FAQ: National School Lunch Program Consideration

What is the National School Lunch Program?

The National School Lunch Program, or NSLP, is a federally assisted meal program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture and the New York State Education Department. Participating schools must serve meals that meet federal meal-pattern and nutrition requirements.

Why is Briarcliff Manor UFSD considering NSLP now?

New York State now provides universal free school meals for schools that participate in the federal school meals program. If Briarcliff participates in NSLP, students would be eligible to receive a reimbursable breakfast and/or lunch at no cost.

Does “free meals” mean everything in the cafeteria is free?

No. Under NSLP, a reimbursable meal would be provided at no cost. A reimbursable meal must include required meal components and meet program standards. Extra items, snacks, second meals, premium beverages, or a la carte items may still have a cost if they are offered and permitted.

What is a reimbursable meal?

A reimbursable meal is a complete meal that meets federal requirements. For lunch, this generally includes required components such as fruits, vegetables, grains, meat/meat alternate, and milk. Students may have some choice, but the meal must contain the required components to qualify as reimbursable.

How is NSLP different from our current a la carte model?

Under the current model, families pay for meals and a la carte items. The District has more flexibility over what is sold and how items are offered.

Under NSLP, reimbursable meals would be free to students, but the District would need to follow federal and state requirements for meal patterns, nutrition standards, claiming, documentation, procurement, and compliance. Snacks and a la carte items sold during the school day would also need to meet Smart Snacks standards.

Would students still be allowed to bring lunch from home?

Yes. NSLP does not prevent students from bringing lunch from home for their own consumption.

Would parents still be able to send food from home for their own child?

Yes. Smart Snacks rules apply to foods sold to students on campus during the school day. They do not apply to food brought from home for a student's own consumption.

Would classroom parties still be allowed?

Classroom celebrations are generally addressed through the District's wellness policy and building practices. If food is provided without being sold to students, Smart Snacks rules generally do not apply in the same way as they do to food sales. The District would still need to follow its wellness policy, allergy protocols, and building procedures.

What are Smart Snacks?

Smart Snacks are federal nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold to students outside of the reimbursable school meal during the school day. This includes a la carte items, school stores, vending machines, snack bars, and many food-based fundraisers.

What kinds of items are affected by Smart Snacks?

Smart Snacks standards apply to foods and beverages sold to students during the school day. Items must meet standards related to calories, sodium, fat, sugar, whole grains, and other criteria. Some items may be allowed if they meet the standards; others may need to be removed, replaced, reformulated, or sold only outside the regulated school-day period.

Does USDA provide a list of approved snacks?

USDA does not approve every individual product. Products must be evaluated using nutrition labels, ingredient lists, product specifications, or the Smart Snacks calculator.

What happens to a la carte items under NSLP?

A la carte items may still be offered, but they must comply with Smart Snacks standards if sold to students during the school day. The District may also choose to set stricter local standards.

Would students still be able to buy snacks?

Potentially, yes. However, snacks sold during the school day would need to comply with Smart Snacks standards. The District could also decide to reduce snack offerings, limit snack purchases by grade level, or provide stronger parent controls.

What happens to PTA pizza day?

This is one of the most important tradeoffs. Because PTA pizza day involves food sold to students during the school day, it would likely not be able to continue in its current format

if the participating school is operating under NSLP and the pizza does not meet applicable Smart Snacks or meal-program requirements.

The District and PTA could explore alternatives, such as non-food fundraisers, after-school fundraisers, off-campus fundraisers, food fundraisers intended for consumption outside the school day, or a pizza meal option offered through the school food service program that meets program requirements.

Why can't pizza day simply continue if families want it?

Federal rules apply to participating schools. The District cannot selectively ignore Smart Snacks requirements for recurring food sales to students during the school day. The issue is not whether pizza itself can ever be served; the issue is whether a separate food sale to students during the school day complies with the rules.

Could pizza still be served as part of school lunch?

Yes, potentially. Pizza can be included on a school lunch menu if it meets applicable meal-pattern and nutrition requirements. A food service-provided pizza lunch is different from an outside PTA pizza fundraiser sold separately during the school day.

Would NSLP lower food quality?

Not necessarily. NSLP sets nutrition and meal-pattern requirements, but food quality depends heavily on the vendor, staffing, equipment, menu planning, preparation, presentation, and District expectations. If the District moves forward, the food service bid could include expectations around food quality, scratch or speed-scratch cooking, allergy accommodations, menu transparency, student feedback, and customer service.

Would NSLP limit menu variety?

It may limit some flexibility because meals must meet federal requirements. However, many districts operate varied and appealing menus within NSLP. The District would need to build menu variety and student acceptance into its expectations for the food service provider.

Would NSLP help families financially?

Yes, for families whose children participate in school meals. Reimbursable breakfast and/or lunch would be available at no cost to students in participating schools.

Would NSLP help reduce stigma?

Yes. Universal free meals can reduce stigma because all students may access meals at no cost, regardless of household income.

Would families still need to complete income forms?

Yes. Even when meals are free for all students, income information may still be important for other programs, reporting, grants, fee waivers, or state/federal data purposes. The District would provide guidance if forms are needed.

Would NSLP require the District to rebid food service?

Yes. If the District moves from its current food service model to NSLP, it may need to rebid or restructure its food service contract to meet federal and state procurement, meal service, and compliance requirements.

Could NSLP be implemented in some buildings but not others?

Potentially, yes, depending on program requirements, District planning, operational feasibility, and NYSED approval. The District is reviewing whether participation may make more sense at certain buildings than others.

Why might the High School be treated differently?

The High School may present different considerations, including student preferences, portion-size concerns, space and serving-line constraints, scheduling, a la carte demand, and lunch-period logistics. The District may consider different models by building.