

School Nutrition Services FAQs

Paying for School Meals

1. Why should all families fill out the Free/Reduced Meal application?

Many students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. To find out if your student qualifies, you must fill out and turn in an application. Filling out the Free/Reduced Meal also application could help your school receive extra federal money. The application is available [here](#).

Your children do not have to be US citizens to receive free and reduced lunch.

If children in your household receive SNAP or TANF benefits, participate in Head Start programs, are foster children, homeless, runaways, migrants or if your income falls within the Federal Income eligibility requirements, your children are eligible for free or reduced lunch meals. Your children may also be eligible if you receive WIC benefits.

2. What is universal free breakfast?

All DPS students can eat free breakfasts at school. All breakfasts include a fruit or vegetable, dairy and a grain. These breakfasts are “reimbursable” meals, meaning DPS receives federal funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for these meals. DPS cannot receive money unless a child receives all required meal components. Because DPS has a large number of students eligible for free/reduced price meals, they are able to offer free breakfasts to all DPS students. To learn more about the national School Breakfast Program, visit [here](#).

3. My children go to DPS and pay for lunch. Can they eat free breakfast?

Yes, all DPS students can eat breakfast for free.

4. How do I pay for my student’s lunches?

You can pay for meals at the cash register in the cafeteria. You can also pay online. There may be an extra fee if you pay online.

- To pay online, go to <https://www.k12paymentcenter.com>
- You will need to know your child’s student ID number, also known as the Powerschool ID. This is found on your child’s report card.

5. How do I check to see how much money is in my student’s account?

You can either ask the cafeteria staff or check your child’s online account at <https://www.k12paymentcenter.com>. Log into your account and click on “Meal History” under each child’s name to see the purchase history.

6. How do I know if my child is running out of money in my account for meals?

If your child’s school meal account is overdrawn, you will get a note in your child’s folder or in the mail. If you want to receive an email or text letting you know when your student’s account is running out of

money:

- Log on to your account
- Go to “Manage Profile”
- Click “Send Low Balance Notification”
- Choose how/where you would like to receive the notification (email, text, both)

7. Is it true that students who owe money must eat a different meal?

When DPS students have not paid for five or more lunches, they may be served an Alternative Courtesy Meal. This meal includes a sandwich, juice and a piece of fruit.

Foods Served at Breakfast and Lunch

1. Where can I find the school meal menus?

School menus can be found on the DPS school website [here](#). Click the “Meals” icon at the top of the page. It can also be found under “Programs and Services - Services - School Nutrition Services - School Menus.”

2. What is in a school lunch?

The requirements for school meals are determined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The lunch meal pattern can be found [here](#).

1. Fruit and vegetables - Fruit and vegetables can be fresh, dried, frozen or canned. No more than half of the fruit or vegetable offerings may be in the form of juice. All juice must be 100% full-strength. There are requirements for different types of vegetables including: dark green, red/orange, beans and peas (legumes), starchy and other.
2. Grains - Grains include foods such as bread, rolls, cereal, pasta, etc. At least half of the grains offered each week must be whole-grain rich which means 51% whole grains. For example: a whole-grain rich bagel would contain at least 51% whole grain ingredients such as whole wheat flour.
3. Meats/Meat Alternate - The meats/meat alternate group foods provide protein. Foods in this group include: beef, pork, fish, poultry, nuts, seeds, beans, nut butter, tofu, yogurt, cheese, and eggs. USDA guidelines outline amounts of each specific food that must be offered to meet requirements for this category.
4. Milk - Milk must be offered at breakfast and lunch. Students do not have to take milk. Currently the approved milk offerings include: fat-free and low-fat white milk; and fat-free and low-fat flavored milk. Flavored milk is served only at lunch.

3. What are the requirements for sugar?

School meals do not have limits for sugar. DPS tries hard to limit sugar in its meals. Foods that are sold during the school day that are not part of a meal must have 35% or less sugar by weight.

4. What are the requirements for sodium?

Sodium (salt) is being gradually reduced in school meals. DPS bases its sodium limits on target level 1. Target level 2 is mandatory by July 1, 2024. The sodium limits are based on both grade level and meal. To learn more click [here](#).

5. Why does my child have to order a full meal to receive the free/reduced price?

The free/reduced price is for the complete “reimbursable” meal. DPS receives federal funding from the USDA for these meals. DPS cannot receive money unless a child receives all required meal components. Students can take four foods at breakfast and five foods at lunch. They must take at least three foods at each meal. One of these foods must be a fruit or vegetable.

6. Why does my child have to choose a fruit or vegetable?

DPS only receives money from the USDA if a child receives a fruit and/or vegetable with their meal.

7. Why are there products such as Cocoa Puffs and Cheetos served as part of school meals?

All foods served as part of school meals must meet the USDA nutrition requirements. Often brands change their recipes for the foods they sell to schools. For example, cereals such as Cocoa Puffs and Cinnamon Toast Crunch are whole grain rich and have less sugar when sold at school than the cereals sold in stores.

8. Can my child eat in the classroom?

At some schools, breakfast is eaten in the cafeteria before class starts. At other schools, breakfast is eaten in classrooms during class time. School administration chooses where breakfast will be served.

9. What if my child is late and misses breakfast?

Students who are late to school can still eat breakfast. They should check-in in the office and then go to the cafeteria.

10. What food is served for breakfast?

Breakfast always has a fruit or vegetable, dairy, and a grain. All grains are whole grain-rich. Sometimes breakfast also has a protein.

11. Why isn't there always protein at breakfast?

Protein is not required at breakfast. DPS serves it as often as funding allows. DPS offers protein twice per week at breakfast in elementary school. At DPS middle and high schools, protein will be served at breakfast every day this year.

12. Why do school breakfasts contain high amounts of sugar and carbohydrates?

USDA Food & Nutrition Services sets rules about what must be served at school meals. DPS must follow the rules for calories, fat and sodium. Sugar is not currently regulated. All breakfasts must include a serving of fruit, low-fat dairy, and one or two servings of grains. All grains are whole grain-rich. Limited funding for staff and equipment makes using some pre-made breakfast grain products necessary.

13. What companies provide the food?

The food comes from many different companies. Different companies provide different parts of each meal served to students. Some only provide milk, others provide bread, etc. The major distributors are:

- Sysco
- Domino's Pizza
- Maola (milk)
- Flowers Foods Baking Company (bread)
- Raleigh-based R&H Produce provides produce
- Farmer Foodshare provides North Carolina grown produce

Brand names purchased include:

- Tyson
- Perdue
- Land O'Lakes
- Dannon
- Smucker's
- Pillsbury

14. Why don't you offer more fresh foods and made from scratch meals?

Prepared foods are often served as part of school meals because of limited equipment, staff time and funding. DPS School Nutrition is working hard to make more foods from scratch. Scratch-made foods currently include pasta sauces, entree salads, lasagnas, baked spaghetti, casseroles, chili, macaroni and cheese, some sandwiches. DPS has also worked to create scratch-made meals with local chefs in the [Durham Bowls](#) Project.

15. Why are there no salad bars?

Salad bars are not offered at DPS schools because of the cost and complicated regulations.

- Extra labor is needed to prepare foods for salad bars.
- Extra training and labor are needed to maintain sanitation and meet regulations. Regulations require that the salad bar must always be monitored or that staff must serve the salad.
- Students must take the required amount of each salad item to count for USDA reimbursement, which is confusing for students and slows the line.
- Federal legislation requires that each serving line in a school cafeteria must offer the same food. That means that if a salad bar is offered in one line, all lines must offer salad bars. This adds to the expense.

More information is available in this [USDA memo regarding salad bars in schools](#).

16. How can I have input in foods to be added/dropped from school meals?

If you have any suggestions or feedback, please contact:

- School Nutrition Services (SNS) Director Jim Keaten at james.keaten@dpsnc.net
- SNS Assistant Director Robin Brooks at robin.brooks@dpsnc.net

Allergies

1. What if my child has dietary restrictions/allergies?

DPS will make changes to meals if there are medically necessary dietary restrictions. Changes approved in IEP's will also be made. Changes because of religion or personal reasons will not be made. To request changes to your students' meals:

- Print out [this form](#).
- Parents/ guardians fill out part A.
- A medical doctor must fill out Part B.
- Turn form in to the child's teacher, school nurse or cafeteria manager.
- The parents will be contacted if further information is needed.

2. What if my child is lactose intolerant or allergic to milk?

If your child cannot drink regular milk, you can fill out [this substitution form](#).

Summer Meals

1. What is the summer meals program?

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), provides healthy, free meals when school is not in session. Meals are provided at schools and community organizations throughout Durham County. They are free to anyone ages 1-18. Adults can eat for \$2 per meal. No application is necessary to get a free meal.

To find a summer meal site, text "FoodNC" to 877-877. You can also call toll-free 1.866.3Hungry (1.866.348.6479) or 1.877.8Hambre (1.877.842.6273) for information in Spanish.

Meals follow the USDA nutrition guidelines outlined above. Summer meal sites are safe places for kids and teens to go, such as schools, churches, and community centers. Many sites offer educational and recreational activities that kids of all ages can participate in.

For more information, visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/sfsp-fact-sheets> or <http://nokidhungrync.org/summer-fast-facts/>

2. My child is not a DPS student, can they still receive free summer meals?

Yes. Any child, ages 1-18 who comes to a summer meals site during meal times will receive a free meal. The child does not have to qualify for free/reduced price school meals to receive a free summer meal.

3. What if my child needs meals during other school breaks, weekends or afterschool?

In spring 2019, DPS started a Spring Break lunch program and the "Super Snack" afterschool meal program at a limited number of sites. There are plans to expand the programs so that more children will have access to food year-round. Funding is provided by a CHAMPS grant from the National League of Cities (NLC) and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

4. What if I have an idea for new summer meals site?

If you know of an organization that would like to provide summer meals, please contact Linda Harris at 919-560-2370, ext. 26287 or linda.harris@dpsnc.net.

Other Topics

1. How are school meals funded?

Funding comes from three main sources:

- Most of the funding comes from the USDA. The USDA gives DPS SNS money for each meal served. The reimbursement rate differs for free meals, reduced-price meals and full-price meals. The state also provides a small amount of money. No funding comes from Durham City or County.
- Revenue from selling meals is another source of funding. When full-price and reduced-price lunches are purchased, the money is used to support the school meals program. Buying school meals is one of the best ways that you can help support school meals.
- Catering is another source of income. SNS offers catering services for DPS programs and events. This catering brings in additional revenue to fund school meals. If you are interested in catering for a DPS event, please contact SNS at 919-560-2370.

2. How can parents advocate for increased funding for school meals?

The best way to advocate for increased funding for meals is to contact your state legislators. Currently, DPS SNS receives very little funding from the NC State Government. For more information about who your NC representatives and how to contact them, please visit the [NC General Assembly](#).

Another way to help increase funding for school meals is to purchase school lunches for your child. When full-price and reduced-price lunches are purchased, this revenue goes directly to support the DPS school meals program. Increased revenue would allow for improvements to the program.

3. I heard about money being raised from the community to pay student lunch debt. Why?

School lunch debt is the total combined unpaid balance owed by all students at the end of the school year. It is best for anyone who would like to donate to pay down debt to give money to a specific school or grade within a school.

4. What is the farm to school program?

The North Carolina Farm to School program is run by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services. NC grown produce is bought from the farmer, processed and served as part of school meals. The Farm to School program benefits children by providing nutritious, high-quality local food. It also supports local farmers and strengthens the local economy. Some schools also have school gardens and teach hands-on activities about food, health and nutrition.

Other programs that bring fresh produce to the schools include:

- Farmer Foodshare is a local non-profit in Durham County. They supply fresh, local produce on a weekly basis to all DPS schools. They also run local produce taste tests at many schools.
- The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) is a USDA grant to introduce children to fresh produce and increase acceptance. It is awarded on a school-by-school basis to eligible Title 1 Elementary Schools. Awarded schools receive funds to provide a fresh fruit or vegetable taste test three days per week to all students during the school day (separate from school meals). Schools must apply annually and therefore there is some change in participating DPS schools each year.

5. What are Backpack Buddies and how can I sign my child up or contribute to the program?

Backpack Buddies is not run by DPS SNS. Backpack Buddies is a service of the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle. For more information click [here](#). The Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina offers a similar program called the “Weekend Power Pack Backpack.” For more information, please click [here](#). If you need this service, please talk to your school social worker.

6. Which schools have food pantries?

Food pantries are not run by DPS SNS. DPS is working with the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina and other feeding organizations to run school food pantries. For more information and to find out if your school has a food pantry, contact your school.

7. Can I join my child for school meals?

Yes, parents may eat with their children. Please check with your child’s teacher or school principal to ensure the timing works well with school programming. Please sign in at the school’s main office as a visitor before going to the cafeteria. You may purchase a school meal. Visit the [DPSNC School Menus](#) page for meals and pricing.

8. Are school lunches healthier than packaged lunches from home?

Possibly. A 2014 study that compared packed lunches to school lunches for pre-K and kindergarten students found that on average packed lunches had more fat, saturated fat, sugar, vitamin C and iron but less protein, sodium, fiber, Vitamin A and calcium compared to school lunches. School lunches also contained more vegetables and whole grains on average than packed lunches. Based on current dietary recommendations the school lunches were, on average, the healthier choice. A 2015 study conducted in middle schools found that school lunches encourage increased consumption and decreased waste of fruits and vegetables. School lunches include whole grains, low fat milk and a variety of fruits and vegetables.

For more information, visit

[https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046\(14\)00632-0/abstract](https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(14)00632-0/abstract)

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/chi.2015.0019>