

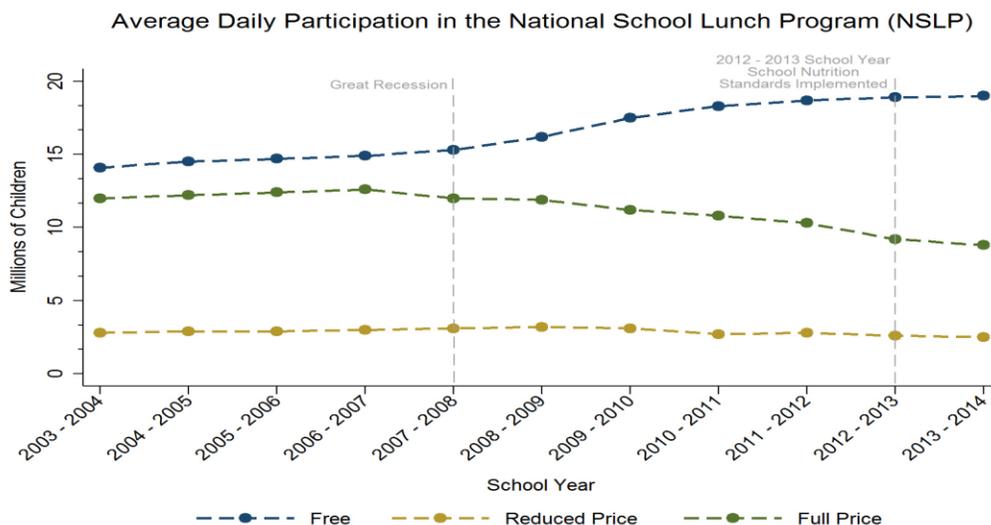
National School Lunch Program: New Standards Not Responsible for Decrease in Participation

Some claim that the most recent update to school nutrition standards are responsible for the decline in participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Data from states indicated very few schools (only 0.51 percent of schools nationwide) reported dropping out of the programs due to struggles over providing kids healthy food.¹ Schools reported dropping out due to mergers, school closures, and consolidation. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) also noted grain/protein maximums (which have been removed), time to eat, long lunch lines, and increases in paid meal prices as possible reasons for the decline.²



Declines in Participation Started Long before School Nutrition Standards Were Updated

- The decline in school lunch participation has primarily been within the paid lunch category (children from middle and upper income families). But this trend is not new—it started in 2008, well before the updated school nutrition standards went into effect in 2012.⁵
- Factors that contribute to the decrease in paid lunch participation include sales of competitive foods, the recession, and increased charges for paid meals.³
- The great recession of 2007-08 led to a fall in household income and an increase in the number of students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches. This trend is consistent with the last three periods of economic decline.⁴
- Among children receiving free and reduced-price lunches, total participation has increased from 18.1 million in 2007 to 21.7 million in 2014.⁵



Prepared by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)
Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Preliminary Data Suggests Participation in School Lunch May Be on the Rise

- According to a USDA snapshot, almost half of all states have experienced an increase in participation from March 2014 to March 2015.⁶
- The total number of participants in the school lunch program nationwide increased 0.5% from March 2014 to March 2015.⁶

School Breakfast Participation Is Increasing



- School nutrition standards were also updated for the national School Breakfast Program and went into effect beginning the 2013-14 school year. Participation in breakfast increased from 12.87 million in 2012 to 13.63 million in 2014.⁷
- Preliminary data shows School Breakfast participation continues to rise with a 2.7% increase from April 2014 to April 2015. 80% of all states have shown an increase in school breakfast participation from April 2014 to April 2015.⁸

Keep School Meals Healthy!

As with any change, challenges are to be expected. Some school districts are facing challenges implementing the new school nutrition standards more than others. However, the solution is not to remove healthy school nutrition standards. 95% of school districts across the country are certified as meeting the updated standards.⁹ School districts experiencing decreased participation should seek technical assistance from USDA, the Institute of Child Nutrition, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, their state child nutrition agency, or others. They can look to districts that are implementing the standards successfully for ideas to bring more children into the school lunch program and improve the quality and appeal of their offerings.

References

¹ United States Department of Agriculture. Fact Sheet: Schools Serving, Kids Eating Healthier School Meals Thanks to Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, September 1, 2015. Accessed at <<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2015/09/0242.xml>>.

² Government Accountability Office (GAO). Report to Congressional Requesters: School Lunch Implementing Nutrition Changes Was Challenging and Clarification of Oversight Requirements Is Needed, 2014. Report No. GAO-14-104. Accessed at <<http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/660427.pdf>>.

³ Food Research and Action Center. National School Lunch Program: Trends and Factors Affecting Student Participation, 2015. Accessed at <http://frac.org/pdf/national_school_lunch_report_2015.pdf>.

⁴ Hanson K, Oliveira V. How Economic Conditions Affect Participation in USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs. *USDA Economic Research Service*, 2012, Bulletin No. 100. Accessed at <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/914042/eib100.pdf>>

⁵ USDA. National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served, July 2015. Accessed at <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>>.

⁶ USDA. National School Lunch Program: Children Participating, June 5, 2015. Accessed at <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/32slatest.pdf>>.

⁷ USDA. School Breakfast Program Participation and Meals Served, July 2015. Accessed at <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/sbsummar.pdf>>.

⁸ USDA. School Breakfast Program: Children Participating, July 2015. Accessed at <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/31sblatest.pdf>>.

⁹ USDA. School Meal Certification Data, 2014. Accessed at <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/school-meal-certification-data>>.