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Let's Take ACTION to Improve School Meals!

Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Awards for School Food Authorities Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Definitions

1. What is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?

The National School Lunch Program is a Federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the Program at the Federal level. At the State level, the NSLP is administered by State agencies, which operate the Program through agreements with School Food Authorities (SFA).

2. What is the School Breakfast Program (SBP)?

The School Breakfast Program is a Federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. The SBP is administered at the Federal level by FNS. At the state level, the program is usually administered by state education agencies, which operate the program through agreements with local School Food Authorities.

3. What is a School Food Authority? Does every school/school district in the United States have an SFA?

An SFA is the governing body responsible for the administration of one or more schools and has legal authority to operate the NSLP and/or SBP therein or be otherwise approved by USDA FNS to operate the Program(s). The SFA holds the highest level of responsibility for ensuring that school meals meet Federal nutrition guidelines, managing program funds, and complying with regulations related to food safety, sanitation, and waste reduction. Therefore, the SFA is typically a school district, or the entity within the school district, that has the authority to operate Federal school nutrition programs.

In some situations, the SFA can be an individual charter school or Charter School Management Organization that has multiple charter schools locally, regionally, or nationally. In other situations, some smaller schools/school districts enter into a joint agreement with a larger district and the larger district operates their meal program as the SFA.

One way to determine if you are an SFA is to answer the question, "To whom do you submit your official documents for the Annual Application Agreement, and/or meal reimbursement claims?" If your answer is someone between your site and your State Agency, it is quite likely that you are not an SFA. If you are still unsure, contact your State Agency for clarification.

4. What is a small SFA?

For the purpose of the Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Awards (Recognition Awards), a small SFA has an enrollment of less than or equal to 5,000 students. Once you set-up an account in the Recognition Awards application portal, your eligibility as a small SFA will be automatically pre-determined based on the data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES).

5. What is a rural SFA?

For the purpose of the Recognition Awards, a rural SFA is defined as an SFA where the majority of students (≥ 50 percent) within the SFA are enrolled in a rural school as defined by a locality code of 41, 42, or 43, according to the NCES online tool. Once you set-up an

account in the Recognition Awards application portal, your eligibility as a rural SFA will be automatically pre-determined based on the data from the NCES.

6. What are local agricultural products?

The definition of “local agricultural products” can depend on geographic, social, governmental, physical, or economic parameters; seasonality; and/or other factors. Local procurement options differ greatly across communities depending on district and school size; proximity to agricultural areas; growing season; and demographics. USDA expects that State agencies will have varying definitions of “local agricultural products” that align with their particular needs and goals. The intent of schools utilizing local agricultural products is to serve more locally produced foods in school cafeterias, improve student nutrition, provide nutrition education opportunities, and support local and regional farmers, ranchers, and fishers. Local agricultural products can be meats, seafood, fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, seeds, dairy foods, or legumes.

7. What are USDA Foods?

The [USDA Foods in Schools](#) program supports domestic nutrition programs and American agricultural producers through purchases of 100% American-grown and -produced foods for use by schools and institutions participating in the NSLP, among other Federal programs.

8. What is a Local School Wellness Policy and where can I find more information?

A Local School Wellness Policy (“wellness policy”) is a written document that guides a local educational agency’s (LEA) or school district’s efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students’ health, well-being, and ability to learn. More information can be found at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>.

9. What is “scratch cooking” compared to “speed-scratch cooking”?

Scratch cooking incorporates ingredients as close to their original state as possible. Speed-scratch (or semi-homemade) cooking uses some pre-cooked or prepared foods while incorporating some scratch ingredients and preparation methods.

Eligibility

10. Who is eligible to apply for the Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Awards (Recognition Awards)?

Eligible applicants must be School Food Authorities (SFA), as [defined above](#), and participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and/or School Breakfast Program (SBP) in the contiguous United States, Hawaii, Alaska, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, or the United States Virgin Islands.

11. Do SFAs need State agency approval?

As part of the application process, SFAs must obtain State agency confirmation that the SFA does not have any outstanding corrective actions and that any previous findings have been resolved. A [fillable PDF form](#) for this purpose is available for SFAs to download. State agencies do not need to review SFA applications prior to submission.

12. Do all our schools have to meet the Recognition Awards criteria?

The criteria for each Recognition Award are different, so please review the criteria for each award carefully. For example, the *Breakfast Trailblazer* and *Lunch Trailblazer Awards* require that at least half (≥ 50 percent) of the schools within the SFA have to meet specifications, so documentation for those sites must be submitted. For example, if a small SFA has three school sites, at least two sites must meet the requirements for the award to meet the ≥ 50 percent requirement.

13. Are independent schools, individual charter schools, and private schools eligible?

If you are the governing body responsible for administering the NSLP and/or SBP for your independent, individual charter, and/or private school, then you would be considered the SFA (as [defined above](#)) and eligible to apply for the Recognition Awards.

14. Can small or charter schools that are their own SFA apply, if part of a larger district?

Yes. If the criteria of being an SFA (as [defined above](#)) is met and the school participates in the NSLP and/or SBP, they are eligible to apply.

15. Can daycare and preschool programs apply?

No. Daycare and preschool programs are not eligible to apply for the Recognition Awards.

16. Are Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) sponsors eligible?

No. SFSP and CACFP sponsors are not eligible to apply for the Recognition Awards.

17. Will a County School Program qualify?

An SFA (as [defined above](#)) is the only eligible entity that may apply; individual schools that are not an SFA are not eligible entities.

18. Can a Juvenile Center that participates in the NSLP apply as long as we are our own SFA?

Yes. If you meet the criteria of an SFA (as defined above) participating in the NSLP and/or SBP.

19. Does the SFA have to be both rural and small? For instance, can a small SFA in urban markets, such as Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles apply?

No. The SFA only needs to meet **one** of the two definitions, they must be EITHER rural or small. Therefore, a small SFA in an urban market would be eligible if they participate in the NSLP and/or SBP.

20. We are classified as rural but some of our townships within the county are in codes

31, 32, and 33. Does the entire SFA have to qualify as rural? If some schools are not rural, are we still eligible?

The requirements to meet the definition of a rural SFA is that the majority of students within the SFA are enrolled in a rural school as defined by a locality code of 41, 42, or 43, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) online tool. Therefore, if ≥50 percent of the students within the SFA are enrolled in a rural school with a locality code of 41, 42, or 43, then the SFA is considered rural.

21. I am designated as rural on the United States Department of Agriculture map but am designated as a town using the NCES tool provided. Why is this different?

For these awards, a rural SFA is defined as an SFA where the majority of students within the SFA are enrolled in a rural school as defined by a locality code of 41, 42, or 43, according to the NCES online tool.

22. On the NCES online tool, the most recent information is from 2021. Are we to use this data?

Yes. The information currently available on the NCES online tool is the criteria to use to determine rural eligibility.

23. We are a small private non-profit school, and we are our own SFA. When I type in our address for the local lookup, it shows that we are located in a 32 and surrounded by 41 around the entire town. Would we still qualify to apply for the award?

If the SFA is located in locality 32, you are not considered a rural SFA by the definition used for these awards; however, you may be eligible as a small SFA. The requirements to meet the definition of a small SFA is a total student population of 5,000 or less.

24. One of our campuses is considered "41" and our other campus is considered a "21." The majority of our students district wide are considered "41." Are we able to apply?

Yes, if the majority (≥50 percent) of students within the SFA are enrolled in a rural school as defined by a locality code of 41, 42, or 43, according to the NCES online tool, the SFA is eligible to apply.

25. Does the SFA have to participate in *both* the NSLP and the SBP?

No. An SFA and its schools used to apply for an award need to participate in at least **one** of the two programs depending on the award for which you apply.

26. Does the SFA have to be at a high free and reduced-price meal percentage?

No. All SFAs that participate in the NSLP and/or SBP, are eligible to apply.

27. We are in the process of becoming an SFA and the paperwork should be complete in the next couple of months so that we can start serving meals under the NSLP by the start of the next school year. My question is, are we eligible to apply for an award?

If your SFA is approved and active with the State Agency prior to the application deadline on Monday, June 30, 2025, you will be eligible to apply. Please note the criteria for some of the awards requires documentation of meals served at least three different times during the 12 months prior to award application submission.

General

28. Is there a travel requirement to receive an award?

Recognition Award recipients will receive travel stipends and information on how to attend a Healthy Meals Summit (Summit) to celebrate and share their work and achievements. Attendance is strongly encouraged, but not required. Summit information is available at: <https://healthymealsincentives.org/spring-2024-summit/>

Application

29. How can we apply for an award(s)?

The Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Awards (Recognition Awards) application portal is available at <https://healthymealsincentives.org/recognition-awards/>. You will be required to create an account and confirm that you are an eligible School Food Authority (SFA) (as [defined above](#)). You can visit the portal anytime to apply for any number of the awards. Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis and you can expect to receive a response within two months of submission.

30. Once you receive a Recognition Award, can you reapply for the same award the following year?

No. An SFA may only receive each Recognition Award once between now and Monday, June 30, 2025, 5:00 PM, EST. You may not reapply for the same award.

31. What is the deadline to apply?

Applications may be submitted through Monday, June 30, 2025, 5:00 pm, EST.

32. Who is the best fit to complete the application?

The SFA (as [defined above](#)) can decide who is most qualified, however, we recommend the School Nutrition Director or Foodservice Director completes the application.

33. As a Healthy Meals Incentives grant recipient, do I have to apply for a Recognition Award?

Yes. After using grant funds to improve school meals, grant recipients are *required* to apply for one or more of the Recognition Awards to demonstrate to their students and community that nutritious school meals are critically important to support child health and school achievement. Action for Healthy Kids and their partners can provide technical assistance to grant recipients as they implement their projects to help them decide which Recognition Award(s) to apply for.

34. What documentation will need to be submitted for the Recognition Awards? The documentation required for each Recognition Award is different, so please review the documentation for each award carefully.

35. Is the use of nutrition analysis software necessary to apply for an award?

No. It is not required; however, if nutrient analysis software is available, the SFA may use it to help document some of the awards criteria.

36. Can our school(s) start working on meeting the criteria now and apply next year?

Yes, absolutely! If you do not currently meet the criteria for a Recognition Award, we encourage you to work towards meeting them and apply anytime through Monday, June 30, 2025, 5:00 PM, EST.

37. Are there resources available to help me qualify for the awards?

Yes. We encourage you to use the Recognition Awards Tips and other helpful resources on the [Healthy Meals Incentives Resources](#) webpage.

38. Can we apply for multiple awards?

Yes. There are a total of eight Recognition Awards. SFAs may apply for any number of awards. However, two of the eight awards are specifically for small and/or rural SFAs: the *Small and/or Rural SFA Breakfast Trailblazer Award* and the *Small and/or Rural SFA Lunch Trailblazer Award*. Therefore, if you are not a small and/or rural SFA, you may apply for a total of six different awards. An SFA may only receive each award once between now and June 30, 2025.

39. If we want to apply for more than one Recognition Award, do we have to submit them all at one time?

No. Once the SFA creates their account, they may re-enter the portal and apply for one or multiple Recognition Awards at a time throughout the duration of the application period (through Monday, June 30, 2025, 5:00 PM, EST). An SFA may only receive each award once between now and June 30, 2025.

40. Can a small and/or rural SFA apply for the regular Breakfast and/or Lunch Trailblazer Awards?

Yes. A small and/or rural SFA may apply for the Breakfast Trailblazer and Lunch Trailblazer Awards as long as the criteria are met and the specified supporting documentation is submitted.

41. Can progress on the application be saved and resumed at a later time?

Yes. The application can be started and saved as you progress through each section. You may go back to it at any time prior to the application deadline of Monday, June 30, 2025, 5:00 PM, EST.

42. Is there support when completing the application?

For help and technical assistance with the online application system, email awards@healthymealsincentives.org with "Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Awards" in the subject line.

43. What if I can't find my SFA in the Recognition Awards application portal?

If your SFA does not appear in the Recognition Awards application portal, you will be directed to a fillable form requesting assistance. The form will be emailed to our technical support team and they will be in contact regarding next steps. If you have additional questions about your SFA status, please email sfaquestions@healthymealsincentives.org.

44. Does the State Agency Confirmation Letter need to be uploaded more than once if an SFA applies for multiple awards?

No, the completed State Agency Confirmation Letter upload is required once to create an SFA profile on the MyAFHK Portal. Once this letter has been uploaded to the SFA profile, the SFA can apply for one or more awards through their profile account.

45. Do speed scratch recipes for sides or main dishes meet award criteria for the Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals Award?

The following are acceptable ingredients to include in menu items prepared from scratch to meet award criteria:

- Prepackaged tortillas, pizza dough, rolls, buns, and breads, including proof and bake breads and sandwich bread,
- dry pasta,
- canned beans,
- fajita chicken meat, beef crumbles, unseasoned cooked meat, chicken, fish,
- individually quick frozen (IQF) fruits/vegetables, and
- unseasoned canned fruits/vegetables are acceptable ingredients in menu items prepared from scratch for this award.

The following are not qualifying menu items for meeting award criteria:

- Semi-homemade or speed-scratch menu items,
- condiments,
- salad dressings,

- grain-based desserts, and sauces

Award Process

46. How will the Healthy Meals Incentives Recognition Award (Recognition Award) applications be reviewed?

Applications will be reviewed by a panel against the criteria for each award and the required documentation to show the criteria was met.

47. How will I receive notification that I received a Recognition Award?

The contact person listed in the application will be notified of their results within two months of submission by email and the application status will also be posted on the portal.

48. What benefits will I receive as a recipient of a Recognition Award? Are there monetary incentives?

SFAs meeting Recognition Award criteria will receive national and local recognition, as well as an awardee communication toolkit that includes digital assets, and travel stipends to attend a national Healthy Meals Summit.

49. Can you provide details regarding the Healthy Meals Summits?

The Summits will convene Recognition Awardee and Healthy Meals Incentives Grantees to be recognized, share best practices, and discuss strategies for sustaining their achievements into the future. Additional information is available at: <https://healthymealsincentives.org/spring-2024-summit/>.

50. Will State Agencies be notified of Recognition Awardees?

Yes, an updated list of awardees will be shared with the USDA on a monthly basis. USDA will share this information with State Agencies via PartnerWeb.

Webinar Information

51. Where can I access the recording of the Informational Webinars? The recordings will be available on the Healthy Meals Incentives website, <https://healthymealsincentives.org>.