

The School Lunch Tray: September 16, 2026

Dear School Sponsors of Child Nutrition Programs:

The School Lunch Tray contains the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) weekly email notifications for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) [school nutrition programs](#).

This week's topics are listed below. Please review and share with appropriate staff members. For previous versions of the School Lunch Tray, visit the CSDE's [School Lunch Tray and Table Talk](#) webpage.

Action Items

- CSDE 2026 SNACT Fall Conference Presentation Topics Survey Due September 19, 2026
- Reminder: Food Safety Inspection Report for School Year 2025-26 Due September 30, 2026
- Prepare for the CT Fresh Ed: Great Plates Contest for Fall 2026 
- Verification Starts October 1 and Must be Completed by November 15, 2026
- CSDE Virtual Office Hour on September 23, 2026: Verification
- CSDE Virtual Trainings – Getting Ready for Success: Preparing for the School Nutrition Program Administrative and Procurement Reviews

Need to Know

- USDA Final Rule with Comment Period: Simplified Geographic Preference Procurement in Child Nutrition Programs (91 FR 57245)
- USDA Memo TA 01-2026 Harvest to Hallways - Resources for Procuring Local Foods in School Year 2026-2027 
- Save the Date: Back to School with Farm to School Live! Webinar, October 19, 2026 

Good to Know

- Dairy Grant Opportunity for School Meals: Deadline November 6, 2026

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Action Items

CSDE 2026 SNACT Fall Conference Presentation Topics Survey Due September 19, 2026

The CSDE will be presenting at the upcoming SNACT 2026 Fall Conference and is requesting input from school food authorities (SFAs) on topics to be discussed during the session. Please take a few minutes to share potential topics by completing the short, 3-minute [CSDE 2026 SNACT Fall Conference Presentation Topics Survey](#). This feedback will help ensure the CSDE presentation addresses SFAs' most relevant questions and priorities.

Please complete the survey by Friday, September 19, 2026.

Reminder: Food Safety Inspection Report for School Year 2025-26 Due September 30, 2026

The Food Safety Inspection Report for school year (SY) 2025-26 must be completed in the [Connecticut Online Application and Claiming System for Child Nutrition Programs \(CNP System\)](#) by September 30, 2026. As required in section 9(h) of the National School Lunch Act (NSLA), 42 U.S.C. 1758(h), at least twice each year, schools must obtain a food safety inspection conducted by a state or local agency responsible for such inspections. As part of that requirement, the CSDE must annually collect the total number of inspections conducted at each SFA and report the number to the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) by November 15, 2026. The food safety inspections requirement applies to all food preparation service sites and service-only sites.

Sponsors must complete the Food Safety Inspection Report for SY 2025-26 in the CNP System at the same time they complete and submit the annual sponsor application, but no later than September 30, 2026. Guidance begins on page 27 of the CSDE's guide, [Updating the Sponsor Application for School Nutrition Programs](#). The Food Safety Inspection Report can be completed by anyone who has access to the CNP System.

Food safety inspections for facilities not under the jurisdiction of the local or state health department: Some schools or facilities (such as schools or group homes operated by the Department of Children and Families) do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Health (DPH) and therefore, will not be inspected by DPH or the local health department. **However, food safety inspections conducted by the state agency that licenses the facility qualify toward meeting the requirement of two food safety inspections annually.**

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While the CSDE recognizes that there may be difficulty in obtaining the two food safety inspections, SFAs are responsible for requesting such inspections and documenting such efforts. When two health inspections are not conducted, each sponsor is responsible for requesting the inspections and documenting these efforts (refer to the CSDE's [Sample Letter for Food Safety Health Inspection for the National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\) and School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#)).

Prepare for the CT Fresh Ed: Great Plates Contest for Fall 2026



This is prime harvesting season, and schools are serving plenty of fresh, CT Grown food. Keep those cameras handy and snap photos of local foods on school menus — especially during CT Grown for CT Kids Week. For more information and instructions, visit the CSDE's [CT Great Plates Contest](#) webpage.

Schools will have more time to capture their Great Plates moments, with contest submissions now moving to later this fall/winter. The CSDE will announce and celebrate the winning schools at the Farm to School Conference in May 2027. More information about the official submission deadlines will be coming soon.

This year, there is a special category for schools that are just getting started with farm to school, so everyone has a chance to enter. For help getting that perfect picture, reach out to the district's [Regional Farm to School Coordinator](#) for tips and assistance.

Verification Starts October 1 and Must be Completed by November 15, 2026

This is a reminder that the verification process begins October 1 and must be completed by November 15. The CSDE's verification webinar, *Verification Procedures for School Nutrition Programs*, is available on the CSDE's [Verification Procedures for School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage. The verification forms are available in the "[Forms](#)" section of the CSDE's Verification Procedures for School Nutrition Programs webpage.

Three important documents that assist in the verification process include the CSDE's [Calendar for Completing Verification](#), [Important Points for Completing Verification](#), and the **required** [Verification Selection Worksheet](#). For more information regarding verification, refer to the USDA's [Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#).

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CSDE Virtual Office Hour on September 23, 2026: Verification

The CSDE will conduct a virtual Teams office hour on September 23, 2026, from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m., covering the topic of verification. This will be a great opportunity to ask questions regarding this topic. All verifying officials are encouraged to attend. Use the Teams link below to attend this session. **Note:** Office hours are not recorded.

Microsoft Teams meeting

Join: <https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/283971930216045?p=hCXrNDtAylamJhR8Rv>

Meeting ID: 283 971 930 216 045

Passcode: yu64MG2z

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CSDE Virtual Trainings – Getting Ready for Success: Preparing for the School Nutrition Program Administrative and Procurement Reviews

Part 2 of the *Getting Ready for Success: Preparing for the School Nutrition Program Administrative Review and Procurement Review* virtual training takes place September 17, 2026. Below is important information regarding the trainings and dates.

Trainings

These virtual training sessions listed below are **mandatory for SFAs scheduled for an AR and/or PR during SY 2026–27**. The sessions are also open to all SFAs, including those not selected for an AR. New school nutrition program directors are encouraged to attend.

Each webinar will focus on different areas and is designed to help SFAs understand the Administrative Review and Procurement Review process, prepare required documentation, and identify key areas of focus before the AR/PR.

Required Attendance

The three trainings are required for food service directors and business administrators who have been notified that they will receive an AR and/or PR during SY 2026–27. [Registration](#) is required for SFAs having an AR. SFAs not having an AR or PR do not have to register to attend the trainings.

Training Dates

- September 17, 2026, 1:00–3:30 p.m., Overview of Meal Compliance, Menu Documentation, Accommodation, General Areas, Onsite Reviews and Supplemental Areas
- September 24, 2026, 1:00–3:30 p.m., Overview of Procurement Review Process

Training Access Information

Microsoft Teams meeting

Join: <https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/282509131680015?p=oQrMXM7ebIbtIpEtJe>

Meeting ID: 282 509 131 680 015

Passcode: aa6id6AR

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Dial in by phone

[+1 860-840-2075, 189456618#](#) United States, Hartford

[Find a local number](#)

Phone conference ID: 189 456 618#

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Need to Know

USDA Final Rule with Comment Period: Simplified Geographic Preference Procurement in Child Nutrition Programs (91 FR 57245)

On September 9, 2026, the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) published the direct final rule with comment period, [Simplified Geographic Preference Procurement in Child Nutrition Programs](#) (91 FR 57245) effective November 9, 2026. This direct final rule amends geographic preference option language in the regulations for the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Special Milk Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program. The changes are customer-focused and intended to simplify program regulations and make them easier to understand. They do not change the meaning of the regulations or their implementation.

As a reminder, the geographic preference option gives CNP operators the discretion to define local when buying food. It also allows CNP operators to:

- Use a local product specification—requiring unprocessed agricultural products to be from a specified local area for a bid to be considered.
- Give a defined scoring advantage (e.g., extra points or credit) for local, unprocessed foods when evaluating offers.

Additionally, when using a defined scoring advantage, CNP operators may determine the amount of preference to give to unprocessed agricultural products that match their local definition(s) and the method for applying it. This rule also supports USDA's [Harvest to Hallways Initiative](#) to improve school meals and strengthen the connection between American agriculture and America's children.

Comments on the final rule must be submitted by October 9, 2026. Comments may be submitted in writing by one of the methods below.

- Federal eRulemaking Portal (preferred): Go to [Regulations.gov](#). Follow the online instructions for submitting comments.
- Mail: Send comments to Community Food Systems Division, Food and Nutrition Administration, USDA, 5601 Sunnyside Avenue, Beltsville, MD 20705.

The FNA will soon be issuing a memorandum that provides information about this direct final rule.

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USDA Memo TA 01-2026 Harvest to Hallways - Resources for Procuring Local Foods in School Year 2026-2027

On August 24, 2026, the USDA released [TA 01-2026 Harvest to Hallways - Resources for Procuring Local Foods in School Year 2026-2027](#). The purpose of this memorandum is to remind schools, sponsors, and institutions participating in any USDA Child Nutrition Program (CNP) of the various resources available to help CNP operators procure local foods.

Save the Date: Back to School with Farm to School Live! Webinar, October 19, 2026



Join the CSDE, UConn Extension, and Regional Farm to School Coordinators on October 19, 2026, from 2:00-3:30 p.m. for the Back to School with Farm to School Live! webinar. Topics include a review of farm to school initiatives, resources, and support for the 2026-27 school year. This webinar will include the latest on the CT Fresh Ed Buy Local Program, CT Fresh Ed Compass & Snapshot, and an opportunity to connect with the district's Regional Farm to School Coordinator. More information will be coming soon.

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Good to Know

Dairy Grant Opportunity for School Meals: Deadline November 6, 2026

The Connecticut Milk Promotion Board and New England Dairy recently announced a funding opportunity from Connecticut Dairy Farmers for K-12 schools participating in the federal Child Nutrition Programs in Connecticut. This funding opportunity supports food service needs related to expanding school meal programs or serving new dairy menu items. The application and more details are available on New England Dairy's [School Grants](#) webpage. The application deadline is November 6, 2026

Funding for this program is provided by the Connecticut Milk Promotion Board.

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For more information, visit the Connecticut State Department of Education's [School Lunch Tray and Table Talk](#) webpage, or contact the [school nutrition programs staff](#) at the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs, 450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 504, Hartford, CT 06103-1841. This document is available at https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/nutrition/slt/2026/slt_09_16_2026.pdf.

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1. mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; or
2. fax: (833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or
3. email: program.intake@usda.gov

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