

Nevada's School Lunch Program

Frequently Asked Questions



What is the School Lunch Program?

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman signed the National School Lunch Act, which created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). As of 2014, this program feeds more than 31 million students nationwide. In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was signed into law by President Obama. It has marked the first major update to the National School Lunch Program guidelines in 15 years. New rules aim to boost the nutritional quality of school meals. Schools that choose to take part in the program receive federal cash reimbursement and USDA foods for each meal they serve. In order to receive federal reimbursements and foods, the participating schools must meet federal nutrition requirements and offer free or reduced-price lunches to eligible children.

Who can qualify for free and reduced price meals?

Any child attending a participating school may purchase a meal through the NSLP. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Children from families between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced priced meals, for which these students can be charged no more than 40 cents per meal. Data as of 2017 shows 130 percent of the poverty level household income is \$31,590 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$44,995.



What is the Nevada Department of Agriculture's role?

The Nevada Department of Agriculture (NDA) provides education and outreach focused on meeting required national school lunch standards. Training and technical assistance is also provided, which helps prepare school staff to create nutritious meals and improve program operation and financial viability.

What are the components of the new meal pattern?

The meal pattern nutrition standards are based on the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Decisions about foods are served and how they are prepared are made by local personnel. New options include:

1. **Fruits:** School meals can include fresh fruit, 100-percent fruit juice, frozen fruit, dried fruit (without added sugar) and canned fruit that is packed in light syrup or 100% juice.
2. **Vegetables:** School meals are now required to include a variety of vegetables throughout the week, including dark-green vegetables such as broccoli and romaine lettuce, red/orange vegetables like carrots, starchy vegetables such as potatoes and legumes like black beans.
3. **Milk:** School meals must include non-fat plain or flavored milk—or 1% plain milk—and at least two varieties of milk must be offered.
4. **Grains:** All grains offered in school meals must now be whole grain rich, increasing the amount of fiber, vitamins and minerals in school meals. There are many great whole grain offerings on school trays such as whole grain bread, whole grain pasta and whole grain tortillas.
5. **Meat/meat alternates:** A variety of meats or meat alternates can be offered, including beef, pork and chicken—or vegetarian options like yogurt, peanut butter, cheese or beans.
6. **Portions:** Students must choose three different food items from the five food groups for schools to receive federal reimbursements for lunches. At least one choice must be a fruit or vegetable.

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I'm still concerned about the quality of my child's food at school. What can I do?

School districts must adopt the national school meal pattern in order to be a part of the school lunch program. Above that, the NDA encourages schools to serve the highest quality of foods to students, and the NDA provides training to school food service professionals on best practices. Concerned parents can contact their school district's nutrition department with any concerns.

Can I provide my children with their own lunch?

Participation in the NSLP is optional. There is, however, some evidence that shows that school lunches can be more nutritious than lunches brought from home. School lunches provide fruits, vegetables and whole grain rich foods every day and can help busy families provide children with nutritious meals.

What do schools receive?

A majority of the support provided by the USDA to schools participating in the NSLP comes in the form of a cash reimbursement for each meal served. Higher reimbursement rates for lunch and breakfast are also in effect for schools with high percentages of low-income students.

Schools are also entitled by law to receive USDA Foods. Schools select entitlement foods from a list of foods purchased by USDA and offered through the school lunch program. Schools can use this entitlement to receive frozen, canned and fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, cheese and other processed food items.

What is plate waste, and what are schools doing to help manage it?

Plate waste is the amount of edible food served to students that is uneaten. Reducing plate waste is a priority for the USDA, and a recent study by Harvard School of Public Health showed that the new Meal Pattern requirements overall did not result in increased food waste. Neither USDA nor the NDA mandate that certain foods can or cannot be served, and menu choices are at the discretion of school district personnel. However, the NDA encourages healthy choices and to help make those choices available to students.

Strategies such as rescheduling lunch so that it follows recess, allowing at least 20 minutes to eat (after the child sits down) and increasing food quality have also been effective in reducing plate waste. We have resources available on our website about healthy eating in the school environment.



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