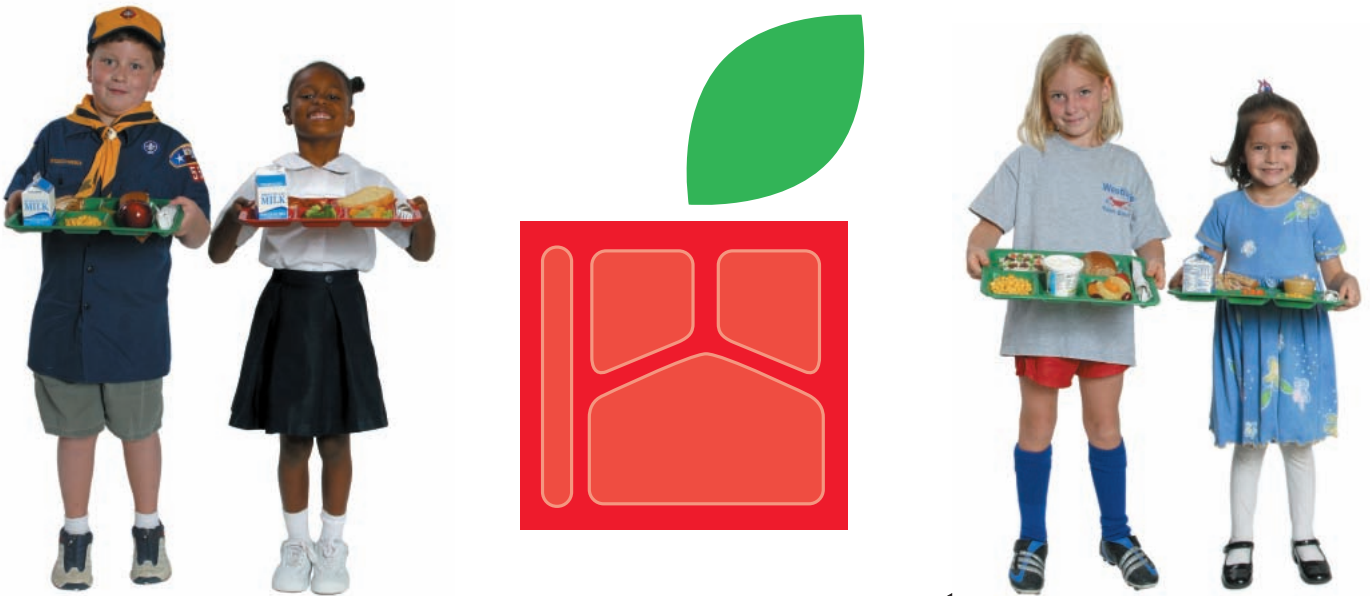


# Nourishing Children's Bodies and Minds



square meals


An Introduction to the School Meal Programs in Texas

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*Nationally, more than 27 million children are served lunch every school day through the National School Lunch Program. In Texas alone, schools serve more than 400 million lunches and 200 million breakfasts a year, all of which meet federal nutrition guidelines.*





Since when is it cool to be square?  
When it comes to eating, of course.  
A healthy square meal can do wonders for the body, creating a strong foundation for a healthier future. But many of our schoolchildren are filling up on empty calories, and their health is being affected.  Because good health is directly linked to learning ability, it is critical to ensure tomorrow's adults develop healthy bodies and healthy minds through good nutrition.

The Texas Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Division works to improve the health and nutrition of Texas schoolchildren by teaming up with school districts, foodservice directors, parents and health care providers to develop and promote healthier food choices through the School Meal Programs.



### **HOW THE SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS WORK**

The National School Lunch Act was passed in 1946 after many potential World War II soldiers failed their physicals due to malnutrition. The Act authorized a permanent lunch program to help provide better nutrition for schoolchildren. Today, the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are federally funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. School districts that choose to take part in the program receive cash subsidies and donated commodities from USDA. In Texas, the School Lunch, Breakfast and After School Snack Programs are now administered by the Texas Department of Agriculture.



## YES, THEY REALLY ARE NUTRITIOUS

School meal menus must meet national nutrition and portion guidelines. At lunch, schools must provide meals that, averaged weekly, provide one-third of the recommended daily allowances (RDAs) of protein, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C. Breakfast meals must provide one-fourth of the RDAs of these same nutrients. The USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans are also followed, with less than 30 percent of the day's calories coming from fat and less than 10 percent coming from saturated fat.

School districts are free to choose specific meals and menus as long as they meet all program guidelines. Healthier versions of children's favorite foods are developed especially for these programs. Most school districts utilize child nutrition and foodservice experts to help establish menus that are both nutritious and enjoyable for young taste buds.



## SCHOOL MEAL PRICING

School districts distribute and administer applications for participation in the programs to all attending students. They then assign full price, reduced price or free meals status to the students. Requirements for reduced price and free meal status are based on federal guidelines for family size and income. Children who receive free or reduced price benefits must not be discriminated against in any way.

All school meals for students, even those classified as full price, are federally subsidized. School districts receive a different cash subsidy for each type of meal served. Because all school meal programs are intended for students, adults and visitors who purchase a school meal must be charged a higher price that covers the cost of the meal. However, the price of an average school lunch is only about \$2.00—a far greater value than the average restaurant meal!



Any parent or guardian can request an application for the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs from their local school administration office. It's easy to participate, low-cost and available in all Texas public and charter schools.

## FUEL FOR THE DAY

A study of the School Breakfast Program showed that students who ate a complete breakfast improved test performance, reduced tardiness and absences, increased attention and improved behavior. But many children are actually skipping this “most important meal of the day.” Even students who do not skip breakfast entirely often do not consume an adequate amount of nutrients. These findings have been consistent regardless of family income.

A complete breakfast is within reach for all students. While many parents assume that breakfast is only available to children with reduced price or free status, the School Breakfast Program is open to all students. It is an excellent start to the school day.

## BETTER NUTRITION, BETTER PERFORMANCE

Students' test scores, concentration and energy levels can all be enhanced through proper nourishment. While many American children today are getting plenty of calories (contributing to our current obesity epidemic), the calories are often empty of essential nutrients. Empty calories can be found in everything from sugar-laden soft drinks and cookies to high fat chips and fast food meals. Lower scores on standardized tests, higher rates of illness, likeliness to fall behind in class, irritability, difficulty concentrating and low energy are just some of the consequences linked with chronic undernourishment.

Participation in the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, which provide healthy, “good food” tailored to children's preferences, is an easy way to make sure that all students receive the nutrition they need and deserve.



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● *School meals are nutritious, fast, easy and affordable. School breakfasts and lunches provide 60 percent of students' dietary needs.*





## GETTING INVOLVED

We can seize opportunities every day to encourage students to make better food choices. Instead of food, parents and teachers can use stickers, toys or extra free time as rewards for a job well done. Teachers can incorporate nutrition-based lessons in their curriculum, and school administrators can fill vending machines for both staff and students with healthy choices like trail mix, baked chips, reduced fat milk, water and graham crackers. Adults can also help lead the way by remaining active, selecting healthy snacks and consistently choosing well-balanced meals.

**Everyone has a voice when it comes to our children's food choices at school.** Parents can talk with the local foodservice director to discuss school menus and choices. Teachers can keep foodservice directors informed about activities such as field trips that keep children away from school at lunch time. This information can have a big impact on the way cafeterias plan their meals for the day. Some Child Nutrition Departments offer sack lunches for field trips. This varies by district but is worth asking about.

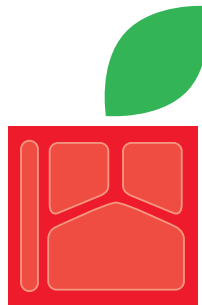
Many foodservice decisions are made on the local district level, including charge policies for students who do not bring a lunch or money for a meal and the duration of lunch periods (USDA regulations merely identify lunch times as 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.). Getting involved means opening the lines of communication, asking questions and sharing ideas and suggestions.

## STAYING INFORMED

Foodservice professionals, school administrators, parents and teachers can also get involved by being up-to-date about the many issues surrounding children's nutrition. TDA remains a partner in this effort and provides a wealth of information on this topic on the Web at **[www.agr.state.tx.us](http://www.agr.state.tx.us)**. Read up on the latest nutrition reports and news and arm yourself with the right tools to fight for our children's health.

To share success stories and ideas, you can e-mail TDA at **[squaremeals@tda.state.tx.us](mailto:squaremeals@tda.state.tx.us)**. Let's spotlight what works and the heroes out there leading the way. Together, we can give Texas schoolchildren strength of heart, body and mind with good food, good choices and good examples.

Commissioner Todd Staples  
Texas Department of Agriculture



## square meals

Nourishing children's bodies and minds.

A Program of the Texas Department of Agriculture's  
Food and Nutrition Division

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