

## Chapter 3: History of National School Lunch Program

### Table of Contents

Child Nutrition Program Goals .....	2
The Early Days .....	2
National School Lunch Act.....	2
Child Nutrition Act of 1966.....	3
Child Nutrition Programs – 1966 to Today .....	3

### **Child Nutrition Program Goals**

The goals of Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) as they have developed over the years are to:

- Serve nutritional, appealing and moderately priced meals.
- Help children grow socially and emotionally.
- Extend educational influences to the homes of school children.
- Improve children's food habits with the ultimate goal of developing healthy adults.

### **The Early Days**

Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) have a long history. School meals were offered in the United States as far back as the 1890s. Some European countries were operating programs a hundred years before.

At the turn of the 20th century, school meals were being provided in cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Milwaukee. Civic and social organizations or volunteers provided the meals. In most cases, the lunch programs were self-supporting. Some students paid three cents for their meals.

The depression of the 1930s brought widespread unemployment. Millions of people lost their jobs and were without means of support for themselves and their families. Demand and prices for farm products steadily declined. Millions of children were unable to pay for their school lunches. With limited resources to provide meals at home, malnutrition among children became a national concern.

At the federal level, Public Law 320 passed in 1935 encouraging domestic consumption of surplus commodities by donating them to needy families and school lunch programs. The commodity distribution program grew rapidly.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was also created in 1935. This agency provided work for the unemployed in public works projects. Since there were unemployed, needy women in nearly every city, town and rural community in the country, these women were assigned to prepare and serve school lunches. By 1941 WPA school lunch programs were operating in all states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

The 78th Congress set aside federal funds for the first time in 1943 to provide cash subsidy payments for the purchase of food for school lunch programs. Similar legislation was passed by Congress in subsequent years.

### **National School Lunch Act**

In 1946, Congress recognized the need for a more permanent status for the school lunch program and authorized the necessary appropriations for it. The legislation was identified as the "National School Lunch Act" and stated:

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic

consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food by assisting the states, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs.”

Schools had to agree to provide meals that met minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. These lunches were defined as one of three types: Type A, Type B, or Type C.

**The Type A lunch was defined as consisting of:**

- ½ pint fluid whole milk
- Protein rich food consisting of one of the following or a combination:
  - 2 ounces of lean meat, fish or poultry
  - 2 ounces of cheese
  - 1 egg
  - ½ cup of cooked dry beans or peas
  - 4 Tablespoons of peanut butter
- ¾ cup serving of two or more vegetables or fruits, or both
- 1 serving of bread, rolls, muffins, etc.
- 2 teaspoons of butter or fortified margarine

The Type A meal pattern lasted 35 years (1946-1977) with only minor changes.

**Type B lunches** contained smaller quantities of the components in the Type A lunch and were served primarily in schools with inadequate cooking facilities.

**Type C lunches** consisted of only ½ pint of fluid whole milk served as a beverage.

### **Child Nutrition Act of 1966**

The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 established guidelines for determining who should qualify to receive a reduced-price or free meal. This law established Income Eligibility Guidelines that are based on the federal poverty levels. The income guidelines are revised annually and are still used today as the basis of approving households for reduced-price or free benefits.

This act also established the first substantial funding for needy children’s meals; and identified the U. S. Department of Agriculture as the agency assigned to administer all school food service funds and establish uniform standards.

The Child Nutrition Act continued the Type C lunch, which became known as the “Special Milk Program”. It also provided for a pilot breakfast program, funds to purchase school food service equipment in low-income areas and state administrative funds.

### **Child Nutrition Programs – 1966 to Today**

The 1980s brought changes and challenges to CNPs. The decade was characterized by declines in funding, stricter federal regulations, and more reviews of CNP operations by state and federal agencies. During the 1980s, the requirement for verification of eligibility was established.

Participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) reached a peak in 1979 with an average of 27 million lunches served per day. In 1982 nearly 3000 schools dropped out of the NSLP as a result of budget cuts. This decline in schools participating in the program continued until 1989. Participation has increased only slightly since.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the threat of block grants increased. With block grants, the federal money would be given to the state, and the state would decide how the money would be distributed. School food service professionals feared CNPs would lose if block grants were to become a reality. Ultimately, the block grant concept was defeated with regard to child nutrition programs.

In 1994, the “Healthy Meals for Americans Act” reinforced established nutrition standards for the NSLP and School Breakfast Programs. Regulations for the “School Meals Initiative” were finalized in 1995 and provided several different menu planning system options. Subsequent federal authorizations brought numerous incremental changes that expanded access to school meal programs while enhancing nutritional requirements.

The largest change in child nutrition programs occurred with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), which reauthorized numerous child nutrition programs until September 30, 2015. Meal reimbursement rates for breakfast and lunch were increased by six cents. However, that increase was tied to a series of new nutrition standards. HHFKA also mandated a gradual increase in paid lunch prices so that the revenue generated from paid lunches is equal to the amount reimbursed by the federal government at the federal free reimbursement level.

HHFKA also increased the amount of authority granted to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In addition to establishing new program audit requirements (Administrative Review) and updated nutrition standards, USDA was granted the authority to set nutrition standards for all food products sold on school grounds during the school day. Additional authority was also granted over food safety matters, to include guidelines for recalling or putting administrative holds on suspect food products.

HHFKA increased access to school meal programs through changes to the Direct Certification process and enhancements to the categorical eligibility of foster children. HHFKA also created an additional way to eliminate individual household eligibility applications through the establishment of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP provides universal meal service to children in high poverty areas that have 40 percent or more of students directly certified for free school meals. Affected children do not need to complete an eligibility application or pay any out-of-pocket cost.

HHFKA left much of its implementation up to regulations, which are issued by USDA. This process is ongoing and will continue to have systemic impact for years to come.