruits or vegetables with every breakfast and lunch. A variety of vegetables are served throughout the week including red, orange and dark green vegetables.
<b>Increase in Whole Grain Offerings</b>	All grains offered with school meals must be whole grain-rich (51% whole grain).
<b>Choices for Milk*</b>	Both low-fat milk and fat-free milk varieties are offered. NHANES dietary intake data indicate milk is the No. 1 food source of three of the four nutrients of concern identified in the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans: calcium, potassium and vitamin D.
<b>Sodium Limits</b>	Schools are gradually reducing sodium levels in school meals to meet identified targets.
<b>Calorie Limits</b>	School meals must meet age-appropriate calorie minimums and maximums.

\* Because of its unique nutrient profile, milk has been a fundamental component of school meals since their inception in 1946.

With USDA setting regulations for nutrition standards, it is the responsibility of the state agencies to administer the program with school districts accountable for implementing them in their operations. The schools determine what specific foods to serve and how to prepare them in ways that are appealing and palatable for their student population. It's important to remember that it's only nutritious if they eat it.

## Nutrition Standards in Motion



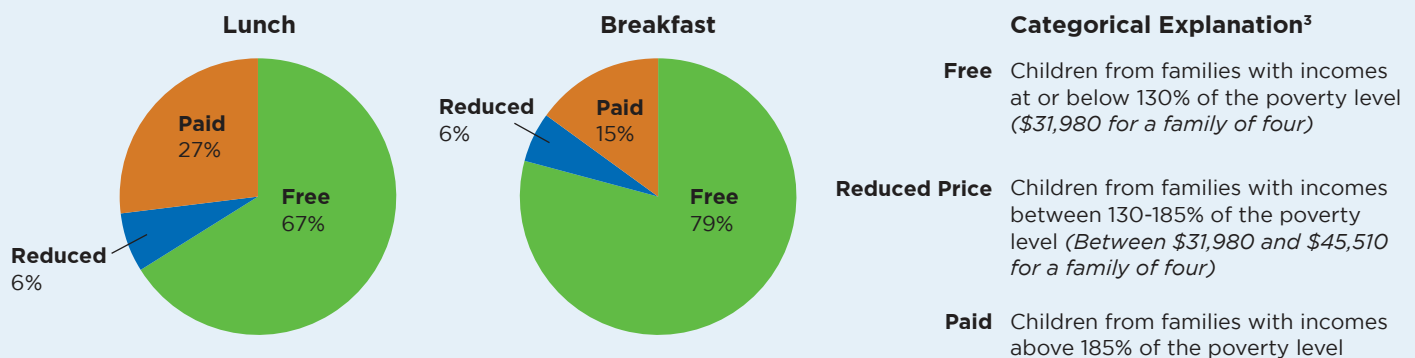
## Reach & Impact

Data from fiscal year (FY) 2017 on school lunch and breakfast programs generate some eye-popping numbers:

- More than 95,000 schools offer school lunch and over 88,000 offer school breakfast.<sup>1</sup>
- Each school day an average of 30 million students participated in the school lunch program. Roughly 20 million of those students (i.e., 67%) receive free meals.<sup>1</sup>
- Each school day an average of 14.6 million students eat school breakfast. Over 11 million of those students (i.e., 79%) receive free meals.<sup>1</sup>

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### Average Daily Participation from FY 2017 (Oct. 2016-Sept. 2017)<sup>1</sup>



## Financial Challenges

The school nutrition budget can be challenging to manage because of many variables. Typically, school nutrition departments are not subsidized by their school districts. They operate as a separate, self-sustaining business. Revenue typically comes from cash payments from students along with support from federal and state agencies. This revenue needs to cover food, labor, benefits, supplies and other costs including indirect costs paid to the school district for shared expenses, such as utilities and custodial services. School Nutrition Directors must be savvy business operators to run a successful program.

## Did You Know?

- Nutrition standards are in place for all foods and beverages sold during the school day in vending machines, school stores, concession stands and a la carte items sold in the cafeteria.<sup>8</sup>
- Every school district has a local wellness policy making child health a priority in the areas of food, nutrition, nutrition education and physical activity.<sup>9</sup>
- An evaluation of U.S. research studies from 2010-2015 found that the nutrient content of elementary, middle and preschool packed lunches brought from home contained more calories, fat, saturated fat, desserts and sugar-sweetened beverages than school lunches.<sup>10</sup>

For additional resources on school meals, please visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/child-nutrition-programs>



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## References

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