



Food Service Facts

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30. History

School Nutrition Goals

The goals of Child Nutrition Programs as they have developed over the years are to:

- Serve nutritionally adequate, appealing and moderately priced meals.
- Help children grow socially and emotionally.
- Extend educational influences to the homes of school children.
- Improve children's food habits with the ultimate goal of developing healthy adults.

Refer to Chapter 2 of *Food Service Facts* for a description of federal, state and local responsibilities for administering Child Nutrition Programs.

The Early Days

School nutrition programs have a long history. School food service was offered in the United States as far back as the 1890s; some European countries were operating programs a hundred years before.

At around the turn of the 20th century, school meals were being provided in cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Milwaukee. Civic and social organizations or volunteers provided the meals. In most cases, the lunch programs were self-supporting. Some students paid three cents for their meals.

The depression of the 1930's brought widespread unemployment. Millions of people lost their jobs and were without means of support for themselves and their families. Demand and prices for farm products steadily declined. Millions of children were unable to pay for their school lunches; and with limited resources to provide meals at home, malnutrition among children became a national concern.

Public Law 320 passed in 1935 encouraged domestic consumption of surplus commodities by donating them to needy families and school lunch programs. The commodity distribution program grew rapidly.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was also created in 1935. This agency provided work for the unemployed in public works projects. Since there were unemployed, needy women in nearly every city, town and rural community in the country, these women were assigned to prepare and serve school lunches. By 1941, WPA school lunch programs were operating in all states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

The 78th Congress set aside federal funds for the first time in 1943 to provide cash subsidy payments for the purchase of food for school lunch programs. Similar legislation was passed by Congress in subsequent years.

National School Lunch Act

In 1946 Congress recognized the need for a more permanent status for the school lunch program and authorized the necessary appropriations for it. The legislation was identified as the “National School Lunch Act” and stated:

“It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food by assisting the states, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs.”

Schools had to agree to provide meals that met minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. These lunches were defined as one of three types: Type A, Type B, and Type C.

- The Type A lunch was defined as consisting of:
 - ½ pint fluid whole milk
 - Protein rich food consisting of one of the following or a combination:
 - 2 ounces of lean meat, fish or poultry
 - 2 ounces of cheese
 - 1 egg
 - ½ cup of cooked dry beans or peas
 - 4 Tablespoons peanut butter
 - ¾ cup serving of two or more vegetables or fruits, or both
 - 1 serving of bread, rolls, muffins, etc.
 - 2 teaspoons of butter or fortified margarine
- Type B lunches contained smaller quantities of the components in the Type A lunch and were served primarily in schools with inadequate cooking facilities.
- Type C lunches consisted of only ½ pint of fluid whole milk served as a beverage.

The Type A meal pattern lasted 35 years (1946-1977) with only minor changes.

Child Nutrition Act of 1966

The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 established guidelines for determining who should qualify to receive a reduced price or free meal. This law established Income Eligibility Guidelines that are based on federal poverty levels. The income guidelines are revised annually and are still used as the basis of approving households for reduced price or free benefits.

This act also established the first substantial funding for needy children's meals; and identified the United States Department of Agriculture as the agency assigned to administer all school food service funds and establish uniform standards.

The Child Nutrition Act continued the Type C lunch, which became known as the “Special Milk Program”. It also provided for a pilot breakfast program, funds to purchase school food service equipment in low-income areas and state administrative funds.

Child Nutrition Programs - 1966 to Today

The 1980s brought changes and challenges to Child Nutrition Programs. The decade was characterized by declines in funding, stricter federal regulations, and more reviews of school food service operations by state and federal agencies. During the 1980s, the requirement for verification of eligibility was established.

Participation in the National School Lunch Program in 1979 was an average of 27 million lunches served per day. In 1982 nearly 3000 schools dropped out of the National School Lunch Program as a result of budget cuts. This decline in schools participating in the program continued until 1989.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the threat of block grants increased. Under block grants federal money would be given to states, and the state would decide how the money would be distributed. School food service professionals feared Child Nutrition Programs would lose if block grants were to become a reality.

In 1994 the “Healthy Meals for Americans Act” reinforced established nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Regulations for the “School Meals Initiative” were finalized in 1995 and provided for several different menu planning systems - Food Based and Nutrient Standard Menu Planning.

Improving child nutrition was the focal point of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act allowed USDA, for the first time in over 30 years, opportunity to make real reforms to the school lunch and breakfast programs by improving the critical nutrition and hunger safety net for millions of children. A summary of the provisions can be found at [FACT SHEET: Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act School Meals Implementation | USDA](#).