

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA



The National School Lunch Program

Among U.S. households with children, Latinos have a much higher rate of food insecurity, 26.8% compared to White non-Hispanic households at 12.7%.¹ Food insecurity is especially detrimental to school-aged children as hunger makes children more likely to have chronic illness; behavioral problems; physical, mental and emotional delays; and lowered attention spans. These increased health risks, in combination with a hungry child's higher tendency to be absent, tardy, and suspended from school, can limit educational opportunities. One key way food insecurity has been reduced for many low-income school children is through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).² The NSLP is a federally assisted meal program created to provide nutritional lunches to children during the day at a free or reduced price. All children who meet income requirements for the program can receive school lunch benefits. In fiscal year (FY) 2005, more than 29.6 million children received a federally subsidized school lunch every day, over half of whom (16.5 million) were from low-income families. As Latino households with school-aged children have high rates of food insecurity, hunger, and poverty, the NSLP plays an important role in providing Latino children with proper nutrition and in helping to mitigate hunger.

IMPACT OF SCHOOL LUNCH ON THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF LATINO CHILDREN

Research shows hunger and nutritional deficiencies inhibit proper growth in children both cognitively and physically. In addition, for school-aged youth, severe hunger has been seen to be a significant predictor of chronic illness, and associated with higher anxiety and depression. Thus, improved access to food resources under any program is likely to not only fill many children's stomachs, but ensure their health and improve educational outcomes.

For many families who participate in the NSLP, the meals served to children constitute the majority (about 60%) of their daily nutritional intake.³ Participants have been shown to meet an average of 94% of the Recommended Energy Allowance (REA) each day, greatly improving their energy intake compared to nonparticipants who consume about 88% of the REA in one day. These higher average intakes of food energy, and an increased consumption of varied nutrients at lunchtime, follow children throughout the day and improve their energy balance over a twenty-four-hour period.⁴

Because many children's eating habits are developed early in life, school lunch plays a role in making sure that children have access to nutritious foods and knowledge about healthy eating. When a child's nutritional needs are met, the child is more attentive in class, has better attendance and fewer disciplinary problems. Research from the USDA demonstrates that children who participate in the NSLP have superior nutritional intakes. They have been seen to have enhanced nutritional consumption compared to those who either bring their lunch from home or otherwise do not participate in the NSLP.⁵

Children who participate in the NSLP have significant improvements in important nutritional measures, including lower intakes of added sugars than nonparticipants (13.2% and 22.0% respectively), leading also to a corresponding difference in added carbohydrate intake. They are less likely to drink soda than nonparticipants (0.2 servings and 0.4 servings at lunch, respectively), helping to contribute to a lower intake of sugars and calories. Children in the program also have a higher likelihood to consume vegetables, milk and milk products, and meat and meat substitutes, all of which are especially vital to young children's diets.⁶

Not only do the nutrition increases observed in participants of the NSLP ensure that hunger is reduced, the increased facility to access healthy foods can help to eliminate risk of overweight and obesity. This proves to be especially important for the Latino community, as more than one in six (16.8%) Hispanic high school students were overweight in 2005, and 24% of Mexican American children (age 6-11) alone were more likely than their non-Hispanic White and Black counterparts to be overweight (12% and 20% respectively).⁷

The NSLP has ensured that many more children have the appropriate nutrition during the day; however, sometimes lunch only is not enough. For children of families that struggle to have nutritionally adequate foods at home, these meals may be the only secure source of food each day. Due to the success of the NSLP, some school meal programs across the nation have expanded to include breakfast, after-school snacks, supper, and programs during the summer. The School Breakfast Program (SBP) has also contributed to significant improvements in school children's well-being. Children participating in both the SBP and the



NSLP have been shown to be significantly more likely to meet the dietary standards for intakes of a variety of vitamins and nutrients and consume more than twice as many servings of milk, fruits, and vegetables combined at breakfast and lunch.⁸

NEW LAWS MAKE SCHOOL LUNCH MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR LATINOS

In 2002, Latino households had a miserable participation rate in the NSLP of 48.4%, thus there were many eligible children who did not benefit from the program for a variety of reasons, including difficult access barriers.⁹ On June 30, 2004, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 was signed into law, expanding the availability of school meals and snacks to more children and for more hours of the day and improving the quality of foods served in schools. The law ensured that more children will be able to access the program by requiring the application forms and descriptive materials to be translated into other languages and easily available to states. For many Latino families, this will eliminate barriers to the program, since children and their parents experience a higher level of limited English proficiency (LEP). About 5.4 million limited-English-proficient students attend U.S. schools in 2006 and are estimated to make up one out of every four students by 2025.¹⁰ In order for these families to be able to properly access such beneficial programs as the NSLP, pertinent information and outreach must be made available in manners that are most culturally appropriate for them. As a result of these language requirements, low-literate and limited-English-proficient families will be more likely to apply for the program, understand and comply with verification processes, and thus, fully benefit from nutrition education outreach efforts.

Accessing benefits through the NSLP can be particularly difficult for children of migrant families as they will often move and change schools in the middle of a school year. Latinos make up a large majority of the migrant population in the United States, 83% of U.S. crop workers identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino.¹¹ The Child Nutrition Act allowed migrant children served through the Migrant Education Program (MEP) to be identified by the school's MEP coordinator and automatically eligible for free school meals as soon as they arrive at the new school, thus reducing time spent applying for programs for which they are already eligible and ensuring fluid access to the program's benefits for migrant children, regardless of where their family moves.

The Act also made important steps to simplify the NSLP application process by automatically qualifying children for school lunch if their household received food stamps. Streamlining the procedures for the NSLP applications created much less paperwork not only for eligible children, but also for administrators. These more effective access guidelines have made significant strides in strengthening the ability of children to participate in the NSLP.

The National School Lunch Program provides lunch to close to 30 million children every day. With the great potential to affect not only the eating habits of young children, but also a variety of positive health outcomes due to nutritionally sound diets, it is crucial that all children who are eligible are able to participate in the program. Currently, due to various barriers, a significant number of children who are eligible are not participating. The 2004 Act, in addressing language, literacy, and cultural barriers, as well as barriers concerning the application and verification processes of the program, made advances in ensuring more children would be able to receive the important nutritional benefits the NSLP has the ability to offer. Combined with improved outreach, these new provisions help ensure that many more children can fully succeed in school and have healthy childhoods due to improved nutrition through the NSLP.

REFERENCES

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