

D.C. School Lunch 101: How school lunch works in Washington, DC

There are approximately 78,000 school-aged children in Washington, DC, and approximately two-thirds of them are served lunch each day at school through the National School Lunch Program. Most schools in Washington, DC also serve breakfast, and some even serve dinner. Healthy meals at school are especially important because one in two Washington, DC children is at risk of hunger, and four in five are reportedly not getting enough servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Healthy meals at school are important to nourish children in our nation's capital and teach them eating habits that will last a lifetime.

National School Lunch Program

The federal government reimburses schools for some or all of the lunches (and other meals) they serve through the National School Lunch Program. In order to receive these reimbursements, schools must meet specific serving and nutrition requirements mandated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food & Nutrition Service. Meals must include five components – a protein, grain, milk, and two fruits or vegetables.¹

Federal School Lunch Reimbursements

The amount of money that a school is reimbursed by the federal government through the National School Lunch Program depends on the income level of the student served.² For each lunch served to a low-income student (defined as at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level), schools in Washington, DC get \$2.79 per meal from the federal government, and these meals for low-income students must be served for free. For students with incomes between 130% and 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, schools receive \$2.39 from the federal government. Most schools across the country sell meals to these students at a reduced price, but they must be served free in Washington, DC schools as a result of the Healthy Schools Act (which we'll hear more about below). Schools receive \$0.25 per meal when students with incomes greater than 185% of the Federal Poverty Level eat school lunch, and these students typically pay for their meals. In Washington, DC, these students typically pay \$1.50 per meal.³

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE) Wellness & Nutrition Services division dispenses National School Lunch Program reimbursements to participating schools each month. OSSE monitors schools to make sure they are complying with the many meal requirements set by the federal government. In Washington, DC, 72% of students are eligible for free or reduced priced meals, meaning their families make less than 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. Washington, DC schools participating in the National School Lunch program currently serve approximately 48,000 lunches to students each day. In 2010, federal payments to D.C. schools amounted to approximately \$19 million.

Local School Lunch Reimbursements

In addition to federal funding for school meals, Washington, DC is one of the only "states" in the nation where the local government provides supplemental funding to schools for serving meals as a result of the Healthy Schools Act. The Healthy Schools Act is a local law that went into

¹ Visit [www. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch>](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch) for more information about the National School Lunch Program requirements and reimbursements

² For the period July 1, 2011, through June 30, 2012, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$29,055 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$41,348

³ Schools can serve all students free of charge if they follow Provision 2 – see <http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/provision2.pdf> for more information

effect in 2010, which sets nutrition and serving standards for D.C. schools participating in the federal school meal programs (in addition to standards set by the USDA). If schools meet these standards, which include serving a variety of fruits, vegetables and whole grains at meals, they receive an extra 10-cents per meal from the D.C. government (in addition to the federal funds described above through the National School Lunch Program). Also, schools can receive a 5-cent per meal extra reimbursement from the D.C. government for every meal served that includes a fresh, locally-grown fruit or vegetable component. Additionally, the Healthy Schools Act eliminates the reduced-price category for students. The D.C. government reimburses schools for the \$0.40 difference between the \$2.39 and \$2.79 federal reimbursement for offering free lunch to students who otherwise would have qualified for reduced-price meals (in other words, with families making between 130 and 185% of the Federal Poverty Level).⁴

With federal and local funding for school meals, schools make and distribute lunches for students each day. Most schools hire a food service management company to prepare meals for the school either on-site, or to be delivered to the school each day. Some schools, however, use federal funding to hire staff, purchase kitchen equipment and prepare meals on-site (see visual below).⁵

Participating Schools

Any school can participate in the National School Lunch Program if it meets the federal requirements – it can be public, public charter, or private. Participating schools are called Local Education Agencies, or LEA's. At D.C. Public Schools, meals at all 127 campuses are managed by DCPS' Office of Food & Nutrition Services, and served primarily by a food service management company called Chartwells-Thompsons. Chartwells has a contract with D.C. Public Schools to serve 113 schools with meals that are either prepared on-site, or composed in a nearby school with a large enough production kitchen. Seven DCPS schools are served by Revolution Foods, which prepares and packages meals for schools to heat and serve. Seven DCPS schools are served by D.C. Central Kitchen, and these meals are prepared in a large school kitchen and distributed to surrounding schools.⁶

There are 63 public charter and private schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. Seven of these schools are “self-operated” and prepare their meals on site, so they use their school lunch funding directly on food, utensils, kitchen equipment and staff. The rest of the schools hire food service management companies, which either prepare meals on site or send pre-made meals to the schools to serve. These “vended” schools use federal and local funds to pay the organizations they contract to furnish meals for students. Some of these food service companies include Revolution Foods, At-Home Management, Catholic Charities Enterprises, and Preferred Meals (to name a few).

The Lunch Line

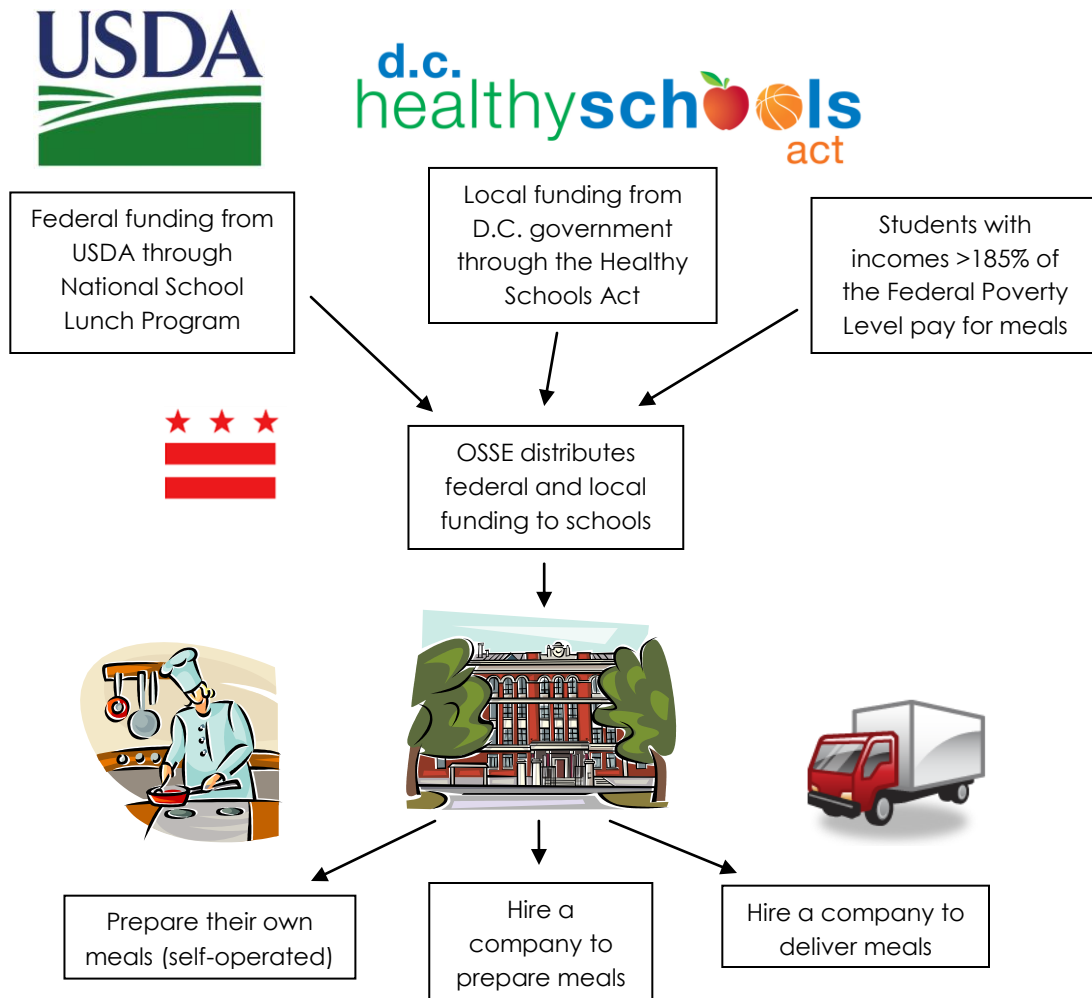
Most schools in Washington, DC serve meals in a cafeteria. Students have between 20 and 40 minutes to go through the lunch line, sit down, and eat. Schools carefully check the names and eligibility status (does the student qualify for a free meal?) so they can accurately submit participation information to OSSE for federal and local reimbursements. Some schools don't have cafeterias, so they serve lunch in classrooms or all-purpose rooms.

⁴ Visit www.dchealthyschools.org to learn more about the Healthy Schools Act requirements for school meals

⁵ For a breakdown of how schools across the country use their National School Lunch Program dollars, see <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/published/CNP/FILES/MealCostStudy.pdf>

⁶ For more information about DCPS' food service vendors, visit www.chartwellsschooldining.com/DCPS, www.revolutionfoods.com, and www.dccentralkitchen.org.

How the Money Flows:



For more information:

D.C. Farm to School Network: www.dcfarmtoschool.org

Healthy Schools Act: www.dchealthyschools.org

Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Wellness & Nutrition Services:
<http://osse.dc.gov/service/wellness-and-nutrition-services>

D.C. Public Schools Office of Food & Nutrition Services:
<http://www.dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/foodserves>

United States Department of Agriculture Food & Nutrition Services – National School Lunch Program: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch>

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