

## What are Child Nutrition Programs and why are they important?

Child Nutrition Programs are federally funded meal programs that provide children with low- or no-cost nutritious meals and snacks in public and private schools, child care facilities, recreation centers and other settings. Child Nutrition Programs play a critical role in reducing food insecurity and improving health outcomes for children living in poverty.<sup>1</sup>



## Types of Federal Child Nutrition Programs

There are several types of Child Nutrition Programs that reach children in school, early care and education (ECE), and community settings, including:

**The National School Lunch Program (NSLP):** Established in 1946, the NSLP provides nutritious lunches to students in a variety of settings, including school cafeterias for K-12 students. In Pennsylvania, more than 168 million meals were served through this program during the 2018–2019 school year.<sup>2</sup>

**The School Breakfast Program (SBP):** Building on the success of the NSLP, the SBP was created in 1966. Today, more than 14 million children nationwide participate in the SBP. Statewide, the participation number is over 400,000 meals daily.<sup>3</sup>

**The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP):** CACFP provides reimbursement for meals to children and adults in preschools, child care centers, day care homes, and adult care facilities (sites). CACFP reimburses up to two meals and a snack or two snacks and a meal per participant per day. The At-Risk After School Meals program of CACFP provides reimbursement for afterschool programs to serve a supper and/or snack to children and teens in low-income areas. The program must also provide education and/or enrichment and be open to all to participate. In Pennsylvania, more than 44 million meals were served through CACFP from October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020.<sup>4</sup>

**The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP):** This program provides meals to children during the summer months. Summer meals can be served at schools, recreation centers, summer camps, faith-based organizations, and other types of community sites. In Pennsylvania, more than five million lunches were served through this program during Summer 2020.<sup>5</sup>

## HOW DO THESE PROGRAMS WORK?

The United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) oversees these programs in partnership with state agencies. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Division of Food and Nutrition works with USDA FNS to administer these programs in Pennsylvania. The eligibility criteria for schools and sites to participate vary by program. Participating schools and sites receive funding in the form of reimbursements for meals served that meet federal standards. These meals must meet specific nutrition requirements and be offered to eligible students at a low- or no-cost rate. USDA FNS sets the reimbursement rates and updates them annually. Learn more about these programs in Pennsylvania [here](#).

## WHAT ARE THE REIMBURSEMENT RATES AND WHAT MUST THEY COVER?

Reimbursement rates and structures vary by program.

For example, in the NSLP, schools offer full-price, reduced-price and no-cost meals and/or snacks to students and get reimbursed accordingly. Whether the student will be required to pay the full price, reduced price or no cost is determined by their family's household income.

### Example Rates: 2020–2021 NSLP<sup>6</sup>

Meal	Maximum Federal Reimbursement
Paid (full-price)	\$0.41
Reduced-price	\$3.28
Free	\$3.68

Schools must utilize the per-meal funds (\$3.68 or less) to cover the cost of nutritious food from all five food groups, the labor of school nutrition staff, equipment, utilities and more.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a newer structure that allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer free meals to all students without collecting income information from individual families. A growing body of research indicates positive impacts on student behavior and nutrition for schools that participate in CEP.<sup>7</sup> As of March 2021, more than 1,100 sites in PA participate in CEP.<sup>8</sup>

## HOW DO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS VARY BY SCHOOL/SITE?

Food service operations for Child Nutrition Programs come in many shapes and sizes. Some schools and sites have significant kitchen infrastructure allowing for on-site meal preparation, while others may be more limited (sometimes with only the ability to reheat food).

Staffing capacity and arrangements also vary. Some schools and sites outsource to third-party food service management companies, while others provide these services within their own district or site operations.

There are rules and regulations in place around how food can be purchased, as well. Schools and sites may purchase food through formal contracts or through less formal mechanisms. Learn more about USDA procurement regulations [here](#).



## HOW CAN SCHOOLS AND SITES PRIORITIZE LOCAL FOOD PURCHASES?

No matter how schools and sites purchase food, there are ways to incorporate local products into meals and snacks. The USDA encourages local food purchases and its [Office of Community Food Systems](#) is dedicated to providing technical assistance, funding and resources for farm to school and local food purchasing. Relevant resources include the [Farm to School Census](#) and the [Buying Local Foods fact sheet series](#).

The National Farm to School Network is a nonprofit organization that serves as an information, networking and advocacy hub for

## Relevant Resources & Links

- **USDA Child Nutrition Programs**  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs>
- **USDA Procurement Regulations**  
<https://bit.ly/3teUegz>
- **Child Nutrition Programs in Pennsylvania**  
<https://bit.ly/3sd4cgX>
- **USDA Office of Community Food Systems**  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs>
- **USDA Buying Local Foods fact sheet series**  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/fact-sheets>
- **USDA Farm to School Census**  
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/farm-school-census>
- **National Farm to School Network**  
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/>
- **The Pennsylvania Farm to School Network**  
<http://www.pafarmtoschool.org>
- **Pennsylvania Harvest of the Month**  
<https://www.paharvestofthemoth.org/>
- **Penn State's Go for the Greens/Apple Crunch**  
<https://bit.ly/328Pmh5>
- **Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program**  
<https://bit.ly/2PYwRJC>
- **The Food Trust's Guide to Local Produce in Keystone Schools**  
<http://thefoodtrust.org/pa-f2s-regional-connections>

farm to school. Resources related to local food purchasing can be found [here](#).

At the state level, [The Pennsylvania Farm to School Network](#) is working to support schools and sites in increasing their local purchases. Using state resources like [Pennsylvania Harvest of the Month](#) to incorporate and highlight one Pennsylvania-grown product per month, PA Preferred Days, or [Go for the Greens/Apple Crunch](#) can help schools and sites get started with or expand local purchases. Grants to support these activities may be available, including the [Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program](#).

To find a Pennsylvania product for a school or site, food service directors may consider working with their school or site's current distributor to discuss local sourcing, visiting local farmers markets or food co-ops, or using resources such as The Food Trust's [Guide to Local Produce in Keystone Schools](#).

*Endnotes are available on the digital version of this fact sheet or by request.*

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information, visit [pafarmtoschool.org](http://pafarmtoschool.org). For technical assistance, please contact us at: [pafarmtoschool@thefoodtrust.org](mailto:pafarmtoschool@thefoodtrust.org)

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