

School Meals FAQ for Teachers

The Board of Education has given our School Meals program a dual mandate: to provide convenient, economical, healthy meals for our students so that they can learn well and to break even financially. What do these twin obligations mean for our teachers — and for the kids they teach? Below, we've provided quick answers to some of the questions we hear most often from our teachers.

“Why do school adults pay more for the same meal that kids get cheaper?”

Every meal we serve to kids -- whether or not those kids are eligible for free meals -- is subsidized through USDA's school meals program and commodity food distribution program. Meals that we serve to adults are not eligible for any of these subsidies. So, while kids may actually pay less for the meals than it costs us to prepare and serve them, adults pay the full amount of our cost per meal. We're certainly not looking to make a profit from the meals we sell to adults, but we hope you'll understand that we are obligated to cover our costs when we sell you a meal.

“How do you decide what to serve to the kids for lunch?”

It's not just a matter of creating any menu that we want to. USDA requires us to follow a specific “meal pattern” with a mix of protein, grain, fruit, vegetables, and milk. Some single items, like pizza, provide more than one component. In order to minimize food waste and encourage choices, USDA allows what they call “offer vs. serve,” so students are allowed to decline 2 of the 5 components that are offered at lunch. We also must serve meals that, on average, derive less than 30% of calories from fat. And we don't get all of our food from USDA either. Most of it comes from local and national commercial vendors.

“Why do you serve stuff other than the regular lunch items?”

Plain and simple, we sell other items to help cover the cost of running the School Meals program in our district. When we consider all of our costs to make a school lunch — not just the food costs, but also labor, equipment, and other operating expenses — each meal costs us somewhere close to \$3.50 to prepare and serve. And those costs are all steadily going up. Currently, the reimbursement we receive for each free lunch is around \$2.75. And our paid meals, even with the recent price increase, don't cover our costs either. If we are to break even, we have to sell additional items, but we do try to include healthier selections.

“Why did the price for the meal go up last year — and will it go up again?”

Our School Meals program is unique among school board departments in that we effectively operate as a retail business that depends on making thousands of individual sales to customers every school day. When food and energy costs go up for families, they go up for us, too. We receive no direct funding whatsoever from the district, and we are required, both by USDA and the board, to pay our own way. We strive mightily to keep prices, for students and school adults alike, as low as we possibly can. But when costs go up, we need to raise prices to cover those costs. This is a calculation we have to make every year.

We'd like to thank you for the opportunity to answer these questions. If there's anything at all about our school food service operation that isn't clear to you, please don't hesitate to get in touch with Cathy Golon, Director of Nutrition Services, at 904-259-4330 or cgolon@baker.k12.fl.us.

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Baker County School Board Nutrition Services