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The National School Lunch Program Serves 24 Million Daily

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The National School Lunch Program ranks behind the Food Stamp Program as the Federal Government's largest food assistance program. On an average school day in fiscal 1992, the program served 24.5 million lunches to children in 92,300 schools and residential child care institutions.

In fiscal 1992, the Federal Government provided \$3.8 billion to schools participating in the program. Commodities worth \$752.4 million were also distributed. Student payments and State and local funds contribute an approximately equal amount to cover the rest of the cost of the lunches.

Congress established the National School Lunch Program in 1946 to safeguard the health of American children by encouraging consumption of nutritious foods and to provide an outlet for surplus commodities by encouraging domestic consumption through noncommercial channels.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the National School Lunch Program nationwide. All public schools and nonprofit private schools are eligi-

ble to participate. State agencies administer the programs in public schools. Other institutions and local school districts prepare and serve the meals. Participating schools are required to serve nutritious lunches that meet USDA

guidelines which specify servings, quantities, and types of foods. A typical lunch includes a serving of a protein-rich food, fruit and/or vegetable, bread, and milk. Schools adjust the portion sizes according to children's ages.



In June 1992, the National School Lunch Program operated in 92,300 schools and residential child-care institutions, with a total enrollment of 42.7 million students—about 90 percent of all children in kindergarten through grade 12.

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Low-Income Children Receive Free Lunches

The Federal Government reimburses States based on the number and type (free, reduced-price, or full-price) of lunches served. All children attending participating schools are eligible to receive a school lunch, but the price they pay depends on their family income.

Eligibility to receive a free or reduced-price lunch is based on the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) poverty guidelines, which are modified yearly.

For the 1992-93 school year, a child from a family of four with an annual income of \$18,135 or less is eligible for a free lunch. A child from a family of four whose annual income is between \$18,136 and \$25,808 is eligible for reduced-price lunches. Children whose family income exceeds these Federal income limits must pay full price.

Participation Rates Stable

In June 1992, the National School Lunch Program operated in 92,300 schools and residential child-care institutions, with a total enrollment of 42.7 million students—about 90 percent of all children in kindergarten through grade 12. About 58 percent of the students attending participating schools ate in the school lunch program.

About 4.1 billion lunches were served during the 1991-92 school year: 1.88 billion free (45.9 percent), 284 million reduced-price (6.9 percent), and 1.93 billion full price (47.2 percent). The proportion of all lunches served free or at reduced prices has remained relatively stable over time, although free and reduced-price participation tends to increase in economic downturns.

On an average school day in fiscal 1992, 24.5 million children participated in the National School

Table 1
Participation in the National School Lunch Program Has Remained Steady Since 1979

Fiscal year	Full price	Reduced price	Free	Total
<i>Million children</i>				
1979	15.3	1.7	10.0	27.0
1980	14.7	1.9	10.0	26.6
1981	13.3	1.9	10.6	25.8
1982	11.5	1.6	9.8	22.9
1983	11.2	1.5	10.3	23.0
1984	11.5	1.5	10.3	23.3
1985	12.1	1.6	9.9	23.6
1986	12.2	1.6	10.0	23.8
1987	12.4	1.6	10.0	24.0
1988	12.8	1.6	9.8	24.2
1989	12.8	1.6	9.7	24.1
1990	12.6	1.7	9.9	24.2
1991	12.1	1.8	10.3	24.2
1992	11.7	1.7	11.1	24.5

Lunch Program (table 1). The number of students served has fluctuated at around 24 million since 1986.

Federal Payments Up 10 Percent

Federal cash reimbursements to State agencies for the program in fiscal 1991 totaled \$3.5 billion, a 9.8-

percent increase from 1990 (table 2). State agencies are reimbursed on a per meal basis. The reimbursement rates are revised each year to reflect changes in the consumer price index (CPI) series for food away from home.

For the 1992-93 school year, States will be reimbursed \$1.695 for each free lunch served, \$1.295 for each reduced-price lunch, and

Table 2
Federal Payments to the National School Lunch Program Have Grown Steadily

Fiscal year	Cash payments	Value of commodities Entitlement	Bonus	Total
<i>Million dollars</i>				
1979	1,991.1	675.3	69.6	2,736.0
1980	2,296.0	772.5	132.0	3,200.5
1981	2,397.2	578.9	316.3	3,292.4
1982	2,191.3	426.2	339.9	2,957.4
1983	2,405.9	433.4	339.9	3,179.2
1984	2,506.1	445.8	384.1	3,336.0
1985	2,578.4	456.0	345.2	3,379.6
1986	2,714.5	445.7	372.6	3,532.8
1987	2,797.1	448.5	439.6	3,685.2
1988	2,917.4	466.3	348.6	3,732.3
1989	3,004.9	474.5	291.2	3,770.6
1990	3,210.2	446.1	153.8	3,830.1
1991	3,524.9	584.3	101.9	4,211.1
1992	3,837.7	636.8	115.6	4,509.1

\$0.1625 for each full-price lunch. Local school districts also will receive an additional 2 cents per lunch when they serve 60 percent or more free and reduced-price lunches.

Commodities worth \$752.4 million were also distributed to schools in fiscal 1992. About \$636.8 million in commodities, worth 14 cents per meal, were provided as an entitlement—based on the needs and preferences of the recipient schools.

The remaining \$115.6 million worth of food was distributed as bonus commodities, which are pro-

vided to schools when USDA surplus inventories permit. For example, during the 1980's, when dairy products were in surplus, USDA provided to the National School Lunch Program nearly \$1 billion worth of bonus commodities annually, including cheese, butter, and dry milk.

Bonus commodities are secured by USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) or Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and donated to FNS for distribution. Schools may obtain as much of some bonus commodities as they can use without waste; others are offered on a limited basis.

Program's Benefits Widespread

The National School Lunch Program benefits the national agricultural economy as well as the nutritional well-being of participating children.

The University of North Carolina found that participation in the National School Lunch Program improves nutritional status of school-age children, especially those from low-income households. For example, children ages 12 to 18 years receiving free or reduced-price lunches obtained an average of 728 more calories daily than did nonparticipating children of a similar income level. Children in the same age group eating full-price lunches ate 169 more calories daily than did children of the same income level who did not eat a school-prepared lunch.

According to an FNS study, lunchtime consumption of all nutrients by older participating children increased, except vitamin C. For children ages 6 to 11 years, the results were similar, but less consistent. Low-income children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches who participated daily obtained slightly more protein, calcium, riboflavin, phosphorus, and vitamins A and B6, but less magnesium and vitamin C than did nonparticipants of similar income.

The National School Lunch Program also expands the market for agricultural commodities. USDA's Economic Research Service found that demand rose significantly for red meats, poultry, and milk due to Federal commodity donations and purchases by participating schools. Demand for fruit, vegetables, and eggs also rose, but by a smaller level.

The program also provides an outlet for surplus commodities. It helps relieve temporary or chronic surpluses by purchasing large quantities for distribution to schools and other institutions. ■



Participation in the National School Lunch Program improves the nutritional status of school-age children, especially those from low-income households.