

Policy Brief

May 2011

National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs

What are the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs?

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to millions of American children each school day to ensure our nation's youth are receiving proper nutrition. The NSLP is available at over 99,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential care institutions. The National School Breakfast Program (NSBP) also provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free breakfasts to school-aged children. It operates in over 86,000 schools and institutions nationwide.¹

Both programs are federally assisted meal programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service at the national level and state education agencies at the state level. Participating institutions in the NSLP and NSBP receive cash subsidies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for every meal served. In return, the institutions are required to service lunches and/or breakfasts that meet federal requirements while providing free and reduced-price meals to eligible children. School food authorities may also be reimbursed for snacks served to children 18 years old and younger who participate in afterschool educational or enrichment programs.

In 2010, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA). Intended to safeguard and improve the health of our children, the Act brought the first increase in federal funding in more than 30 years. The newly reformed program also calls for national standards for all foods and beverages sold in our schools, including training for food service workers and stronger safety measures. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working with in conjunction with the HHFKA to: promote participation in the NSBP; expand access to meals served through eligible afterschool programs for at-risk children to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); expand educational initiatives for wellness policies intended to teach our children healthy eating habits and; improve the nutritional quality of food sold at schools.²

Who is Eligible for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs?

Any child attending a school or institution participating in the national meal programs is eligible to purchase a meal. Children from low-income families earning at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG) (\$29,055 for a family of four) are eligible to receive free meals. Children from families that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are automatically qualified to receive free school meals. Children from families earning between

130 and 185 percent of the FPG (up to \$41,348 for a family of four) are eligible to receive reduced-price meals.³ Students receiving a reduced-priced meal may not be charged more than \$0.40 for lunch and \$0.30 for breakfast. Children from families earning more than 185 percent of the FPG pay full-price for their meals, though the federal government does provide a small subsidy for paid meals.

The current cash reimbursement rates for FFY 2011 are:

Federal Reimbursement Rates for National School Lunch & Breakfast Programs

Type of Meal	Lunch	Breakfast
Free	\$2.77	\$1.51
Reduced-Price	\$2.37	\$1.21
Paid	\$0.26	\$0.27

Source: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/fedrates.pdf>

How Many People Participate in NSLP?

Nationally, the NSLP provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day. In Indiana, 2,220 schools participate in the NSLP. On an average school day during the 2009-2010 school year, over 798,559 Hoosier children ate a school lunch served through the NSLP. Fifty-six percent of children (432,256) participating in the program received a free or reduced-price lunch, while the remaining 366,303 students paid for their lunches. For comparison, Indiana saw a 15% participation increase from the 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 school year. Federal funding for the NSLP in Indiana totaled over \$210.5 million during the 2009-2010 school year.⁴

The NSBP is not as wide reaching as the lunch program. Nonetheless, it is offered at 1,945 schools across the state and on an average school day during the 2009-2010 academic year, provided breakfast to 224,936 Hoosier children. Eighty-three percent of those students received a free or reduced-priced lunch, while 17 percent of the students participating paid for their breakfasts. Over the past ten years, Indiana's participation in the free and reduced-price NSBP has increased 120 percent.⁵

Who are NSLP participants?

Characteristics of NSLP participants vary by ethnicity, race, age, income, household composition, and food security status. The study of NSLP participants during the most recent school year available (2004-2005) found:

- One-third of all participants in the NSLP were students 8-10 years old, while students 11-13 years old accounted for 25 percent of all participants. Participation was the lowest among 14-15 year olds and 16-18 year olds at 12.5 and 13.5 percent respectively. Younger children, those 6-7 years old, accounted for 15.6 percent of all NSLP participants.
- Half of all students participating in the NSLP were white, while 24 percent were Hispanic, 19 percent were Black, and less than 7 percent were of a different ethnicity.

- The majority of participating students (45 percent) came from households earning 186 percent of the FPG, while 29 percent lived in households earning less than 130 percent, and 13 percent had family incomes ranging between 131 and 185 percent of the FPG.
- Thirty percent of children enrolled in the NSLP lived in a single-parent household, while 70 percent of children lived in a household with two adults.
- Twenty-four percent of children eating a school lunch lived in a household that received SNAP benefits, while another 10 percent lived in a household that received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or another form of cash assistance.
- The vast majority of students eating school lunches (78 percent) were from food secure households, while 17 percent were from households with low levels of food security, and 6 percent were from families experiencing very low food security.⁶ A family is “food secure,” if all members of the household, at all times, has access to enough food to afford them an active, healthy life.

How do these programs benefit Indiana?

A report released by the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University found that children who experienced hunger and food insecurity suffered adverse consequences compared to children who did not experience hunger –consequences that affect their health, behavior, ability to learn, and academic performance.

Negative health effects of food insecurity for children include:

- Poorer overall health status and a compromised ability to resist illness;
- Increased likeliness of health problems including, colds, ear infections, iron deficiency anemia, stomachaches, headaches and fatigue; and
- Increased incidence of hospitalizations and doctor visits.

The report also indicates that children in food-insecure and hungry households experience increased psychological and emotional distress. Food insecure and hunger children are more likely to experience psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems such as:

- Impaired psychosocial functioning, including higher levels of anxiety, irritability, hyperactivity, and aggressive and oppositional behaviors;
- Fatigue and difficulty concentrating;
- Increased levels of aggressive and destructive behaviors;
- Higher levels of distressed behavior and withdrawal; and
- Increased difficulty of getting along well with others.

Furthermore, the report explains that food insecurity and malnutrition resulting from hunger can negatively affect a child’s development including their ability to grasp basic skills and diminish their learning potential. Hunger and food insecurity negatively affect the test scores, school

performance, and overall learning of children. Other negative outcomes associated with food insecurity and hunger includes:

- Increased likelihood of repeating a grade in school;
- Higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism; and
- For teenagers, nearly doubled the likelihood of suspension from school.⁷

According to government data, almost 32 percent of children 6 to 19 years of age are overweight or obese. These numbers continue to climb, putting our children at risk of chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and Type 2 diabetes. Participating in the HHFKA trial program could decrease these numbers, ultimately decreasing costs to taxpayers.

Childhood poverty in Indiana is on the rise at a rate faster than the national average—with 1 in 5 children living in poverty. Additionally, a report by the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), analyzed data from Gallup’s *Healthways Well-Being Index* project and found that more than a quarter of Indiana households with children did not have enough money to buy the food they needed in 2008 and 2009—ranking Indiana 19th in the nation for food hardship.⁸ According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Indiana ranks 31st in the nation in overall child health and well-being.⁹ Malnourishment and hunger, caused by increased poverty levels, continue to burden the local economy; it is estimated that this costs the state near \$1.9 billion per year.¹⁰

Providing nutritious meals to Hoosier children through The National School Lunch and Breakfast Program can help to mitigate the negative consequences of hunger for school children and improve their overall health, behavior, ability to learn, and academic performance.

How Many NSBP Dollars Go Unclaimed in Indiana?

If Indiana could increase participation in the School Breakfast Program to equal 60 percent of School Lunch Program participation, then an additional 72,721 school children would receive a free or reduced-price nutritional breakfast before school. Enhancing the program to 60 percent participation would also bring an additional \$14.28 million in federal funding to Indiana.

Additionally, there are two provisions in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which have the potential to increase Indiana’s participation in both NSLP and NSBP participation. These policies are as follows:

- Increases the number of eligible children enrolled in school meal programs by using Medicaid data to directly certify children who meet income requirements; and
- Allows more universal meal access for eligible students in high poverty communities by eliminating paper applications and using census data to determine school-wide income eligibility.

Policy Brief Made Possible Through Generous Funding From:



FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Indiana Institute for Working Families

1845 W. 18th St.

Indianapolis, IN 46202

Phone: 317-638-4232

Web Site: <http://www.incap.org/iiwf.html>

¹ United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *National School Lunch Program Fact Sheet*, August 2009.

² United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, Quick Facts*. August 2009.

Online: http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/factsheets/2011_hhfka.pdf

³ Food Research and Action Center, *Reimbursement Rates & Income Guidelines for the Federal Child Nutrition Programs*, August 2011.

Online: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/fedrates.pdf>

⁴ Food Research and Action Center, *National and State Program Data*, August 2011.

Online: <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/reports-2/>

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *National School Breakfast Program: Total Participation*

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *The National School Lunch Program: Background, Trends, and Issues*, July 2008.

⁷ Center on Hunger and Poverty Heller School for Social Policy and Management Brandeis University, *The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: Evidence from Recent Scientific Studies*, June 2002.

⁸ Food and Research Action Center, *Campaign to End Hunger, Food Hardship in American 2010, Households with and without Children*. August 2011.

Online: http://www.frac.org/pdf/aug2011_food_hardship_report_children.pdf

⁹ Annie E. Casey Foundations, 2011 Kids Count Data Center.

Online: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/DataBook/2011/Default.aspx>

¹⁰ The Economic Cost of Hunger in the United States, *Estimated Annual Burden to the United States, 2007*. Online: http://www.sodexofoundation.org/hunger_us/Images/Cost%20of%20Domestic%20Hunger%20Report%20_tcm150-155150.pdf