

The National School Lunch Program

**By
Carrie Draney**

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INTRODUCTION

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a government assisted lunch program that is incorporated into schools in order to make lunches more affordable to children. This program provides low-cost to free lunches to over 31 million children each school day (1). The NSLP focuses on providing nutritious meals to children and therefore has strict requirements. These requirements are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Schools are required to provide a specific amount of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and calories. Also, there are regulations on specific macronutrients and micronutrients. In order for a school to qualify for the NSLP, it is the school foodservice manager's responsibility to ensure that all requirements are met. Meeting these requirements can be difficult due to a lack of funds. It is important for a foodservice manager to understand the funding that the government could provide. Also, once the school has decided it can afford the program, implementation of the program is critical in order to keep participation rate high. Every school foodservice director should understand the NSLP's nutrient requirements, government funding, and program implementation in order to decide whether their school should participate in the NSLP.

NUTRIENT REQUIREMENTS

In order to participate in the NSLP, a school foodservice manager must understand the nutrient requirements. The federal and state governments regulate the nutritional content of each meal. The state agencies will conduct an analysis every three years to verify that requirements are being met. These requirements set a standard for how much meat, grain, fruit, vegetable, and dairy must be served. Other requirements include meeting specific calorie needs. It is important for a school foodservice director to understand each rule in order to see if their school can provide an appropriate menu for the NSLP (2).

Basic Food Group Requirements

The NSLP focuses on five basic food groups: protein, grain, fruits, vegetables, and dairy. The government has established rules for each group that restrict what can and cannot be served. For example, the NSLP requires that a meat or meat alternative must be provided daily at lunch or breakfast. Schools must offer the proper amount to the children, which vary depending on age (3). A school foodservice manager should be aware of these rules in order to decide if the school can follow each one. Another specific rule states that all grains must be whole grain enriched. Children are often exposed to refined grains and the NSLP hopes to expose the children to healthier options, like whole grains (1).

Also, strict requirements are set for dairy. Previously, milk was available in low-fat and fat-free options, both flavored and regular. Now, the NSLP requires that all flavored milk be fat-free. Low-fat flavored milks are no longer provided because of high fat and sugar content (1). Originally, schools did not believe children would enjoy this change but over time, data shows that children accept the change (4).

These nutrient requirements are important for a school foodservice manager to understand in order to estimate the cost of providing these foods. The school must be able to afford to implement each of these nutrient requirements. If financially the school cannot afford to provide the foods required, the school cannot be funded by the NSLP.

Calorie Requirements

The goal of the NSLP is to provide more nutritious meals with hopes to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity. Calorie requirements are established in order to achieve this goal. Children must be provided with the recommended minimum or maximum calorie levels for

their age group. The NSLP seeks to provide calories from nutrient dense foods and from meals that can teach children about a balanced diet (1).

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Eligibility for Government Funding

In order to properly plan a menu that follows all NSLP nutrient requirements, a school foodservice manager should plan a budget based on eligibility funding and food donations. By participating in the NSLP, the government provides funding. The amount of subsidy provided depends on student participation. The foodservice manager must understand how a child can become eligible for free meals. The government will pay for meals if the child meets a certain income criteria. For example, if a household of two earns less than \$552 a week, their child would be eligible for reduce priced meals and the government would pay the school the difference. By analyzing children's economic statuses, the school food manager can estimate a budget based on how many children are eligible and the money they will receive in return (1).

Food Donations

Also, schools that participate in the NSLP can apply for food donations from government agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (1). The USDA funds a program known as the USDA's Schools/Child Nutrition programs (Schools CN). This program provides nutritious foods to the NSLP and other programs that seek to improve nutrition. The USDA provides fruits, vegetables, dairy, and protein products to schools (5). Also, the USDA funds the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program (FFVP). This program provides fresh fruits and vegetables to schools participating in the NSLP. The USDA will provide reimbursement to schools that are willing to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the students throughout the day

(6). In order for a proper budget and menu to be determined, a foodservice manager should understand how the government would contribute and what resources are available for donations.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Menu Variety and Food Adjustments

Changing the food in a school system can be uncomfortable for the children and can be rejected if not implemented correctly. Foodservice managers must find a way to implement nutritious options without forgoing taste. For example, with new regulations on fat content, managers must become creative with the ingredients they use in recipes for desserts (7). These adjustments may require extra labor and the foodservice manager should be mindful of the added labor needed.

Competition of Local Restaurants

Also, school foodservice managers must be aware of off-campus vendors where students can eat lunch (8). If students go off-campus for lunch, they do not participate in the NSLP and the school loses government funding. Managers need to create a healthy, appealing menu to compete with off-campus vendors. Overall, it is the responsibility of the foodservice manager to implement the program successfully by creating a menu that students will enjoy.

CONCLUSION

The NSLP has strict protocols and it is the school foodservice manager's responsibility to decide if the school can uphold all requirements. In order to decide if the necessary changes can be made, the nutrient requirements and financial plans should be reviewed. Then, the manager must decide if the program can be implemented properly in order to receive full support from the children.

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