



Student Success and Wellness Bureau

Kids Kitchens – Healthy, Universal School Meals Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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Questions and responses will continue to be added to this FAQ.

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Healthy Universal School Meals Program Eligibility and Participation

1. What school food authorities are eligible to participate in the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

Public school districts and charter schools operating the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) shall establish a program to offer high-quality meals at no charge to all students. Bureau of Indian education schools, tribally controlled schools and private schools operating the NSLP and the SBP program may establish a program to offer high-quality meals at no charge to students.

2. If a school food authority is currently participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in the 2022-23 school year. What do they need to do to participate in the Healthy Universal School Meals for All Program that begins in the 2023-24 school year?

Current SFAs of the NSLP will be notified when it is time to complete the application for the Healthy Universal School Meals in Nutrition Portal for the 2023-24 school year. SFAs already currently operating NSLP should prepare for the next school year as they normally would.

3. If a school food authority is currently participating in the National School Lunch Program and is adding the School Breakfast Program for the 2023-24 school year, what steps do they need to take to add the School Breakfast Program?

SFAs that are not yet operating the School Breakfast Program, but are already operating the NSLP, will be able to add the School Breakfast Program in the Nutrition Portal as part of the School Nutrition Program application process for the 2023-24 school year.

4. Can a school food authority participate in Healthy Universal School Meals if they only operate either the School Breakfast or School Lunch?

No. In order to participate in Healthy Universal School Meals and receive the State reimbursement, SFAs must serve both breakfast and lunch to students.

5. If a school is private, tribally controlled or managed by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) already participates in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, how do they opt into the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

Again, BIE and Private currently operating the NSLP will be notified when it is time to complete the annual NSLP application for the Healthy Universal School Meals Program in Nutrition Portal for the 2023-24 school year. SFAs already currently operating NSLP should prepare for the next school year as they normally would. Compliance Officers will reach out to non-public/charter entities to ensure that they want to participate in the program. Schools have the option to opt-out of the program each year.

6. May a school food authority claim preschool or pre-K students under the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

If a school food authority serves eligible preschool or pre-K programs under the School Breakfast (SBP) and National School Lunch Programs (NSLP) they would be included in the Healthy Universal School Meals Program and all meals would be free for those students as well.

Preschools or pre-K programs eligible to provide meals under the SBP and NSLP are those that are income-based programs, like Head Start, or ones that offer instructional time. Instructional time means a learning environment that supports children's growth in many areas such as language, literacy, and social and emotional development. If students attend the school for daycare, then the daycare students are not eligible for meals under SBP or NSLP.

If pre-K students eat separately from older students, then they must be served meals that meet the pre-K meal pattern requirements. If pre-K students eat at the same time and in the same place as older students, then they may follow the NSLP and SBP meal patterns.

7. How will school food authorities maximize the amount of federal funding they receive?

School food authorities will be required to maximize the amount of federal funding received by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for all qualifying schools, or

grouping of schools, and by directly certifying students' eligibility.

Direct certification is a method used to qualify students for free or reduced-price school meals by using documentation directly from state agencies or other authorized sources such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), students experiencing homelessness or migrant students certified by PED. The Direct Certification System matches students with available data and apply school meal benefits without requiring a household to provide income information through a free and reduced-price lunch application.

The New Mexico Public Education Department was approved to participate in a demonstration project with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to use Medicaid data to help directly certify more students starting in school year 2023-24. Utilizing Medicaid data should increase the number of students that are directly certified for free and reduced-price meals.

New School Food Authorities (SFAs)

1. Schools that have never participated in the National School Lunch Program may wish to participate now that meals will be free. How do they sign up?

SFAs that wish to participate in the National School Lunch Program must contact the PED no later than May 31 for the following school year. After the first year of implementation, a School or SFA must notify the SSWB they wish to participate in NSLP that have not previously participated by January 31st for the following school year to be able to be part of the Healthy Universal School Meals program. An application for the National School lunch Program must also be submitted by May 31 to participate in the following school year. All logistics, including procuring a vendor and purchasing equipment, must be resolved before the National School Lunch Program application is approved.

2. Schools that have participated in NSLP in the past but have not for several years may wish to participate now that meals will be free. How do they sign up?

SFAs that wish to participate in the National School Lunch Program must contact the PED no later than May 31 for the following school year. After the first year of implementation, a School or SFA must notify the SSWB they wish to participate in NSLP that have not previously participated by January 31st for the following school year. An application for the National School lunch Program must also be submitted by May 31 to participate in the following school year. All logistics, including procuring a vendor and purchasing equipment, must be resolved before the National School Lunch Program application is approved.

State Funding for Meal Reimbursements

1. What additional state reimbursement will school food authorities receive when implementing the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

For the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, all SFAs participating in the Healthy School Meals for All Program will receive the maximum state reimbursement that is equal to the federal free reimbursement rate multiplied by the total number of meals served, minus any other federal or state reimbursement that the SFA receives for providing meals.

This state reimbursement is the difference between the Federal Free and Federal Paid reimbursement rate. Federal reimbursement rates for the upcoming school year are typically released in mid-July and will be estimated based on previous year total meal counts:-

By August 1 of each year, PED will inform eligible school food authorities of the estimated program funding they will receive during the upcoming school year. When calculating the amount of program funding that is due to a school food authority, the department would be required to assume that student participation will remain at the same level as the previous school year. However, once school food authorities submit their monthly claims for reimbursement, their state claim will be calculated based on the actual number of meals served each month.

Guidance regarding healthy school meal improvement requirements is forthcoming. Starting in the 2025-2026 school year, SFAs will be required to meet the healthy school meal improvement requirements to receive maximum state reimbursement.

2. Will school food authorities still receive state funding for Reduced-Price meals and Breakfast After the Bell?

This funding will continue, but all SFAs and/or sites may not receive this reimbursement based on their participation in CEP. SFAs and/or sites not eligible for CEP will continue to receive an additional \$0.30 for breakfast and \$0.40 for lunch for meals served to Reduced-Price students. SFAs and/or sites operating CEP will no longer have a Reduced-Price designation – all meals will be claimed as either free or paid. As such, the additional reimbursement for Reduced-Price meals would no longer apply.

SFAs will still need to follow the Breakfast After the Bell rule and offer breakfast to students after the bell at schools that are 85% free and reduced-price lunch or higher (Per NMAC 6.19.12). The reimbursement for the paid student breakfasts served will be included in the state reimbursement for Healthy Universal School Meals. All SFA's will be required to follow the breakfast after the bell law that was passed in New Mexico.

3. How will SFAs receive state funding?

SFAs are required to put a claim in for reimbursement for federal funds starting the 1st-10th of every month for the prior month. A state claim will be generated based on the reduced and paid

breakfast and lunches entered per site. The SFA will then submit both the Federal and State Claims for reimbursement by the 10th of every month.

4. What if my SFA was not listed in the estimated allocation listing and it is participating in the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

If your school food authority is 100% CEP, then it is already receiving the maximum reimbursement and the SFA will not have to create a BAR nor will it be listed on the estimated allocation listing. Another reason a SFA may not be listed on the estimated allocation listing is that it is in its first year of school lunch and school breakfast program operation and therefore it does not have previous year meal count to estimate funding. The department will inform you on how to enter a BAR.

Free and Reduced Lunch Application Requirements

1. May school food authorities require that families complete a free and reduced lunch application?

No. Not all Schools or SFAs implementing the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs need to require households to complete and submit a free and reduced lunch application. CEP and Special Provision schools are exempt from collecting household application and certifying students for free, reduced, and paid meals as they all qualify for free meals under these special provisions. Schools that are Standard Program options should collect household application to certify students for free, reduced, and paid meals. These program options guide USDA federal reimbursements as well as state funding through the Healthy Universal School Meals Program. Standard Schools or SFAs with non-Community Eligibility Provision schools should notify households that while costs are being covered by state funds, New Mexico school districts must maximize federal reimbursement to ensure sustainability of the program. To do this, households are highly encouraged to fill out a free and reduced lunch application regardless of income level. A communication toolkit will be available in July to assist with this outreach.

These free/reduced applications in standard schools are needed for programs such as E-rate and Title I programs for federal funding. These school districts will notify parents and families if they are needed to complete these applications.

2. If all students eat for free, why do non-CEP schools still need to collect applications?

School Food Authorities that participate in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast programs receive a per meal federal reimbursement for each reimbursable meal they serve. For SFAs that opt in, the Healthy Universal School Meals Program will provide free meals to all students by covering the cost of meals provided to students that would otherwise pay full price for a meal. SFAs will first receive their federal reimbursement rate based on their program option (CEP, Standard, or P2) percentages for free, reduced, and paid meals. Based on those

percentages, the state will reimburse the SFA for the difference between the federal paid and free rates. Therefore, it is important that Standard schools still collect applications.

3. Will school food authorities collect free and reduced lunch applications at schools implementing the Community Eligibility Provision?

No. Schools implementing the Community Eligibility Provision will not collect free and reduced lunch applications and schools will claim reimbursement for meals served based on how many students are eligible for free meals, using the direct certification system approved CEP base year.

4. How should school food authorities communicate the collection of free and reduced lunch applications and/or a combination form to their families?

The NM Public Education Department is developing a communications toolkit that may include a letter template, social media posts and handouts for communication to families. This toolkit is projected to be available by mid-July.

5. How will electing to participate in CEP at the new 25% Identified Student Percentage (ISP) threshold affect my SFA?

There are many benefits to the SFA for participating in CEP even with the new 25% ISP threshold such as no matter how low the ISP threshold is for the SFA, the state will reimburse the SFA for the difference between the federal paid and free rates, maximizing the reimbursement rate. Some other benefits include:

- Reducing the administrative burden and paperwork for the SFA by not having to collect yearly applications.
- Eliminates unpaid meal debt once implementing CEP.
- Simplifies the Administrative Review process.
- Eases the financial burden on the state by having a determined ISP.

New Mexico Grown Program

1. Are school food authorities required to operate the New Mexico Grown Program?

No. School food authorities are not required to participate in this aspect of the program.

There is a separate application process that closed in spring 2023 for this portion of the program. If a SFA applied to implement the New Mexico Grown Program, and is approved, they will use the funds to purchase New Mexico grown, raised, or processed products. More information about this program can be found <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/student-success-wellness/nutrition/farm-to-school/>.

2. How much money will each school district receive for the Local Food Program?

Participating school food authorities may receive New Mexico Grown product funds based

on the lunches served in the prior school year (approximately \$.10/per lunch) or a minimum of \$1,000, pending available appropriations annually.

School Kitchen Capital Improvement Program

1. When will school kitchen capital improvement funds be released? How should school food authorities apply for funds?

Application deadline was November 17th. Awards will be made in January 2024.

General Questions

1. How is the Healthy Universal School Meals Program different from the National School Lunch Program?

The Healthy Universal School Meals Program is a state funded program that provides reimbursement for meals served to students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals, so all students receive the meals at no cost. Schools participating in the Healthy Universal School Meals Program must participate in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program and adhere to the regulations of those programs.

2. Is the Healthy Universal School Meals Program a temporary program?

No, the funding for the Healthy Universal School Meals Program is permanent.

3. When does this program start?

The Healthy Universal School Meals Program begins on July 1, 2023.

4. Can schools operate the National School Lunch Program and/or the School Breakfast Program only some of the days that school is in session?

No. The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program must operate on all academic school days that students are on campus.

5. Will meals be free for teachers and staff?

No. School Nutrition Programs funds may not subsidize meals served to nonprogram adults. The adult meal price must be set high enough so that the cost of the meal is fully paid by the customer.

6. Where can I find a list of the schools that are participating in the Healthy Universal School Meals Program?

The NM Public Education Department will have a list of participating schools after July 1, 2023.

7. Can we provide meals to our students through this program on weekends, during the summer, or on other school breaks?

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program can only operate on

academic school days. Other federal child nutrition programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) may be available for schools to operate on non-academic days.

8. My question was not answered in this FAQ, who should I contact?

Additional questions can be submitted to the NM Public Education Department, Student Success and Wellness Bureau. For questions regarding the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program contact Rachele DiQuarto at Rachele.diquarto@ped.nm.gov. For questions on Healthy Universal School Meals contact Dr. Rosa Lopez at Rosa.Lopez@ped.nm.gov, and for questions related to federal and state reimbursements contact Laura Henry-Hand at Laura.Henry-Hand@ped.nm.gov.