FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
School Edition

HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

ABOUT HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

1. WHAT IS HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS (HUSM)?

Healthy Universal School Meals is New Mexico's initiative to provide no-cost, healthy, scratch-cooked meals to all students at school, regardless of their economic status. This program makes nutritious, scratch-cooked meals accessible, ensuring students have fresh and enjoyable food options. Healthy Universal School Meals equips students with the nutritious fuel they need to succeed in school, as studies show that well-nourished students are more engaged and focused during school hours.

2. WHO PAYS FOR NO-COST HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

Healthy Universal School Meals is funded through a combination of federal and state reimbursements. Each month, school's request reimbursement from federal and state sources. When all requirements are met for each meal served, meals can be no cost to the school and students, while saving caretakers' time and money.

3. WHEN DID HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS START?

Healthy Universal School Meals was signed into New Mexico law by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham in 2023. It has been in effect through 2024 and compliance is required for the 2025-2026 school year.

4. IS THIS A TEMPORARY PROGRAM?

No, Healthy Universal School Meals is permanent. An annual recertification process is required to continue receiving reimbursement for the program.

5. WHAT MAKES HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS UNIQUE?

Healthy Universal School Meals is more than providing no-cost meals to students. New Mexico has established the following requirements to ensure that meals served in schools are high-quality and nutritious while adding benefits for local communities and economies: (1) 50 percent of weekly meal components must be freshly prepared or scratch cooked; (2) Lower food waste by providing 20 minutes of seat time for K-5 students to ensure they have adequate time to eat their meals, the use of share tables at each school, and donating unused food; and (3) Implement the use of New Mexico grown foods.

6. WHAT HAPPENS IF HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEAL REQUIREMENTS ARE NOT MET?

Reimbursements will be reduced in the 2026-2027 school year if meal standards are not met by the end of the 2025-2026 school year. Great changes in the cafeteria happen over time and while schools work toward meeting all HUSM requirements, each meal will still receive reimbursements through state and federal sources but will vary depending on compliance level.

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REIMBURSEMENT

7. WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR MEAL REIMBURSEMENT?

School Food Authorities should be enrolled in one of the three federal reimbursement programs to collect required data (Community Eligibility Provision, Provision 2, or Standard) for their reimbursement request. Within the 1st and 10th of every month, schools will submit a reimbursement request to calculate the amount of reimbursable meals served for the prior month. The reimbursement amount will be calculated from the amount in each category of “free”, “reduced”, and “paid” meals. After getting the correct calculation, the School Food Authority will submit their reimbursement by the 10th of every month.

8. DOES THE ENTIRE COST OF THE MEAL GET REIMBURSED, OR IS IT ONLY UP TO A CERTAIN AMOUNT?

Federal funding establishes a max reimbursement rate each year that is published mid-July. The rate can change each year depending on the federal budget, inflation, or other factors. Schools should be aware of the current reimbursement rates to ensure meal costs are budgeted for properly. Meals will only be reimbursed, through federal and state funding, to the established rate for that year. In addition, compliance through meal quality, freshly prepared meal requirements, and submission of the proper paperwork through recertification will affect the state reimbursement rate.

9. WHAT ARE THE FEDERAL REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAMS?

USDA has three program options to determine a participating school’s reimbursement process: Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), Standard, or Provision 2 (P2). CEP allows schools to participate in Healthy Universal School Meals without requiring income forms, P2 requires income forms in the student’s first year, and the Standard Program requires them annually. Participating schools will receive reimbursement on each meal served regardless of which federal reimbursement program they use.

10. HOW IS THE REIMBURSEMENT PER MEAL CALCULATED?

Schools participating in Healthy Universal School Meals will receive the maximum state reimbursement that is equal to the federal free reimbursement rate multiplied by the total number of meals served, minus any other federal or state reimbursement that the School Food Authority receives for providing meals.

By August 1 each year, New Mexico Public Education Department will inform eligible School Food Authorities of the estimated program funding they will receive for the upcoming school year. When calculating program funding, the department will assume that student participation will remain at the same level as the previous school year. Once School Food Authorities submit their monthly claims for reimbursement, the state claim will be calculated based on the actual number of meals served each month.

11. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF USING THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP) REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAM?

Along with maximizing reimbursement through federal and state funding, CEP can reduce the administrative burden and paperwork for School Food Authorities by not having to collect yearly applications. Additionally, when CEP is implemented, unpaid meal debt is eliminated.

12. FOR SCHOOLS PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP): WHAT IS IDENTIFIED STUDENT PERCENTAGE (ISP) AND WILL THE NEW 25% ISP THRESHOLD AFFECT MY SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY?

The Identified Student Percentage (ISP) determines the percentage of students eligible for free meals.

Even with a 25% ISP threshold, schools can still benefit from using CEP. With Healthy Universal School Meals, regardless of how low the ISP threshold is for the School Food Authority, the state will reimburse the School Food Authority for the remaining amount after federal reimbursement.

13. HOW DO SCHOOLS WITH COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP) VERIFY INCOME REQUIREMENTS WITHOUT INCOME INFORMATION?

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) receives income information through direct certification which is a method used to qualify students for free or reduced-price school meals using documentation from state agencies or other authorized sources, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and students experiencing homelessness or migrant students certified by New Mexico Public Education Department. The Direct Certification System matches students with available

14. IF ALL MEALS ARE NO COST, WHY DO SCHOOLS WHO DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN CEP STILL HAVE TO COLLECT INCOME INFORMATION?

Non-CEP schools must still collect income information because their reimbursement process is determined by their specific reimbursement program (P2, or Standard). Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide no-cost meals to students, but must still track the number of meals served in each category (free, reduced, or paid) to accurately calculate the federal and state reimbursement. To receive accurate reimbursements, schools must submit the correct data in their reimbursement request in the correct categories of “free”, “reduced”, and “paid”.

Standard schools or non-CEP schools should notify households that while meals are no cost, providing income information will help schools and districts maximize their federal and state reimbursements.

15. WHAT IF MY SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY IS PARTICIPATING IN HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS, BUT WAS NOT ON THE ESTIMATED ALLOCATION LIST?

If your school food authority is 100% CEP, then it is already receiving the maximum reimbursement and the School Food Authority will not be on the estimated allocation listing. Another reason a School Food Authority may not be on the estimated allocation listing is that it is in its first year of school breakfast and lunch program operation and therefore it does not have previous year meal count to estimate funding. The department will inform you on how to enter your budget.

SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

16. WHAT SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITIES ARE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

All public school districts, charter schools, private schools, Bureau of Indian Education schools, and tribally controlled schools in New Mexico can participate in Healthy Universal School Meals if they operate the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). After enrolling in NSLP and SBP, schools will be notified through their nutrition portal when the Healthy Universal School Meals application becomes available.

17. IF A SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY ONLY OPERATES THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM AND NOT LUNCH, OR ONLY THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM AND NOT BREAKFAST, CAN THEY STILL PARTICIPATE IN HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

No. In order to participate in Healthy Universal School Meals, School Food Authorities must serve both the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program.

18. MY SCHOOL ONLY OFFERS ONE MEAL (BREAKFAST OR LUNCH). CAN WE ADD THE OTHER MEAL TO QUALIFY FOR HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

Yes, your school can add either breakfast or lunch to qualify for Healthy Universal School Meals. Schools can join the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in the school nutrition portal. Schools should be aware of program sign up dates to ensure requirements are met before the cut off for the school year.

To find out cut off dates, visit
https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/student-success-wellness/school-meals/

19. IF A SCHOOL IS PRIVATE, TRIBALLY CONTROLLED OR MANAGED BY THE BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION (BIE) AND ALREADY PARTICIPATES IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM AND SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM, HOW DO THEY OPT INTO HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

Bureau of Indian Education schools, tribally operated schools, and private schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) have the option to opt-in to the program each year. These schools will see an “opt out” button in the nutrition portal when it’s time to complete the annual application.

20. CAN PREK OR PRE SCHOOLS PARTICIPATE IN HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS?

Preschools or PreK programs are eligible to participate in Healthy Universal School Meals if they are income-based programs, such as Head Start, or if they offer instructional time and operate both School Breakfast (SBP) and National School Lunch Programs (NSLP). Daycares are not eligible for Healthy Universal School Meals.

MEAL PREPARATION

21. DO WE HAVE TO HIT ALL THE REQUIREMENTS FOR MEAL PREPARATION IMMEDIATELY?

It's about progress, not perfection. Every step toward freshly prepared meals increases participation and ultimately benefits students. The first step is identifying opportunities for growth. Many schools are already making strides in meal preparation, often without realizing it. Schools across the state are navigating similar changes, and there's a lot to learn from one another. No school has to navigate this process alone. To access support, consider becoming a member of the New Mexico School Nutrition Association (NMSNA).

22. HOW CAN SCHOOLS INCORPORATE CULTURALLY RELEVANT MEALS?

Culturally relevant meals are a powerful way to connect with students and uplift the rich heritage of New Mexico communities. When preparing meals, schools are encouraged to incorporate recipes that reflect the cultures of the students they serve. Sourcing local foods that have long been part of traditional recipes can honor our diverse and unique communities. This not only makes meals more meaningful, but can increase participation and reduce food waste by offering dishes students recognize and enjoy.

23. WHERE CAN I FIND THE REQUIREMENTS FOR FRESHLY PREPARED AND SCRATCH-MADE MEALS?

The Healthy Universal School Meals Guidance document is the best place to find definitions for freshly prepared, scratch cooked and speed scratch cooked meals. It also gives ideas for how to refresh the menu based on the new requirements and how to prepare adequate records to maximize reimbursement.

24. HOW CAN MY SCHOOL LEARN ABOUT PREPARING HEALTHY AND NUTRITIOUS MEALS?

Utilizing resources such as The Lunch Box (https://www.thelunchbox.org/) is a great way to stay up to date on how other schools are implementing changes. You can explore recipes or get tips on scratch cooking, and find information about grants that may become available for program-related materials and learning.

25. WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE REQUIREMENTS AND IDEAS ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE CHANGES?

The Healthy Universal School Meals Guidance document available through New Mexico Public Education Department walks schools through meal prep changes and nutrition requirements and even gives meal ideas that help schools meet the new requirements.

26. HOW CAN SCHOOLS MAKE MEAL PREPARATION FUN AND ENGAGING — FROM MILD TO WILD?

One of the best ways to boost participation in Healthy Universal School Meals is to turn mealtime into a positive and exciting experience for students. Schools can start small or mild by featuring student favorite recipes with a fresh twist, and build up to more exciting or wild events like mini food festivals featuring different flavors or food profiles. Try introducing new recipes from your community, hosting themed lunch days, or create some fun staff competition with a cooking contest.

Promoting the experience is just as important as the food itself. Engaging signage, student voting on menu items, and sharing fun facts about ingredients or local farms can help build support. When students look forward to what is on the menu, they are more likely to participate and enjoy the meal.

FOOD WASTE

27. HOW DOES HEALTHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS COMBAT FOOD WASTE?

Healthy Universal School Meals includes several strategies to reduce food waste while ensuring students have access to no-cost meals:

Offer vs Serve: Schools are encouraged to implement the offer vs serve strategy, allowing students to choose three of the five required meal components at meal time. This strategy is required at the high school level.

Twenty-Minute Seat Time: Schools must provide at least 20 minutes of seated lunchtime for students in grades K–5. This gives students adequate time to enjoy their meals, which can lead to less uneaten food being thrown away.

Share Tables: Designated areas where students can return unopened, allowable food items they don't want in exchange for something they do want, reducing waste and increasing access.

Food Donations: Any allowable food left on the share table that isn't taken during the meal period must be donated to students, local food banks, or other charitable organizations, keeping good food out of the trash and getting it to those who need it.

Together, these practices help create a more efficient, thoughtful approach to school meals benefiting students, families, and the broader community.

28. HOW CAN SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT SHARE TABLES?

Share tables are designated areas where students can place unopened, allowable food items they don't want, making them available to other students during mealtime. Start by setting up a clean space that can be easily supervised in your cafeteria. Then, create signage that informs students which items are allowable such as milk cartons, packaged snacks, or whole uneaten fruits. Create signage that lets students know they can grab what they'd like. Share tables are a simple, effective way to reduce food waste and support student access to food.

29. HOW DO WE DONATE FOOD?

Any allowable food left on share tables or not taken during the meal period must be donated. Schools can partner with local food banks, nonprofits, or distribute directly to students. It is important to follow food safety guidelines and keep records of donations. Donating food helps reduce waste and supports students and community members in need.

LOCAL INGREDIENTS

30. HOW CAN MY SCHOOL GET FUNDING TO PURCHASE LOCAL FOOD?

School Food Authorities with locally sourced food can annually apply for **New Mexico Grown**, a program that encourages schools to purchase New Mexico grown, raised, or processed products.

Participating school food authorities may receive New Mexico Grown product funds based on the lunches served in the prior school year (approximately $.10/per lunch) or a minimum of $1,000, pending available appropriations annually. There is a separate annual application process each spring. More information about this program can be found here: https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/student-success-wellness/nutrition/farm-to-school

31. HOW CAN I LEARN ABOUT LOCAL FOODS?

New Mexico Grown offers guides, procurement worksheets, and other resources online at: https://newmexicogrown.org/

Even if your school is not actively participating in New Mexico Grown, the Nuevo Thursdays program guide gives excellent ideas to boost participation for Healthy Universal School Meals. The guide provides program structure, menu inspiration, marketing ideas, and classroom connections to school meals.
https://newmexicogrown.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Copy-of-Nuevo-Thursdays-Program-and-Planning-Guide.pdf

STUDENT AND FAMILY VOICE

32. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO INCLUDE STUDENT VOICE?

This refers to the practice of actively engaging and asking students and families for feedback on school meals. Including student voice while making changes in your cafeteria is a great way to gauge the impact of the program and tailor meals to the specific needs of those being served. When youth see that sharing their opinions can result in meaningful change, students may feel more invested or excited about eating their meals at school.

33. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS SCHOOLS CAN GATHER FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS AND FAMILIES?

To implement student voice in the meal process, schools can use strategies such as online surveys or feedback forms, in-person focus groups, taste test events, social media engagement, and more. Feedback can cover topics like current recipes or menu for the month, overall satisfaction, and specific likes and dislikes.

GENERAL

34. ARE NO-COST MEALS AVAILABLE OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL?

No, the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program requires that meals are served on academic school days that students are on campus. Other federal child nutrition programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) may be available for schools to operate on non-academic days.

35. CAN TEACHERS AND STAFF GET NO-COST MEALS?

No, Healthy Universal School Meals are no cost for students only.

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WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I STILL HAVE QUESTIONS?

Additional questions can be submitted to New Mexico Public Education Department, Student Success and Wellness Bureau.

For questions regarding the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program contact Rachele DiQuarto at Rachele.Diquarto@ped.nm.gov.

For questions about Healthy Universal School Meals contact Culinary Specialist, Amanda Hermosillo at Amanda.Hermosillo@ped.nm.gov or Kika Ortiz at Francisca.Ortiz@ped.nm.gov.

For questions related to federal and state reimbursements contact Laura Henry-Hand at Laura.Henry-Hand@ped.nm.gov

Healthy Universal School Meals (HUSM) is made possible by New Mexico Public Education Department with federal and state funding which reimburses schools for each no-cost meal served.