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Efforts Are Expanding the School Breakfast Program

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The School Breakfast Program provides cash assistance to initiate and maintain a breakfast program in eligible schools and child care institutions. The program has grown from serving 80,000 children at a cost of \$573,000 in fiscal 1967 to an average of 4.92 million children a day in 50,000 schools and institutions at a cost of \$787 million in fiscal 1992. The growth reflects concentrated efforts to encourage more schools to participate in order to reach more needy children.

To provide this food, the U.S. Government spent \$787 million in fiscal 1992, up 16.2 percent from \$677.2 million in fiscal 1991. Over 850 million breakfasts were served during fiscal 1992—a 50-percent increase from a decade earlier. About 87 percent of the breakfasts are served free or reduced price—remaining relatively stable since the program's inception.

Program Expanded Along With Need

Initially authorized as a 2-year pilot program under the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, the program is now open to all schools, public and nonprofit private, as well as public and private nonprofit residential

child care institutions. Participating schools and institutions must serve meals that meet Federal nutrition guidelines and must provide all eligible children with free or reduced-price meals.

At its inception, the School Breakfast Program was targeted toward "nutritionally needy" children in low-income school districts. In 1971, the program was expanded to give priority consid-

eration to schools that demonstrated a special need to improve the nutrition of children from low-income families.

A determination of "severe need" for the School Breakfast Program is based on the School Lunch Program. That is, a participating school qualifies as being in "severe need" if at least 40 percent of school lunches have been served free or reduced price 2 years prior,



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and if the current reimbursement rates do not cover the operating costs for breakfasts. Such schools then may receive additional funding. About 62 percent of all free and reduced-price breakfasts are served in schools with severe need.

Low-Income Children Receive Free Breakfasts

Amendments to the Child Nutrition Act in 1975 made the School Breakfast Program permanent and extended eligibility to all public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions wishing to participate. Today the breakfast program is available to more than half of all elementary and secondary school students. About 5 million children are served a school breakfast on an average school day (table 1).

The School Breakfast Program offers free, reduced-price, and full-price breakfasts. Eligibility for free and reduced-price breakfasts are based on the same criteria as for the National School Lunch Pro-

gram. For the 1993-94 school year, a child from a family of four with an annual income under \$18,655 is eligible for a free breakfast. If the household's income is between \$18,655 and \$26,548, the child may receive reduced-price meals. More than 85 percent of the program's breakfasts are served to students whose family income is below 185 percent of poverty (\$26,548 for a family of four in 1993-94).

Students who are eligible for free breakfasts may not be charged under Federal law. Schools may charge students a maximum of 30 cents for reduced-price breakfasts. The average price for a reduced-price breakfast was 28 cents in 1991-92. There is no maximum limit on the price schools may charge for a full-price meal. In school year 1991-92, the average price charged for a full-price breakfast was about 60 cents.

For the 1993-94 school year, the reimbursement rate for free breakfasts is 96 cents per breakfast served (114.25 cents in severe-need schools). The Government reim-

burses 66 cents for reduced-price meals (84.25 cents in severe-need schools). The reimbursement rate for full-price meals in 1993-94 is 19 cents. Higher reimbursement rates for all breakfasts are paid to schools in Alaska and Hawaii because of higher food costs. Reimbursement rates are adjusted annually to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index for food away from home.

In addition to the cash funding, the program originally received donated commodities worth about 3 cents per meal. Most schools, however, did not use a large share of the commodities because they were not suitable for the types of breakfasts being served. For example, products that required extensive preparation, such as grains and flour, could not be efficiently used in most school breakfast operations. As a result, commodity donations for the program were discontinued in 1980.

Meals Must Meet Nutritional Guidelines

Breakfasts served in the program must comply with nutritious meal pattern requirements in order to be eligible for Federal reimbursements.

The breakfasts should provide 25 percent of the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for nutrients. The current requirements, issued in March 1989, specify the types of foods to be included in the program's meals as well as the quantities or minimum portions (table 2). Requirements were adapted to improve the nutritional quality of the program's meals, specifically to increase the content of vitamin A, vitamin B6, and iron.

A study conducted by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in 1992 found that school break-

Table 1
School Breakfast Program Serves Almost 5 Million Children in 50,000 Schools

Fiscal year	Number of schools*	Daily participation			
		Free	Reduced price	Full price	Total
	Thousand	Million children			
1982	34.3	2.80	0.16	0.36	3.32
1983	33.5	2.87	.15	.34	3.36
1984	33.8	2.91	.15	.37	3.43
1985	34.8	2.88	.16	.40	3.44
1986	35.2	2.93	.16	.41	3.50
1987	37.2	3.01	.17	.43	3.61
1988	38.8	3.03	.18	.47	3.68
1989	40.0	3.10	.20	.51	3.81
1990	42.8	3.30	.22	.55	4.07
1991	46.1	3.61	.25	.58	4.44
1992	50.2	4.05	.26	.60	4.92

*Includes schools and residential childcare institutions.

Table 2

The School Breakfast Program Requires Nutritious Meals

Food component/Item*	Serving
One serving from each of the following components	
Fluid milk: As a beverage, on cereal, or both	1/2 pint
Juice, fruit, vegetables: Fruit and/or vegetable or full-strength fruit juice or vegetable juice (it is recommended that a citrus fruit or juice or a fruit or vegetable or juice that is a good source of vitamin C be offered daily)	1/2 cup
And, one serving from each of the following components or two servings from one component	
Bread products: Whole-grain or enriched bread	1 slice
Whole-grain or enriched biscuit, roll, muffin, cornbread, etc.	1 unit
Whole-grain, enriched, or fortified cereal	1/4 cup or 1 ounce
Meat products: Lean meat, poultry, or fish	1 ounce
Cheese	1 ounce
Large egg	1/2 egg
Peanut butter or other nut or seed butter	1-1/2 tablespoons
Cooked dry beans or peas	4 tablespoons
Nuts or seeds	1 ounce

fasts offered in elementary and secondary schools were high in nutritional quality and balanced across a number of key nutrients. While the overall caloric value of the program's meals was 24 percent, supplying slightly less than the program's goal of 25 percent of daily calorie needs, the meals were high in nutrient density, supplying over 25 percent of the RDA for most nutrients examined.

However, the breakfasts are currently high in fat and saturated fat. The breakfasts offered contained 31 percent of calories from fat and 14 percent of calories from saturated fat. In comparison, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines suggest that no more than 30 percent of calories come

from fat, and less than 10 percent of total calories should come from saturated fat. The breakfasts also exceed the National Research Council's recommendation for sodium. The meals offered provided 673 milligrams of sodium, compared with the 600 milligrams that would be equivalent to 25 percent of the National Research Council's daily recommendation.

At the beginning of this school year, USDA announced that school meals should meet the Federal Dietary Guidelines for fat, saturated fats, cholesterol, and sodium so that students will get nutritious, healthful meals.

USDA has launched a long-term nutrition initiative to reduce the

level of fats and to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables in both school breakfasts and school lunches. The initiative offers lower fat meat and dairy products on a test basis in some schools. USDA plans to double the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables offered to schools through the commodity distribution program—a substantial increase over the 8.8 million pounds distributed last year.

In addition, USDA held public hearings in the fall of 1993 to seek public comment about ways to further improve the nutrition quality of meals children eat at school.

Participation Up, But Aim Is To Reach More

To increase local flexibility in implementing the program and thereby encourage more schools to participate, Congress authorized "offer versus serve." Under this option, schools must offer all four meal components (one from each of the components/groups in table 2), but if a child refuses one of the four food items, the breakfast would still qualify as a reimbursable meal.

In the early years of the breakfast program, growth was initially slow. However, State and Federal outreach efforts have generated significant interest in the program. Additionally, in 1989, Public Law 101-147 established a 5-year series of grants to expand the number of participating schools. To date, FNS has awarded grants to 44 States targeting over 4,000 schools that serve nearly 800,000 needy children.

The results of these efforts have been evident in the significant increase in the number of participating schools as well as the substantial increase in student participation in the past 4 years. ■