



SCHOOL MEALS 101: WHAT FAMILIES SHOULD KNOW

The goal of offering healthy, appetizing meals is shared between families and school nutrition professionals. School meals are often in the “hot seat” with families for not being healthy. School meals have changed a lot over the years and learning more about them can help ease a parent’s mind about what is being served at school.

DID YOU KNOW THAT:

- Children who eat school meals are more likely to consume milk, fruit and vegetables and less likely to eat desserts and snack items than children who do not.³¹
- There is no evidence that either the school breakfast or lunch program is contributing to rising rates of childhood obesity.³¹
- Students are less likely to gain weight during the school year when in school than during the summer when school is out.³²

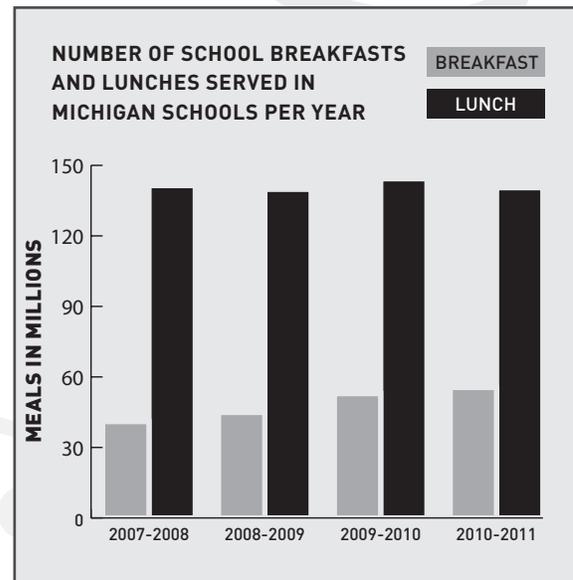


WHAT ARE THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM (NSLP) AND SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM (SBP)?

The NSLP and SBP are federally assisted meal programs for school children through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Schools that participate in the NSLP and SBP get cash reimbursement for free, reduced and paid meals and receive USDA foods. School lunches and breakfasts must meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and meet nutrient standards. While school lunches must meet federal requirements, decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made locally. Local schools set their own prices for full-price meals but must operate a nonprofit lunch program. Schools are monitored by the Michigan Department of Education for compliance with the federal guidelines.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICED MEALS

Any child at a school participating in the NSLP may purchase meals. However, children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-priced meals. For the period July 1, 2011—June 30, 2012, the income limit to qualify for free meals for a family of four is \$29,055 and the income limit for reduced-priced meals for a family of four is \$41,348. To receive free or reduced priced meals a family must submit an application available at their local school district. Contact the school Food Service Director for more information.



**SCHOOL MEALS FUNDING**

School food service programs receive their funding through federal reimbursements for free, reduced and paid meals, state supplemental funding, and revenue from meals and a la carte. Schools also receive credit for meals served to use towards USDA foods.

For the 2010-2011 school year, the basic reimbursement rates were:

• **FREE LUNCH:** \$2.72 • **REDUCED PRICE LUNCH:** \$2.32 • **PAID LUNCH:** \$0.26

In addition to cash reimbursements, schools are entitled to receive USDA foods at a value of 20.25 cents for each meal served in School Year 2010-2011. Schools can also get “bonus” commodities if available from agricultural surplus.

USDA FOODS (FORMERLY KNOWN AS USDA COMMODITY FOODS)**USDA FOODS:**

- Are foods USDA purchases and makes available to schools
- Help food service programs stretch their budgets to provide nutritious, well balanced meals
- Make up approximately 15 to 20 percent of the food served in each school lunch.
- Provide a variety of healthy food choices, including fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy, and grains.
- Include a selection of more than 180 nutritious food items—fresh, frozen, packaged, canned, dried, and bulk.
- Meet rigorous food safety standards set by Federal regulatory agencies and USDA’s two purchasing agencies—the Agricultural Marketing Service and the Farm Service Agency.

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**BUILDING A MEAL**

A school lunch program is required to offer five food items at a lunch from the following components—fruit & vegetable, grain, meat or meat alternate and milk. A student must take three of the five components for the meal to qualify for reimbursement. Schools must build their menus to meet the federal guidelines. These include minimum weekly amounts for each component that must be offered to students. The current federal guidelines have calorie minimums that schools must follow. For example, an elementary lunch must have at least 664 calories but there are no maximums set. These calorie guidelines will change when the new national nutrition standards in the [Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010](#) go into effect. With the new guidelines, the calories will need to be between 550-650 for an elementary lunch. Keep these things in mind when you look at your school’s menu. Just like in homes, schools have to play a balancing act to create nutritious, student appealing meals that meet the federal guidelines and stay within their food and labor budget.

NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL

The current federal school meal guidelines are under revision to meet the current nutrition needs of students. This revision is taking place because of the [Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010](#). The proposed school meal guidelines will include calorie maximums as well as minimums, maximums for sodium, fat, and saturated fat. In addition to the calorie guidelines, there are also minimum amounts for foods with health benefits such as dark green and deep yellow/orange/red vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. The new federal meal guidelines are expected to go in effect during the 2012-2013 school year.

Adapted from: USDA—National School Lunch Program fact sheet; MDE School Meals in Michigan; and USDA—USDA Foods: Healthy Foods for Our Schools