

Meal Prices

A research brief about school year 2022–2023



Key Takeaways

- In States that did not offer universal free school meals, 65 percent of school food authorities (SFAs) had one or more schools that charged students for school meals.
- The average price of a paid breakfast was \$1.80.
- The average price of a paid lunch was \$2.99, a 20 percent increase from the average price of \$2.49 in school year 2015–2016.
- In response to the Paid Lunch Equity requirement of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, 24 percent of SFAs increased prices for paid lunches in their schools.

The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program are Federally assisted meal programs. They provide nutritious, low-cost or free meals to children in schools. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the school meal programs at the Federal level. State agencies administer the school meal programs in each State and Territory through agreements with local school food authorities (SFAs).

SFAs are responsible for the school meal programs in one or more schools, and provide free, reduced-price, or paid school meals to children. FNS sends SFAs cash reimbursements to subsidize the cost of every school meal ([42 USC § 1773](#); [42 USC § 1759a](#)).^{1,2} The reimbursements are highest for free school meals and lowest for school meals that students pay for ([Federal Register 2022](#)).³

Free school meals

Free school meals may be provided to every child in a State. In school year (SY) 2022–2023, California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont funded universal free school meals.

Free school meals may be provided to every child in a school. The Community Eligibility Provision allows schools in low-income areas to serve free meals to all students ([7 CFR § 245.9](#)).⁴ In SY 2022–2023, about one-third of the SFAs in States without universal free school meals (35 percent) provided all meals in all schools for free. About two-thirds of the SFAs (65 percent) had one or more schools that charged for school meals.

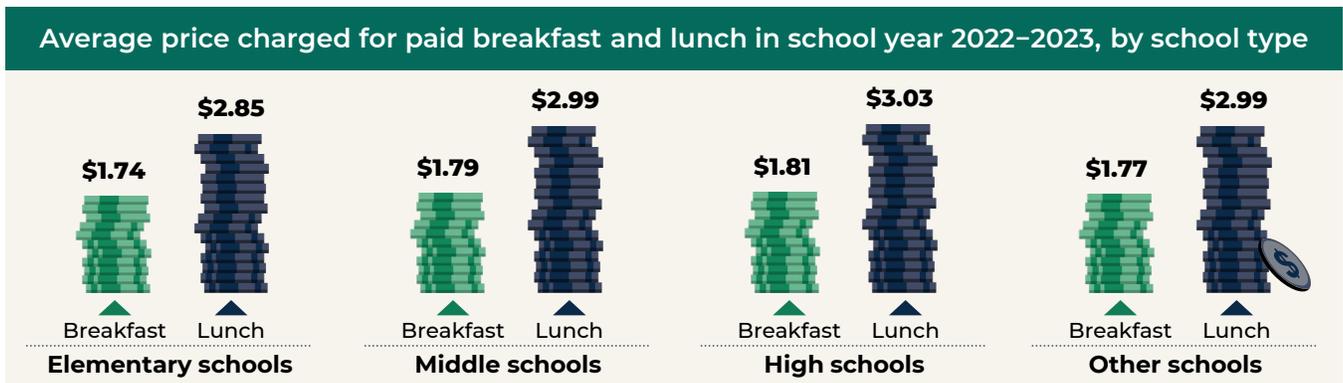
Free school meals are provided to individual children who live in households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level ([42 USC § 1758\[b\]\[1\]\[A\]](#)).⁵ Foster children, homeless children, migrant children, runaway children, children who participate in Head Start, and children who live in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are all categorically eligible for free school meals ([7 CFR 245](#)).⁶ In addition, some States subsidize reduced-price meals to make them free ([FRAC 2023](#)).⁷

Reduced-price school meals

Reduced-price school meals cost \$0.30 or less for breakfast and \$0.40 or less for lunch ([42 USC § 1773](#); [42 USC § 1758](#)).^{8,9} Students are eligible for reduced-price school meals if their household income is between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level.

Paid school meals

SFAs set the prices of paid school meals. In SY 2022–2023, the average price of a paid breakfast was \$1.80 and the median was higher at \$2.96, while the average price of a paid lunch was \$2.99 with a lower median of \$1.75. Paid meal prices varied by school type as shown in the chart below.



Note: Other schools included secondary schools (serving grades 6 or 7 through 12), early elementary schools (serving prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 2), K through 8 schools (serving prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 8), and K through 12 schools (serving all grades).

The price of paid school meals has steadily increased over the years in response to the **Paid Lunch Equity (PLE) requirement** ([7 CFR 210.14\(e\)](#)).¹⁰ The PLE requirement directs SFAs to compare the average price for a paid lunch with the difference between the free and paid lunch reimbursement rates. If the average price for a paid lunch is less than the reimbursement difference, SFAs must increase their paid lunch prices or offset the difference with funding from non-Federal sources. This ensures free and reduced-price subsidies are not used to cover the cost of paid lunches.

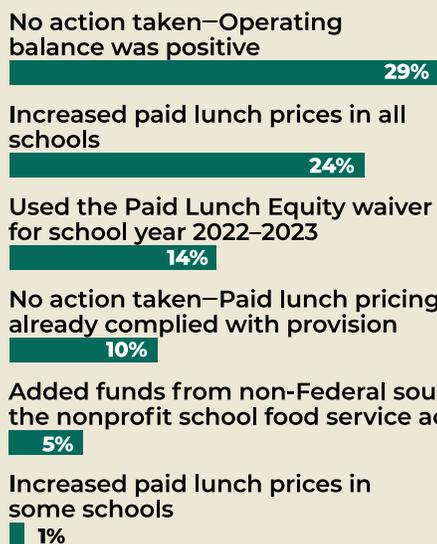


Note: FNS did not collect data on meal prices for SY 2018–2019, and meals were free during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in the spring of SY 2019–2020 and through the end of SY 2020–2021. The data for SYs 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018 are from an earlier study ([FNS 2022](#)).¹¹

Since SY 2018–2019, Congress has provided an exemption from PLE requirements for SFAs with a zero or positive balance in their nonprofit school food service account (PL 117-103).¹² In addition, in SY 2022–2023, FNS issued a waiver giving SFAs the flexibility to maintain prices and to price lunches at levels that met local needs. This was done to help families transition back to paid school meals after free school meals were provided to all children through SY 2021–2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. SFAs took a variety of actions in response to the PLE requirement in SY 2022–2023 under the PLE exemption and waiver.

About one-third of SFAs did not take any action in response to the PLE requirement because their operating balance was positive, whereas one-quarter increased the price of a paid lunch in all schools. Fourteen percent of SFAs used the PLE waiver, meaning they did not increase their paid lunch prices even though they would have been required to in the absence of the waiver; 10 percent did not take any action because their paid lunch pricing already complied with the PLE provision. Only a few SFAs added funds from non-Federal sources to the nonprofit school food service account (5 percent) or increased paid lunch prices in some schools (1 percent).

School food authority actions in response to the Paid Lunch Equity Provision



About the data reported here

This study was sponsored by USDA FNS. The information reported in this brief was collected from an online survey distributed to a nationally representative sample of 1,100 SFAs that participated in NSLP or SBP during SY 2022–2023, although the questions about meal prices excluded SFAs in California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont because they had universal free school meals in SY 2022–2023. The data tables are available in Supplement B.6, and include some data broken down by SFA characteristic (size, poverty level, and urbanicity).

Suggested citation

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Disclaimer

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- ¹⁰ Part 210, National School Lunch Program. August 1988, amended 2013. [https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-210#p-210.14\(e\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-210#p-210.14(e)).
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Child Nutrition Program Operations Study (CN-OPS-II): SY 2017-18. Beyler, Nick, Jim Murdoch, and Charlotte Cabili. Project Officer: Holly Figueroa. Alexandria, VA: November 2022. [CN-OPS-II Report: School Year 2017-18](#).
- ¹² Section 752 of Division A of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-117publ103/pdf/PLAW-117publ103.pdf>.