

School Breakfast and Lunch Programs for Grandfamilies and Kinship Families



Millions of children across the country are raised by their grandparents, other extended family members, or close family friends when their parents are unable to raise them. These families, known as grandfamilies or kinship families, provide a safe, stable, and loving environment for the children in their care. With the sudden increase in household and caregiving expenses, some grandfamilies and kinship families may face struggles with getting the food they need. The School Nutrition Programs – the [School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#) and the [National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#) – provide the nutritious breakfasts and lunches children need during the school day, which can help lower household food costs for caregivers.

What Are School Meals?

All children who attend a school that participates in the School Nutrition Programs can eat school breakfast and lunch. Approximately [29 million children participate](#) in school lunch and 15 million children participate in school breakfast each day. As of July 2025, nine states have passed [Healthy School Meals for All](#) policies that offer all children access to school meals at no charge: California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont. Schools in the remaining 41 states, and the District of Columbia, must qualify children for free or reduced-price school meals based on household income or participation in eligible assistance programs. Children who are determined eligible for reduced-price meals can be charged a maximum of 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch. Children who are not certified for free or reduced-price school meals are placed in the “paid meal” category and are charged full price for their meals. The cost of school breakfast and lunch for a child who does not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals may vary from school to school.

**Caregivers do not have to have legal custody or guardianship,
or be related to the child they are raising, to obtain free or
reduced-price meals for their student.**

What Are the Benefits of School Meals?

School meals provide the nutritional foundation children need to learn, grow, and thrive. Children who participate in school meals have reduced rates of hunger, improved health outcomes, and better academic success. Additionally, utilizing school meals programs helps stretch a family's food budget.

School meals must meet specific nutrition standards based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. These requirements ensure that children receive healthy meals of low-fat dairy, lean proteins, whole grains, and colorful fruits and vegetables. As a result, students who eat school meals have a better diet, consuming a greater variety of healthful food, than students who do not participate.

"Free lunches ... was tremendous both financially and to make sure the children had a nutritious meal"

– Grandparent caregiver
in Louisiana

How Do I Know if My Student Is Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals?

Eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals depends on the income of the household in which the child lives. Every year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) releases Income Eligibility Guidelines for free and reduced-price school meals. There are a few ways that children can qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

Automatic Eligibility

To make it easier for eligible children to qualify for free school meals, schools can automatically link certain children to free school meals, and the caregiver does not have to fill out a school meals application for the child. These children are considered "categorically eligible."

Automatic eligibility may cover children if any member of their household participates in any of the following programs.

- ▶ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- ▶ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- ▶ Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)
- ▶ Medicaid (In most states, children can be certified through Medicaid if they belong to a family whose income, as defined by Medicaid, qualifies them for free or reduced-price meals.)

Automatic eligibility can also cover children who are identified as:

- ▶ homeless or “unaccompanied youth,”
- ▶ runaway,
- ▶ migrant,
- ▶ participating in Head Start, or
- ▶ in foster care.

Children being raised by kin with no legal relationship and without child welfare involvement may be considered “unaccompanied” and can qualify for services, such as automatic eligibility for free school meals, under the federal McKinney-Vento Act.

School Meals Applications

Schools collect school meals applications each school year, and families can fill out an application at any point during the school year. Caregivers do not have to have legal custody or guardianship, or be related to the child they are raising, to obtain free or reduced-price meals for their student. Every child attending a school that participates in the School Nutrition Programs can apply for free or reduced-price school meals.

To qualify for free school meals, a child’s household annual income must be less than 130 percent of the federal poverty line. To qualify for reduced-price school meals, a child’s household income must be between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line. Income eligibility guidelines for free and reduced-price school meals are updated annually, vary by household size, and are higher in Alaska and Hawaii. Some states, such as Oregon and New Jersey, have passed state policies that expand eligibility for free school meals to levels higher than the federal limits. Visit the USDA’s [Income Eligibility Guidelines](#) webpage for more information on the federal guidelines, and check with the [state agency](#) that oversees the National School Lunch Program in your state for state-specific guidelines.

How Do I Apply for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals?

Most school districts begin accepting school meals applications immediately prior to the start of the school year; however, there is no deadline to apply – you can apply for school meals at any time throughout the school year. Eligibility lasts for one school year, and you must reapply every year to continue receiving meals. In most districts, the application may be completed online or via a paper form. If you are raising multiple children enrolled in the same school district, you only need to fill out one application, indicating all the children in your household on the same form. Applications are often available in multiple languages, or the school may offer translation services. If you have questions about your school district’s specific policies, go to the Food and Nutrition

Services webpage on your school district's website, or call your school district and request to speak with Food and Nutrition Services.

What Information Is Required to Complete a School Meals Application?

The school meals application requires the following information:

- ▶ the names and grades of each child;
- ▶ the names of all household members;
- ▶ the amount and source of income for each household member;
- ▶ the signature of an adult household member; and
- ▶ the last four digits of the Social Security number of the adult household member who signs the application. (If the adult does not have a Social Security number, they must write "none" in that space or check the box, "I do not have a Social Security number," if provided. Children are still eligible for free or reduced-price school meals even if no one in the household has a Social Security number, but the Social Security section cannot be left blank.)

Requests on the application for any other information are strictly optional.

If anyone in your household receives SNAP, TANF, FDPIR, or Medicaid (in most states), or if the child is in foster care or is considered homeless ("unaccompanied"), runaway, or migrant, the child(ren) should automatically qualify for free school meals without an application. However, some eligible children may be missed, requiring the household to submit a school meals application. In these cases, you do not need to complete the entire application. Instead, you will only need to provide:

- ▶ the child's name;
- ▶ the SNAP, FDPIR, TANF, and/or Medicaid case number for someone in the household, or check a box stating that the child is homeless, runaway, migrant, or in foster care; and
- ▶ the signature of an adult household member.

What if My Student Is Denied Free or Reduced-Price School Meals?

If your student's school meals application was denied and you believe they are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, call your school district's Food and Nutrition Services Department to find out the reason. Oftentimes, applications are denied due to missing or inaccurate information. If that happens to you, you can resubmit an application with the corrected information. Remember, eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals is based on the household size and income.

What if My Student Changes Schools or the Family Circumstances Change?

Eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals is determined at the school district level; therefore, changing schools within a single district should not affect a student's eligibility. Enrolling in a different school district may require you to submit a new school meals application. Contact the district's Food and Nutrition Services department for more information.

Once determined eligible, a child may receive free or reduced-price meals for the remainder of that school year in that district, even if the household's financial circumstances change. Caregivers may reapply at any time during the school year and are encouraged to do so if the household size increases, household income decreases, or a member of the household qualifies for another assistance program.

What Other Benefits Can My Household Receive by Participating in Free or Reduced-Price School Meals?

In addition to receiving free or reduced-price school meals, your family may be eligible to receive other benefits, including [SAT fee waivers](#), [ACT fee waivers and resources](#), and [college application fee waivers](#). Other benefits vary by location and may include waived school uniform and/or textbook fees. Contact your school to learn more.

What if the School Offers All Students School Meals at No Charge?

Some schools offer all students school meals at no charge through the [Community Eligibility Provision](#), through other [Provisions to the National School Lunch Act](#), or through states' [Healthy School Meals for All](#) policies. The school district may still request that you submit information about your household income or participation in

assistance programs to see if your school is eligible for other benefits, such as federal Title I or state education funding.

Where Can I Receive Food Assistance When School is Closed for the Summer?

The [Summer Nutrition Programs](#) can provide meals and [benefits](#) to eligible children over the summer months. Contact your local school district or your [state administering agency](#) to learn more.

Where Can I Learn More About School Meals?

For more information about the school meals program at your school, contact your district's Food and Nutrition Services Department, parent liaison, school social worker, or guidance counselor.

For more information about school meals in general, visit the Food Research & Action Center's [School Breakfast Program](#) and [National School Lunch Program](#) webpages.

For more information on food assistance for kinship/grandfamilies, visit the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network's [resource library](#) and the Food Research & Action Center's [Hunger Among Grandfamilies and Kinship Families](#) webpage.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) improves the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. For more information about FRAC, or to [sign up](#) for FRAC's e-newsletters, go to www.frac.org.

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