

Know Your School Meal Requirements



School food service may be simple on first glance, but there are so many layers to offering meals, especially when we dive into school food finance and the meal pattern and nutrition standard requirements. This resource will guide you through the School Meal Requirement journey. Hopefully it'll supply you with a better understanding of the rigorous requirements our school food operators must follow when serving breakfast and lunch.

Keep an eye out for...

The onion icon throughout this resource. The call-outs identified by this icon dive into the different layers our school food operators must be aware of when menu planning and why change towards scratch-cooking can be slower than we may dream of.



There are two main “buckets” our school food operators have to navigate when it comes to feeding their students:

- 1 The Regulations
- 2 The Operations

Both of these “buckets” are tied to the school food service department’s overall budget.

This resource dives into the regulations. For more details about how school food operations impact the process of making school meal changes - check out our ["Making School Menu Changes - The Reality Today"](#) resource.

Please keep in mind that this resource only dives into the meal requirements for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). There are additional meal requirements for all other school food service meal programs that are different from the NSLP and SBP.

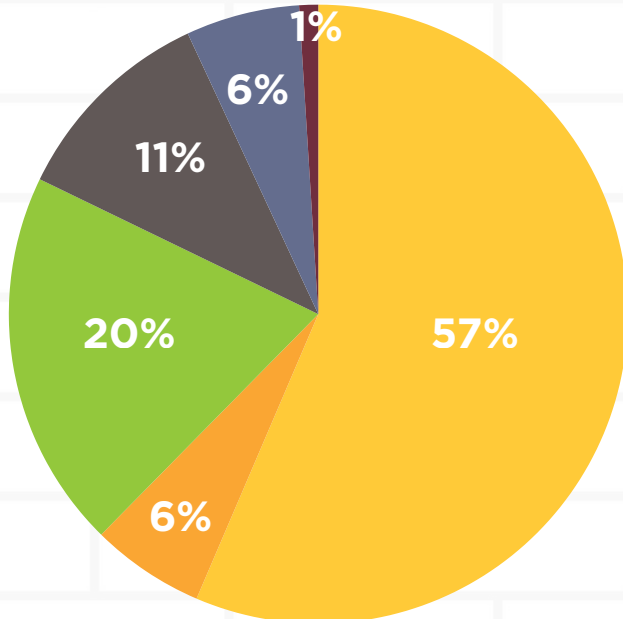
School Food Finance



School food service departments (more formally known as School Food Authorities or SFA) run on a budget separate from the school district's General Fund. Due to this, an SFA is considered an 'Enterprise Fund' and does not use local taxpayer dollars to fund their operations. Instead, an SFA funds their operations primarily through the revenue received by serving school meals. This money is distributed to an SFA as a reimbursement from the federal government and, in some cases (e.g. Colorado), from the state.

Breakdown of School Food Authority Revenue

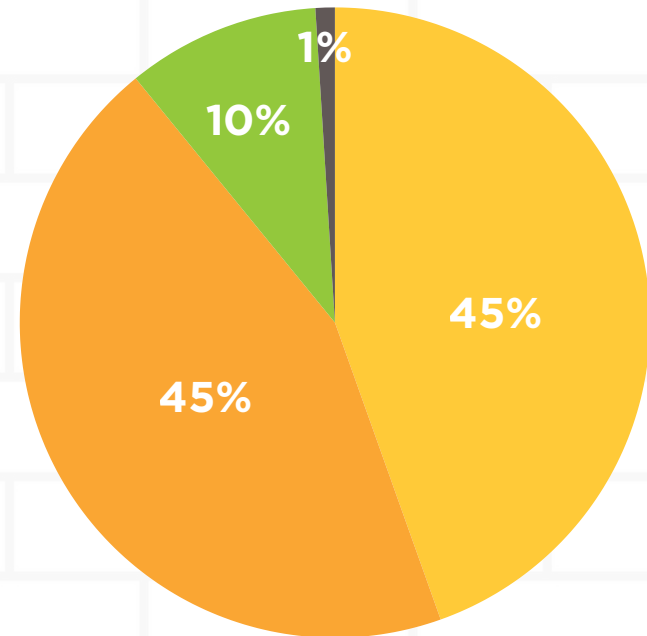
- USDA Federal Reimbursements
- USDA Foods
- Student Payments for Reimbursable Meals
- A la Carte and Other Nonreimbursable Sales
- State and Local Funds
- Other



Numbers are from the [USDA](#). Percentages equate to more than 100% due to rounding.

Breakdown of School Food Authority Budget

- Labor Costs
- Food Costs
- Other Direct Costs
- Indirect Costs



This is a depiction of the average of how SFAs budget. Some budget differently than others. Numbers are from the [USDA](#). Percentages equate to more than 100% due to rounding.

The Cost of Producing School Meals

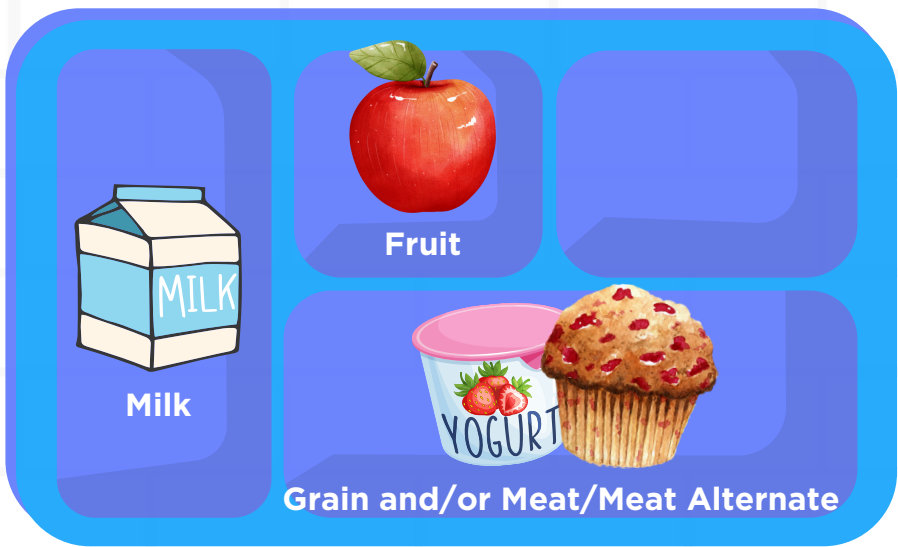
**School Year
2025-2026**

\$2.46

The amount of money an SFA receives **per breakfast served** in reimbursement. This cost covers labor, food, and other direct, and indirect costs.

\$1.00-\$1.60

The amount of money budgeted for the **tray cost per breakfast**, which includes all required breakfast components **in minimal serving requirements**. This amount is a range, as each SFA budgets differently.



These reimbursement amounts are set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and change each year with inflation.

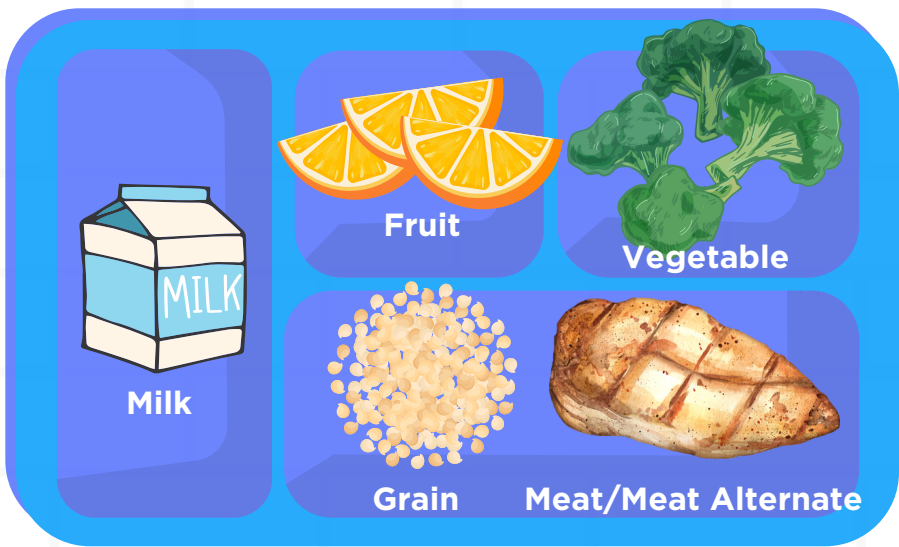
See pages 7-11 for more info on school meal requirements!

\$4.69

The amount of money an SFA receives **per lunch served** in reimbursement. This cost covers labor, food, and other direct, and indirect costs.

\$1.55-\$2.20

The amount of money budgeted for the **tray cost per lunch**, which includes all required lunch components **in minimal serving requirements**. This amount is a range, as each SFA budgets differently.



The Cost of Producing School Meals

You may now be wondering - how do the different meal components price out per serving? Well, we're so glad you asked!



Milk → \$0.30-\$0.40



Fruit → \$0.30-\$0.50



Vegetable → \$0.30-\$0.50



Meat/Meat Alternate → \$0.40-\$0.60



Grain → \$0.30-\$0.50



SFAs do **SO MUCH** on *incredibly* tight budgets! This doesn't even consider that they also have to factor in student preferences, supply chain issues, and so much more when menu planning.

Consider this...

How easy or difficult would it be for you to make a lunch at home that includes all five food components *in their minimal serving requirements* for \$2.00 or under?

Nutrition Standards for School Meals



Along with the crazy tight budgets SFAs must contend with, school meals must also meet strict federal nutrition standards that align with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. These nutrition standards require SFAs to offer more fruit, vegetables, and whole grains, and limit sodium, calories, unhealthy fats, and added sugar. Nutrition standards vary based on grade level.

See the next page for more info!

Breakfast Nutrition Standards

Nutrient Standards	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades K-8	Grades 9-12	Grades K-12
Calories	350-500	400-550	400-500	450-600	450-500
Saturated Fat	Less than 10%				
Sodium Target 1 (milligrams)	≤ 540	≤ 600	≤ 540	≤ 640	≤ 540

The nutrition standards above are the weekly averages for calories, fat, and sodium.

Nutrition Standards for School Meals

Lunch Nutrition Standards

Nutrient Standards	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades K-8	Grades 9-12
Calories	550-650	600-700	600-650	750-850
Saturated Fat	Less than 10%			
Sodium Target 1 (milligrams)	≤ 1,110	≤ 1,225	≤ 1,110	≤ 1,280

The nutrition standards above are the weekly averages for calories, fat, and sodium.

Sodium Targets and Added Sugar Limits? Please Explain More...



- SODIUM:** The USDA requires school breakfast and lunch to have weekly sodium limits. These sodium limits are based on the average of meals over the course of the week. Based on the latest nutrition science, stakeholder input, and lessons learned, the USDA has implemented one-time sodium reductions for K-12 students in school breakfast and lunch starting July 1, 2027. Specifically, school breakfast will have a 10% sodium reduction from the current limits above, and school lunch will have a 15% sodium reduction from the current limits above.
- ADDED SUGARS:** The USDA also requires school breakfast and lunch to have added sugar limits, which will be implemented in two phases. Starting July 1, 2025, there are product-based added sugar limits for breakfast cereals, yogurt, and flavored milk. Then, starting July 1, 2027, there will be a weekly 10% limit for added sugars in school breakfast and lunch.

Offer Versus Serve (OVS) at Breakfast

Tell Me More!

- Allows students to decline some of the food offerings at meal time
- Helps reduce food waste
- Allows students a choice of what they put on their tray for breakfast
- Optional for districts to participate in at breakfast for all grade groups

School Requirement

Offer the **3 required** breakfast components (see next page)



Offer at least 4 *food items*

Student Requirement

Select at least 3 *food items* in the required serving sizes



One of these *food items* must be, at least, 1/2 cup fruit and/or vegetable

Breakfast Requirements

What Needs to be Offered for School Breakfast?

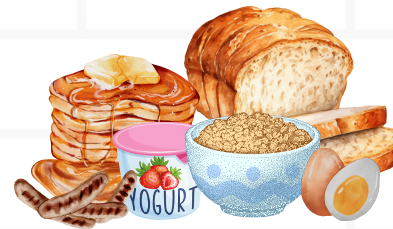
Guess what?!
 These requirements are made by the USDA.

Components that Must be **Offered**



Fruit and/or Vegetable
All Grades: 1 cup

Includes 100% Full-strength Fruit Juice



Grain and/or Meat/Meat Alternate

All Grades: 1 oz eq
 At least 80% of grains offered per week must be whole grain-rich



Milk
All Grades: 1 cup

1% or Skim Flavored or Unflavored

If substituting vegetables for fruits at breakfast more than once per week, the vegetables must come from at least two different vegetable subgroups. See page 13 for more info on subgroups!

Meat/Meat Alternates (MMA) (e.g. sausage, cheese, yogurt, etc.) are not a required component at breakfast. Schools may offer a Grain, MMA, or a combination of both to meet the minimum serving requirements per day.

What in the world do we mean by "oz eq!?" See page 12 for more info!

Food Items that Must be **Taken** by a Student if SFA Participating in OVS



Fruit and/or Vegetable
All Grades: 1/2 cup

At Least 2 Other Food Items

It's not required that students take milk as one of these food items under OVS.

Offer Versus Serve (OVS) at Lunch

Tell Me More!



- Allows students to decline some of the food offerings at meal time
- Helps reduce food waste
- Allows students a choice of what they put on their tray for breakfast
- Optional for districts to participate in at lunch for grades K-8
- Required for districts to participate in at lunch for grades 9-12

School Requirement

Offer the
5 required lunch
components
(see next page)

Student Requirement

Select at least
3 *components* in the
required serving sizes



One of these *components*
must be, at least, 1/2 cup
fruit and/or vegetable

Lunch Requirements

What Needs to be Offered for School Lunch?

Components that Must be **Offered**

Don't forget that these requirements are made by the USDA.



Vegetable
Grades K-8: 3/4 cup
Grades 9-12: 1 cup



Fruit
Grades K-8: 1/2 cup
Grades 9-12: 1 cup



Meat/Meat Alternate
Grades K-8: 1 oz eq
Grades 9-12: 2 oz eq



Grain
Grades K-8: 1 oz eq
Grades 9-12: 2 oz eq



Milk
All Grades: 1 cup
1% or Skim
Flavored or Unflavored

Includes five subgroups that must be offered in specific quantities over the course of the week (see page 13 for more info on subgroups)

Includes 100% Full-strength Fruit Juice
(juice cannot be offered for lunch if offered at breakfast)

Examples of a Meat Alternate are cheese, beans, nuts, and/or yogurt

At least 80% of grains offered per week must be whole grain-rich

*Beans/Peas/Lentils can be counted as both an MMA **AND** towards the weekly Beans/Peas/Lentils subgroup in the same meal, but, if using this combination, they cannot also count towards the daily vegetable component that day. Therefore, another vegetable would still need to be served on the menu that day.*

This does not include green peas! See page 13 for more info.

Remember to check out page 12 for an explanation of "oz eq!"

Lunch Requirements

What Needs to be Offered for School Lunch?

You're probably catching on by now! These requirements are made by the USDA.

Components that Must be **Taken** by a Student if SFA is Participating in OVS



Vegetable
All Grades: 1/2 cup

&/OR



Fruit
All Grades: 1/2 cup

+

At Least 2 Other Components

Vegetable and Fruit can be combined to make a 1/2 cup serving (i.e. 1/4 cup of each)

Due to these complex meal pattern and nutrition standard requirements, it's often complicated for SFAs to move into scratch-cooking. Rather, the current system makes it easier to offer processed items, such as Pancake-and-Sausage-on-a-Stick, because these sorts of options have all the required information on the box.

Vegetables and Fruit are measured in volume, rather than weight for all school meal programs. Weird, right?!

Similar to breakfast, it's not required that students take milk as one of these food items under OVS for lunch.

≡ Ounce Equivalents (oz eq) Explained ≡



An Ounce Equivalent (abbreviated “oz eq”) is a unit of measure that tells you the amount of Grain or Meat/Meat Alternate in a portion of food for school meals.

(The abbreviation “oz” means ounce, which is a unit of weight measuring one sixteenth of a pound.)

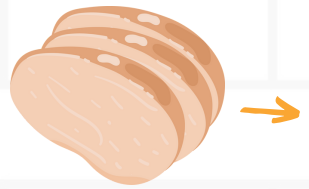
EXAMPLE

Meat/Meat Alternate

Chicken Breast vs. Deli Chicken



→ If your chicken breast is 100% meat and doesn't include added liquids, binders, extenders, preservatives, etc., then 1 oz of that chicken breast would be equivalent to 1 oz eq.



→ Since deli meat contains added liquids, binders, extenders, preservatives, etc., we CANNOT say that 1 oz deli meat is equivalent to 1 oz eq - the product isn't 100% meat since there are other ingredients! Therefore, 1 oz eq would depend on the amount of meat per serving. For instance, to credit 1 oz eq of deli meat, you might need to serve 1.6 oz of the actual product.

Grain

Brown Rice vs. Whole Grain Muffin



→ If your brown rice only contains rice as an ingredient and doesn't include any preservatives, flavors, etc., then 1 oz of that brown rice would be equivalent to 1 oz eq.



→ Since a muffin contains numerous ingredients - some type of whole grain, water, preservatives, flavorings, etc. - we CANNOT say that a 1 oz muffin is equivalent to 1 oz eq. Therefore, 1 oz eq would depend on the amount of grain per serving. For instance, to credit 1 oz eq of grain, you might need to serve a 1.5 oz muffin.

Vegetable Subgroups Explained



Vegetable Subgroups are part of the National School Lunch Program meal pattern requirements for K-12. Meal patterns require a daily serving of the Vegetables component during lunch and weekly servings of the five Vegetable Subgroups. Subgroups are based on the recommendations of the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and [MyPlate](#).

Includes fresh, frozen, canned, and rehydrated dried vegetables, plus 100% full-strength vegetable juice.

What are the **Five** Vegetable Subgroups and Examples of Foods in Each?



Dark Green

Broccoli, Leafy Greens (e.g. Spinach, Romaine Lettuce, Arugula, Kale, Chard, Collard Greens), Cilantro, etc.



Starchy

Corn, Potatoes, Green Peas, Plantains, Poi, Taro, Hominy, Jicama, Parsnips, etc.



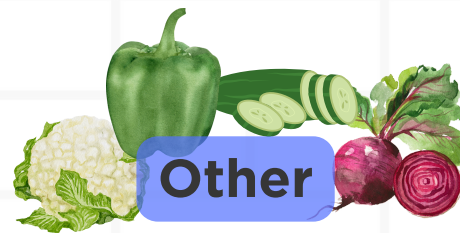
Beans/Peas/Lentils

Black Beans, Black-eyed Peas, Edamame, Garbanzo Beans/Chickpeas, Lentils, Kidney Beans, Pinto Beans, Refried Beans, Mung Beans, etc.



Red/Orange

Carrots, Acorn Squash, Butternut Squash, Tomatoes, Sweet Potatoes, Red and Orange Peppers, etc.



Other

Asparagus, Green and Yellow Peppers, Celery, Cucumber, Green Chili Peppers, Olives, Iceberg Lettuce, Snap and Snow Peas, Cauliflower, Beets, etc.



Peeling back another layer...isn't it is bizarre that cucumbers, green peppers, and other green vegetables are in the "Other" subgroup, rather than "Dark Green," and beets are considered "Other" instead of "Red/Orange?"

Serving Traditional Indigenous Foods



Traditional Indigenous foods are defined as those traditionally prepared and consumed by American Indian people and nations, which includes, but is not limited to, wild game meat, fish, seafood, marine mammals, plants, and berries. These foods may be served in reimbursable school meals.

What are Examples of Traditional Indigenous Foods?

Local procurement is an excellent way to include traditional Indigenous foods in school meal programs!



Bison



The Three Sisters

Corn, Beans, and Squash



Prickly Pear Cactus



Berries

Chokecherries, cranberries, blueberries, strawberries, rosehips, thimbleberries, etc.



Fish

Walleye, sturgeon, trout, salmon, etc.



Root Vegetables



Birds

Grouse, duck, geese, etc.



Grains

Wild rice, blue cornmeal, etc.

Resources for Serving Traditional Indigenous Foods in School Meals

- [Toolkit for Indigenous Foods in School Meals](#) (Indigikitchen and Montana No Kid Hungry)
- [Native Farm to School](#) (First Nations Development Institute)
- [Farm to School in Native Communities](#) (National Farm to School Network)
- [Serving Traditional Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs](#) (USDA)
- [Bringing Tribal Foods and Traditions into Cafeterias, Classrooms, and Gardens](#) (USDA)

Simplifying the Complex

A Brief Glossary to Help Understand School Meal Terms and Acronyms

Terms

Dietary Guidelines for Americans - A formal report published for the general public by both the United States Department of Agriculture and Health and Human Services that “provides advice on what to eat and drink to meet nutrient needs, promote health, and prevent disease.”

MyPlate - A nutrition guide published by the United States Department of Agriculture that illustrates healthy choices from each of the five food groups (i.e. fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy).

Reimbursement - The money a school food service department receives from the federal government for the meals served during a meal program. This money is used to pay for the school food service department’s expenses, such as labor and food, among other costs.

School Meal Operations - All of the factors at play that allow a school food service department to run each day. This includes, but is not limited to: ingredients and the supply chain; training and labor; kitchen facilities and equipment; the time school nutrition operators have to prepare meals; and the time students have to consume the meals.

School Meal Requirements - The rules school food service departments must follow for the meal programs they offer. These rules are created by the federal government (specifically the United States Department of Agriculture).

Scratch-cooking - When a school food service department makes their meals using cooking techniques that prioritize and include raw and/or fresh ingredients (e.g. raw proteins, unprocessed whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables), rather than food items that have undergone high levels of processing (e.g. chicken nuggets, pancake and sausage on a stick, etc.).

Supply Chain - The process of how food from a farm or ranch ends up on our plate. Includes production, processing, distribution/transportation, consumption, and disposal.

Acronyms

MMA - Meat/Meat Alternate (i.e. protein-rich foods such as chicken, pork, beef, tofu, cheese, yogurt, etc. Excludes fluid milk)

NSLP - National School Lunch Program

OVS - Offer Versus Serve program

SFA - School Food Authority (i.e. school food service department)

SBP - School Breakfast Program

USDA - United States Department of Agriculture