

Are Kids in Your Care Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals?

School meals programs, particularly when offered for free or at a reduced price, can help stretch your household food budget and ensure that the students in your care have access to nutritious meals during the school day. Qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals may also qualify your student or household for additional benefits, such as the [Summer EBT program](#) or utility assistance.

What Are School Meals?

The school meals programs – the [School Breakfast Program](#) and the [National School Lunch Program](#) – provide healthy breakfasts and lunches to children during the school day. Most schools – [over 94,000 nationwide](#) – participate in the National School Lunch Program, serving more than 29 million children each school day.

Participating in [school meals programs](#) is associated with positive health and academic outcomes, including improved classroom behavior, academic performance, food security, and diet quality. And [research shows](#) that school lunch is often the most nutritious meal children receive in a given day, exposing students to a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, lean proteins, and whole grains.

Eligibility for School Meals

Any student who attends a school that participates in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program can pay to receive a school meal. Children from households with incomes below [specific federal thresholds](#) are eligible to receive meals for free or at a reduced price. **It is important to note that the child's household is the home in which they live; the child does not need to be related to you to be considered a part of your household. Additionally, caregivers do not have to have legal custody or guardianship to obtain free or reduced-price meals for their students.**

Automatic Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals

Children can be certified for free or reduced-price school meals through a school meal application, or they may be certified without an application based on participation in other income-based government programs. If you, your student, or anyone in your household participates in the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP), [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#) (TANF), the [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](#) (FDPIR), or, in most states, [Medicaid](#), your student may be automatically eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Additionally, if the student in your care is homeless or an “unaccompanied youth,” a runaway, a

Healthy School Meals for All

As of the 2025–2026 school year, nine states have policies that offer free school meals to all students regardless of household income: California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont.

In other states, some schools may offer school meals at no charge to all their students through a program called the [Community Eligibility Provision](#).

Even if your student's school offers free school meals to all students, the district may still require that you submit a school meal or household income application for your student. Contact your school district's Food and Nutrition Services Department for more information.

migrant, participating in Head Start, or in foster care, they may also automatically qualify for free school meals.

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 Application

If the student in your care is not automatically eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, you will need to fill out a school meals application. Most school districts begin accepting 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.** 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.

The school meals application requires:

- ▶ the names and grades of each child;
- ▶ the names of everyone who lives in your home;
- ▶ 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 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.)

Additional Information

For more information on school meals benefits and eligibility, 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.

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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