

House Resolution 17 (2023)

National School Lunch and Breakfast Program Recommendations

January 2024

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are federally assisted meal programs operating in public and nonprofit private schools of high school grade or under, and in residential child care institutions (RCCIs). They provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free meals to children each school day. Participating schools receive cash subsidies from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each reimbursable meal served. In Louisiana, almost 1500 schools participated in these programs during the 2022-2023 school year. Eighty percent of the schools belonged to public school systems operated by either a parish or municipal school board, in accordance with Louisiana's laws requiring participation in the NSLP and SBP (LA R.S. 17:191; LA R.S. 17:192).

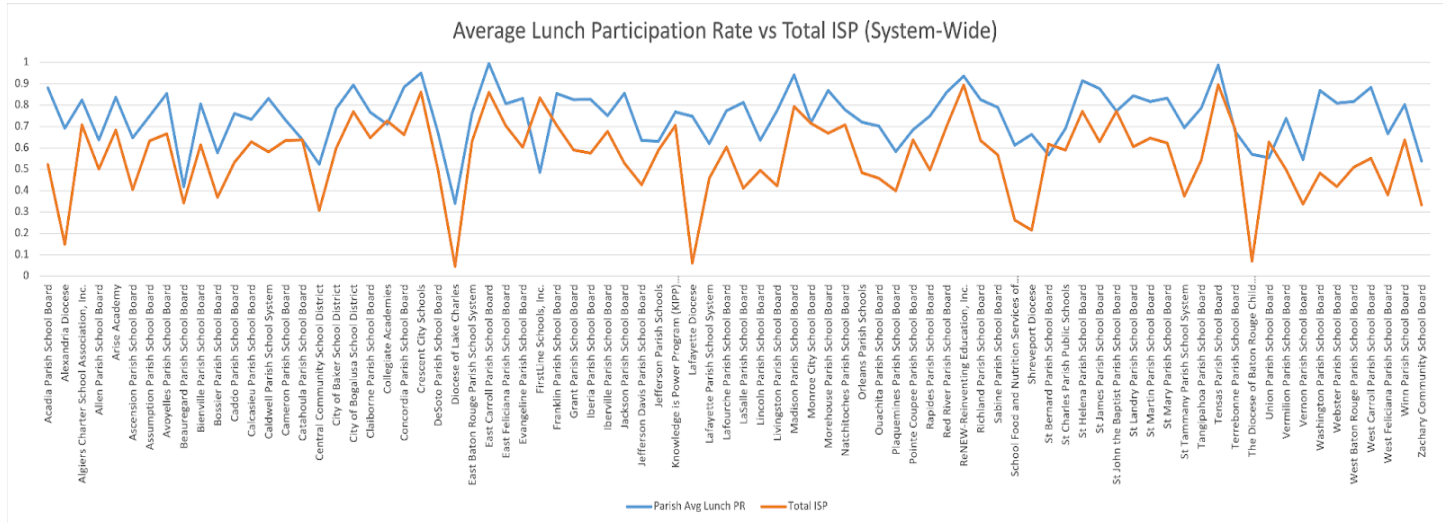
Table 1. 2022-2023 Louisiana NSLP & SPB Meal Statistics

	Meals Served Annually	Average Meals Served Daily	Percentage of Free Meals	Annual Federal Funding
NSLP	77.9 million	512,000	83%	\$292.2 million
SBP	43.2 million	225,000	89%	\$105.2 million

Study

The Louisiana Department of Education Division of Nutrition Support (LDOE DNS) was tasked in House Resolution 17 of the 2023 Regular Legislative Session to make recommendations related to the NSLP in Louisiana. LDOE DNS studied the correlations between the number of students directly certified for free and reduced-price meals through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid programs, or through Foster, Homeless, Migrant, and Runaway status. The total of these directly eligible students compared with total enrollment is referred to as the Identified Student Percentage (ISP). Eighty-two (82) local education agencies (LEAs) were analyzed to see if their ISP correlated with school lunch participation. Our results determined a very strong correlation between ISP and meal participation across the state.

Table 2. 2022-2023 Average Lunch Participation Rate vs Total ISP (System-Wide)
Average Lunch Participation - Total ISP



LDOE DNS also conducted a survey in June 2023 at the School Nutrition Association of Louisiana annual conference. LDOE DNS surveyed 283 school nutrition professionals (directors and managers) from 54 LEAs across the state to determine if perceived meal service time affected the consumption of school meals. School nutrition professionals estimated that students have an average of 18.6 minutes for the lunch period. This is from when students walk into the cafeteria until they leave. It includes time waiting in line. The minimum estimated time to eat was 5 minutes, with a maximum reported as 60 minutes. Because this study was conducted in the summer, LDOE staff was unable to collect objective observational data to confirm school lunch periods. The average food waste observed was 40%, although this figure was not associated with meal period times in this subjective data study.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a study and released recommendations related to school lunch periods in 2019. Their research showed that providing more time for lunch is associated with the following:

- Increased consumption of food and key nutrients.¹
- Increased selection of a fruit.²
- Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, lunch entrée, and milk.^{2,3}
- Decreased plate waste.¹

The CDC found that nearly one-half of school districts nationwide do not require or recommend that schools provide students with at least 20 minutes to eat lunch once they receive their meal.⁴ This is referred to as seat time, which is different from the lunch period. Some students also report that insufficient time to eat is a key reason for not participating in the school lunch program.⁵ This distinction

¹ Bergman EA, Buergel NS, Englund TF, Femrite A. The relationship between the length of the lunch period and nutrient consumption in the elementary school lunch setting. *J Child Nutr Manage*, 28(2): October 2004
² Cohen JFW, Jahn JL, Richardson S, Cluggish SA, Parker E, Rimm EB. Amount of time to eat lunch is associated with children’s selection and consumption of school meal entrée, fruits, vegetables, and milk. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2016;116(1):123-8
³ Gosliner W. School-level factors associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption among students in California middle and high schools. *J Sch Health*. 2014; 84: 559-568.
⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). Results from the School Health Policies and Practices Study 2016. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
⁵ Asperin, A. E., et al. (2010). “The Non-Participation Survey: Understanding Why High School Students Choose Not to Eat School Lunch.” *Journal of Child Nutrition & Management* 34(1): 8

between adequate seat time and the length of the meal period overall is important because many activities can shorten time to eat, including using the restroom, handwashing, walking to where the meal is served, waiting in line, selecting items for the meal, waiting to pay, walking to the table, socializing with friends, and bussing trays after the meal.⁶ School nutrition professionals in Louisiana reported an average lunch meal period shorter than the minimum recommended seat time threshold across the state.

Recommendations

Schools can:

- Provide adequate training to school nutrition staff so that meal service and payment are efficient.
- Minimize wait time in lines by adding serving lines, rearranging points of service so that they are easier for students to access, or offering preorders of meals.
- Offer grab-and-go meal options in the cafeteria or in remote locations.
- Cut up fruit, such as apples and oranges, so they are easier for students to eat.

Parents, school staff, and community members can:

- Join the school wellness team or district wellness committee that sets the policies for health and wellness, and ensure that wellness policies say that students should have at least 20 minutes of seat time to eat lunch.
- Educate district and school administrators about the importance of school lunch and adequate seat time.

States can:

- Consider policies that address sufficient seat time, which is significantly associated with schools providing at least 30 minutes for lunch.⁷

Conclusions

It is clear that food-insecure children participate in the NSLP and SBP programs in Louisiana at high rates. 83% of school lunches and 89% of school breakfasts are served to children who qualify for free meals. In addition, meal participation closely correlates to the percentage of children who qualify for free or reduced meals in Louisiana. Food-insecure children in Louisiana rely on school meals for nourishment.

LDOE DNS recommends a minimum of a 30-minute lunch period (with 20 minutes of seat time) for all children to allow adequate time for children enrolled in pre-K-12 programs to have adequate time to eat. This should be built into the school day in addition to instructional time and does not necessarily require an increase to the number of minutes required in the school day. This can be accomplished through local or statewide policies.

Please contact childnutritionprograms@la.gov with questions.

⁶ Conklin MT, Lambert LG, Anderson JB. How long does it take students to eat lunch? A summary of three studies. *Journal of Clinical Nutrition and Management*. 2002;26(2):1-9

⁷ Turner L, Leider J, Piekarz-Porter E, Schwartz MB, Merlo C, Brener N, Chriqui JF. State Laws Are Associated with School Lunch Duration and Promotion Practices. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2018;118:455-463