

Fact Sheet: Why are School Lunch Prices Going Up?

As the 2011-2012 school year draws near, many school boards are voting to raise school lunch prices for students that do not qualify for free or reduced price lunches. An analysis by the School Nutrition Association during May and June 2011 found about 150 districts have raised lunch prices for the 2011-2012 school year up from about 60 that raised prices in spring 2011. The average increase was \$0.27, up 16% from 201-2011.

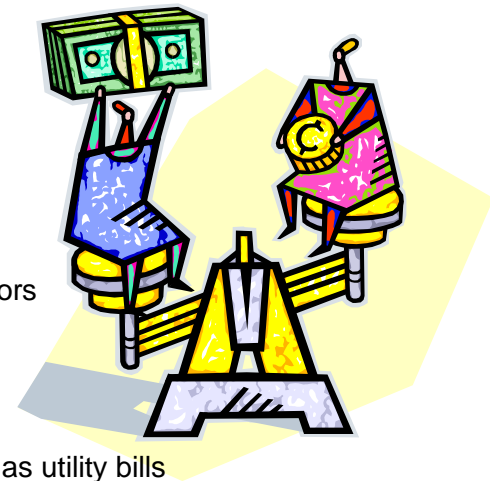
Why are so many districts raising lunch prices now?

Many food items needed to provide balanced, nutritious school meals have experienced up to double-digit price increases in the last 12 months:

- Milk: ↑ 14%
- Whole grain breads: ↑ 15%
- Cheese: ↑ 12%
- Eggs: ↑ 31%
- Fruits and Vegetables: ↑ 4%
- Pasta: ↑ 14%

In addition to food, other costs are also increasing. School nutrition directors from around the nation reported the following this school year:

- 86% indicated an increase in their programs' food costs
- 83% indicated an increase in their programs' labor costs
- 84% indicated an increase in their programs' gas/transportation
- 46% indicated an increase in their programs' indirect costs - such as utility bills



Nationally, the average cost to prepare a school lunch is about \$3.00. However, the average price school districts are expected to charge students for a meal in 2011-2012 is \$2.60. While the federal government provides a reimbursement of \$0.23 per 'paid' meal, school nutrition programs are often losing money on each meal served.

Doesn't the federal government provide free food to schools?

The US Department of Agriculture operates a commodity food distribution program that provides about 18 cents worth of healthy food items (such as low fat cheese, sliced apples and whole wheat flour) per meal served to school nutrition programs. However, the commodity foods only account for 15% to 18% of the food served as school lunch to over 30 million students each school day. Over 80% of the food schools serve is purchased through the same commercial foodservice vendors that serve restaurants.

How come schools are not raising the price of reduced price meals?

Federal law caps the price of reduced price meals at 40 cents. Students who qualify for reduced price meals must have a family income between \$34,281 and \$41,415 for a family of 4. Students from families with household incomes under \$29,560 (based on a family of 4) qualify for free lunches through the National School Lunch Program. The cost to prepare and serve these meals is covered in part by a federal reimbursement.

Don't local property taxes cover the cost of serving school lunches?

School nutrition programs are financially self sufficient and operate separately from the general school district budget. While there are exceptions, generally school nutrition programs must cover all of their costs - including labor, food, supplies, equipment, utilities - from revenues they receive from paid lunches and federal reimbursements.

Should I start packing my child's lunch?

Even with the price increases, the cost to purchase a school lunch is still less than the average cost associated with preparing a lunch to bring from home – estimated to be a national average of \$3.95 last school year according to a meal cost analysis conducted by Alice Jo Rainville, PhD, RD, CHE, SNS, Human Nutrition, School of Health Sciences at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI.

Are school lunches healthy?

Meals served under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) must, by federal law, meet nutrition guidelines based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. No more than 30% of calories can come from fat and less than 10% from saturated fat. School lunches provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories. These guidelines apply over the course of one week of school lunch menus. The 2007 School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment III (SNDA III) study based on research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that in about 90 percent of all schools nationwide, students had opportunities to select low-fat lunch options. In fact, NSLP participants have substantially lower intakes of added sugars than do non-participants.

What is being done to address the rising cost of school lunches?

School nutrition professionals are streamlining their operations and stretching their limited financial resources. Strategies in practice include cooperative purchasing together with neighboring districts, procuring local items to save on fuel costs, buying produce in season and making economical but healthy menu substitutions where possible. While improving efficiencies of their operations, school nutrition directors are ensuring that they do not compromise on the nutritional integrity of meals provided.

What can I do?

Contact your member of Congress to request assistance in increasing the federal reimbursement rate for school nutrition programs to help deflect rising food and fuel costs. Click here to take action: <http://capwiz.com/asfsa/issues/alert/?alertid=11343966&PROCESS=Take+Action>

For more information contact your district's school nutrition director or the School Nutrition: Marian Olinde at 225-638-3738, email marian.olinde@falsriveracademy.org.

