



MEETING STUDENT NEEDS & YOUR BOTTOM LINE IN SY21-22: WAIVERS & PROGRAM OPTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

The past year has shown how important school meals are to meeting students' needs. And not only do meals support students' health and academic achievement, they can foster community and connection after a challenging year. Help your students learn and re-engage in School Year 2021-2022 by taking advantage of waiver flexibilities and planning your school nutrition operations to ensure that all kids get the food they need. As an added bonus, maximizing the reach of your operations can help your school nutrition department recover financially from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contents

- [Waivers and Flexibilities Available for SY21-22](#)
- [Program Options for Schools by Day and Time](#)
- [Service Models that Meet Student Needs](#)
- [Additional Resources](#)

Waivers and Flexibilities Available for SY21-22

Available for the Full School Year (to June 30, 2022)

- **All Schools May Operate the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO)**
- **SSO Meals Reimbursed at the Rural/Self-Prep Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Rates**

Taken together, these waivers will allow all schools plus school-sponsored community sites to serve meals through SSO during the school year and receive the higher SFSP rates for those meals, rather than serve meals through NSLP and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) to enrolled students only.

- **Area Eligibility for the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Meals component and NSLP Area-Eligible Afterschool Snacks**

This waiver will allow all school and community-based sites, regardless of location or usual area eligibility, to serve afterschool meals and/or snacks through CACFP At-Risk Afterschool or NSLP.

Available for the Full School Year (to June 30, 2022) (continued)

- **Offer Versus Serve (OVS) Flexibility for Senior High Schools**
- **Limited Meal Pattern Flexibility for NSLP, SBP, SSO and CACFP**

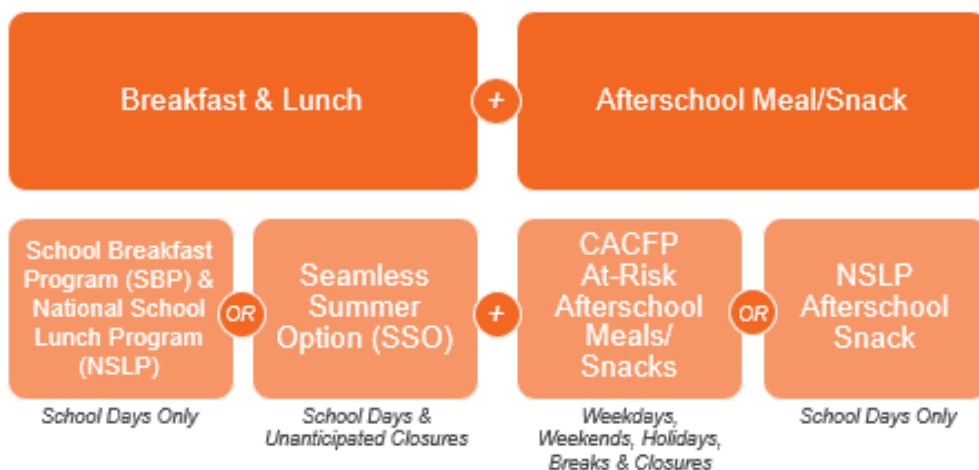
These waivers will provide some ongoing flexibility for schools facing challenges meeting usual school nutrition and meal service standards. However, the meal pattern waiver available October 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022 for schools operating NSLP/SBP or SSO is not as broad as the meal pattern waiver that is available through September 30, 2021. Likewise, the CACFP meal pattern waiver available July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022 is narrower than past meal pattern waivers.

Available to the Extent and for the Duration Needed for NSLP, SBP, SSO, and CACFP (to June 30, 2022)

- **Non-Congregate Meal Service**
- **Meal Service Time Flexibility**
- **Parent or Guardian Meal Pick-Up**

These three waivers have been central to many of the alternative service models implemented since March 2020, such as direct home delivery, curbside or grab-n-go meals, and multi-day meal bundles. These waivers will still be available to support students as needed, such as those continuing with virtual learning or those affected by a school closure or quarantine. They may also support flexibility needed within the school building. In general, though, schools are expected to resume normal operations as much as possible. Work with your state agency to determine what is possible based on your operating status and student needs.

Program Options for Schools by Day and Time



Breakfast + Lunch on School Days:

- **Seamless Summer Option (SSO)**
For SY21-22, SSO meals will be reimbursed at the SFSP rural/self-prep rate
- **National School Lunch Program (NSLP) & School Breakfast Program (SBP)**

Breakfast + Lunch on School Days *(continued)*:

There are many reasons to opt for SSO in SY21-22, including:

- Higher federal reimbursement: \$4.3175 for lunch & \$2.4625 for breakfast for all students
- No need to collect free or reduced-price meal applications from all students*
- No need to collect money from students
- No risk of unpaid meal debt
- Simplified counting and claiming
- More flexibility for alternative service models to serve virtual learners and accommodate social distancing in schools
- More flexibility and ease if schools close, go all-virtual, or switch to a hybrid schedule



* The free or reduced-price meal application must remain available to qualify new students for [Pandemic EBT \(P-EBT\)](#), but otherwise, schools operating SSO do not need to collect, determine, and verify applications from all students as they normally would with standard counting and claiming under NSLP/SBP. If your district is worried that operating SSO will have implications for education funding, review our [Free or Reduced-Price Application/Alternative Income Form Toolkit](#). You may find out that this is not a concern for your district, and the toolkit can help overcome any challenges that you may have.

Unlike this past SY20-21, schools *cannot* operate SFSP, nor can schools serve meals through SSO on weekends, holidays, or breaks. The daily limit on meals per child per day through SSO remains: no more than breakfast and lunch, or any one meal and one snack, per child per day.

After School on School Days:

- **NSLP** (snack only)
- **CACFP At-Risk Afterschool** (supper and/or snack)

Offering afterschool meals through CACFP At-Risk is an excellent way to further meet students' needs for balanced, nutritious meals, especially those engaging in extracurricular activities for long hours after school. The high per-meal reimbursement for afterschool meals can also support school nutrition finances. Work with your state agency to determine whether you can offer non-congregate meals along with [virtual or print enrichment activities](#) to all students or at least virtual learners.

Weekends, Breaks, and Other Non-School Days:

- **CACFP At-Risk Afterschool** (one meal and/or snack)

Consider this if your schools, or any programs in your community, will offer in-person tutoring or other enrichment programs during weekends or other non-school days. Work with your state agency to determine whether you can offer non-congregate meals to some or all students along with [virtual or print enrichment activities](#).

Unanticipated Closures (*snow days, COVID-related closures, etc.*):

- **SSO** (breakfast + lunch *or* any one meal and one snack)
- **CACFP At-Risk Afterschool** (any one meal and one snack)

Both SSO and CACFP At-Risk Afterschool may operate on days when schools close unexpectedly, whether due to weather, staff strikes, or COVID-19 outbreaks. Planning in advance for such events is important to ensure that student needs are met, staff are prepared, and families know where to go.

SFSP is usually available to support meal service during unanticipated school closures. However, because the non-congregate, meal service time, and parent or guardian meal pick-up waivers have *not* been extended for the SFSP, this would not be a good option for school closures during SY21-22, particularly COVID-related closures.

Service Models that Meet Student Needs

Accommodate Virtual Learners

If your district will continue to provide an option for virtual learning, such as through a virtual academy, then it is critical to consider how those students can maintain access to the nutritious meals they need to learn, grow, and thrive. Operating SSO and providing non-congregate service options can ensure these students do not slip through the cracks. Work with families and consider your own capacity in order to determine the best service model. This may include:

- Direct home delivery to virtual learners
- Delivery via mobile or bus routes
- Curbside or grab-n-go meal pick-ups at schools or other community locations

Especially if offering curbside pick-ups, work with families to determine the optimal time, frequency, and location to ensure that work schedules and transportation challenges do not interfere.

Waivers and Program Options in Action

Lynchburg City Schools (VA)

Director of School Nutrition Beth Morris plans to operate SSO for the first time in SY21-22. She is busy working with principals across her division's 20 schools to adapt the customized service plans developed for last year's hybrid schedule to this year's full-time in-person schedule. Depending on the school's safety protocols, meals may be served in the classroom or cafeteria. With extracurriculars back in person, Morris will also offer afterschool meals as before the pandemic. In addition, just under 300 of the division's 8,000 students will continue learning remotely. Morris plans to offer those families a weekly meal bundle delivery using a van purchased to support meal service during the pandemic. The van will also be put to use if students need to quarantine or some schools close.

Tolleson Elementary School District #17 (AZ)

Around 90 percent of the district's 3,000 K-8 students will return in person this Fall – up from the 75 percent who returned to classrooms in March 2021. Director of Dining Services Laura Alvarez will continue serving meals through SSO as she has through the pandemic. For in-person learners, breakfast will be served in the classroom and lunch in the school café with enhanced safety measures like a longer lunch period with staggered arrival times. Curbside meal pick-ups will continue twice per week for full-time virtual learners as well as any students who need to quarantine. The district will also continue its partnership with St. Mary's Food Bank to offer weekend backpacks, a school pantry, and a twice-monthly mobile pantry.

Adapt to In-School Safety Protocols

Depending on the latest state or local guidelines as well as school policies for capacity and distancing, students may not be able to eat in the cafeteria. Eating in the cafeteria may be possible with tactics like assigned seats, decals and signs to promote distancing, and staggered shifts, but be sure to allow adequate time to eat after students get their food. If the cafeteria is not an option for some or all students, they may eat outdoors (weather permitting), in other common areas, or in classrooms.

Options for distributing meals may include:

- In the cafeteria using the serving line
 - This may be possible whether students eat in the cafeteria or take meals elsewhere.
 - This could allow the most options for meals and menu items.
- At kiosks in hallways or common areas
- Delivery to classrooms

Maximize Participation While Supporting Students

Serving breakfast in the classroom as part of the school day is a proven strategy to boost breakfast participation. The ability to serve meals free of charge through SSO with simplified counting and claiming can facilitate breakfast in the classroom while further boosting your bottom line. Moreover, serving breakfast in the classroom can create a positive environment for students and teachers, providing an opportunity to connect or address social-emotional needs before beginning work for the day. Providing breakfast in the classroom has also been shown to improve students' focus and behavior while reducing nurses' visits and disciplinary issues.¹⁻³

Additional Resources

[Summary of Current COVID-19 Child Nutrition Program Response Nationwide Waivers](#)

This frequently-updated resource lists every nationwide COVID-19 waiver by expiration date and provides a summary and link to each. It also summarizes USDA's Q&A guidance on waiver implementation.

[Free or Reduced-Price Meal Application / Alternative Income Form Toolkit](#)

If your district will operate SSO in the coming school year, your team may be debating whether it's necessary to ask families to complete school meals applications or alternative income forms -- and if so, how to explain them when they are not related to school meals. For districts that need to collect income forms, this toolkit will support communication with families about their importance.

References

1. Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, 35(4), 326-333
2. FRAC. (2018) RESEARCH BRIEF: The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior. Accessed at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfast-for-behavior.pdf>
3. FRAC. (2018) Increasing Breakfast Participation to Improve Student Health. Accessed at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/increasing-breakfast-participation-to-improve-student-health.pdf>