

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



September 19, 2011

Public Schools Face the Rising Costs of Serving Lunch

By **FERNANDA SANTOS**

The federal government is making school meals more nutritious this year, but also more expensive.

Under a little-noticed provision of the [child nutrition bill signed by President Obama in December](#), which brought more fresh produce and less whole milk to cafeterias nationwide, school districts are required to start bringing their prices in line with what it costs to prepare the meals, eventually charging an average of \$2.46 for the lunches they serve.

Though the law suggests that prices go up by a maximum of 10 cents a year, the town of Seymour, Conn., raised its prices by 25 cents, after years without increases; the new prices, \$2.25 a day for elementary school pupils, \$2.50 for middle-school students and \$2.75 for high school students — are [listed on the district's Web site](#), just under the words, "Welcome Back to School!" In Suffolk County, on Long Island, the president of the [Board of Education](#) at the [Riverhead Central School District](#) — which also raised prices by a quarter a day, or 12.5 percent for most students — said that parents had cornered her and other officials at supermarkets, gas stations and before meetings, questioning the increase.

"All we could tell them was we really had no choice," said the president, Ann Cotten-DeGrasse.

Officials are already bracing for a backlash as the increases pile up.

"Our parents haven't complained, but I don't know if they'll be as understanding if we do it again next year, and the year after, and then the year after that," said Louise D'Angelo, director of food services at the [North Syracuse Central School District](#) in upstate New York, where lunch prices just went up by 25 cents across all grades — to \$1.75 in elementary school, \$2 in middle school and \$2.25 in high school.

The new pricing requirement, which comes amid school budget cuts and a lingering recession, is the first time the federal government has gotten into the business of cafeteria prices since its school lunch program was established in 1946. Under the roughly \$10 billion program, families with incomes up to 130 percent of the poverty level— \$28,665 a year for a family of four — are eligible for free meals. Those that earn 130 percent to 185 percent of poverty level, or \$40,793 for a family of four, qualify for reduced-price meals.

The federal government reimburses districts \$2.72 for free meals, \$2.32 for reduced-price meals and 26 cents for the rest. Generally, this money is combined with proceeds from the sale of meals and snacks into a single pot. But there is a wide range of what districts charge paying customers: in Fairfax County, Va., lunch costs \$2.65 in elementary school and \$2.75 in middle and high schools, while in Austin, Tex., it is \$2.15 and \$2.50, respectively. Other districts have kept prices far lower than costs — in New York City, for example, there is a \$1.10 gap — to make lunch affordable.

A study published last year by the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), a research organization in Washington, argued that this arrangement “appears to be subsidizing meals for children whose families are much better off” than the children for whom the reimbursements are meant. It urged a gradual rise in lunch prices to prevent federal money from being “siphoned off to keep prices low for paid meals.”

Congress heeded the suggestion, tying an increase of 6 cents in the reimbursement rates, the first in 30 years, to the mandate for increased meal prices in the child nutrition bill.

Based on a convoluted formula that takes into account inflation and the average price of meals sold in schools, certain districts — like New York City, where lunch is sold for \$1.50 — did not have to raise prices this year. But next year, it could be different, unless the districts decide to use their own money to subsidize lunches.

The mandatory increases in meal prices are “a recognition that over time, the money coming in to schools from the sale of paid meals has not kept pace with the cost of preparing those meals,” said Kevin Concannon, under secretary for food, nutrition and consumer services at the Department of Agriculture, which oversees the [school meal program](#). “The consideration here is the transition and giving school districts time to make the adjustments that they need to serve healthier meals to all our kids.”

But Eric Goldstein, who oversees the [New York City schools’ food program](#), said the law “misses the point.” Price increases threaten to upend the delicate balance of school food operations, Mr. Goldstein said, as they might compel more parents to pack their children’s lunches or to skip on paying cafeteria lunch fees altogether — already a huge problem, with the [city absorbing \\$42 million in unpaid fees since 2004](#).

Mr. Concannon, of the Agriculture Department, said the bill “seeks to ensure that the level of support for all school meals is equal.” Mr. Goldstein said the goal was “unrealistic.”

“We want to serve the same food for everyone, in the same cafeteria, to have everyone eating together,” Mr. Goldstein said. “It shouldn’t be that we have to say, this is for this child, and this is for that child, and here’s money to pay for this and here’s money for that.”

Then, there is the financial burden that higher meal prices would carry for families whose income

lies just above the cutoff line for reduced-price lunches, for which schools can charge no more than 40 cents. (They cost 25 cents in New York City.)

“We could be shooting ourselves in the foot here if we’re not setting prices at a level that parents are able or willing to pay,” said Diane Pratt-Heavner, a spokeswoman for the School Nutrition Association, which represents cafeteria administrators.

Cindy Brooks, the food service director in Seymour, a 2,500-student district northwest of New Haven, said she had been closely monitoring the sales of paid meals, which provide the bulk of her revenues, since the 25-cent price increase went into effect.

“I’m worried,” Ms. Brooks said. “A lot of our families are struggling to make ends meet.”

And in North Syracuse, Ms. D’Angelo said the entire pricing structure was out of balance. After labor costs, she said, she is left with 15 cents per lunch to buy ingredients, repair equipment and equip cafeterias.

“The federal government knows this is not enough to pay for the food we make,” she said.