

Overview of Menu Planning for Grades K-12 in the National School Lunch Program

School Year 2023-24 (July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024)

This guidance helps school food authorities (SFAs) meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) meal pattern requirements for grades K-12 (including the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP) and encourage student selections of reimbursable meals with offer versus serve (OVS). The NSLP meal patterns are available on the Connecticut State Department of Education’s (CSDE) [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage. For guidance on the crediting requirements, refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Summary Charts for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage. The CSDE’s training program, *What’s in a Meal: National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12*, provides comprehensive guidance on the meal pattern and crediting requirements.



Meal pattern: All lunch menus must provide the minimum daily and weekly requirements of each component for each grade group. The weekly requirements for vegetables, fruits, and milk are the sum of the daily requirements. The weekly requirements for grains and meat/meat alternates (MMA) are ranges; menus must provide the weekly minimum for each grade group, but the weekly maximums are not required. Lunch menu may include larger amounts of any component if the weekly menu meets the dietary specifications (refer to “[Dietary specifications \(nutrition standards\)](#)” in this document). For more information on the lunch meal patterns, visit the CSDE’s [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage and refer to the CSDE’s [Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) and the CSDE’s training program, *What’s in a Meal: National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12*.



Crediting documentation: SFAs must use the USDA’s [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#) (FBG) to determine how foods credit and the amount that provides the required meal pattern serving. Commercial processed foods not listed in the FBG require a Child Nutrition (CN) label or product formulation statement (PFS) to document crediting information. Foods made from scratch must have a standardized recipe that documents crediting information. For information on crediting documentation, refer to the CSDE’s resources, [Child Nutrition \(CN\) Labeling Program](#), [Using Product Formulation Statements in the School Nutrition Programs](#), [Accepting Processed Product Documentation in the NSLP and SBP](#), and [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the NSLP and SBP](#), and visit the “[Crediting Commercial Processed Products](#)” and “[Crediting Foods Made from Scratch](#)” sections of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

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Milk: Allowable types of milk include low-fat (1%) and fat-free milk, either unflavored or flavored. Lunch menus must offer at least 1 cup daily for all grades and must include a variety of milk, i.e., at least two different choices. At least one milk choice must be unflavored. For more information on the milk component, refer to the CSDE’s [Comparison of Meal Pattern Requirements for the Milk Component in School Nutrition Programs](#) and visit the “Milk Component for Grades K-12” section of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.



Fruits: The fruits component includes fresh, frozen, and dried fruits; canned fruits in juice, water, or light syrup; and pasteurized 100 percent full-strength fruit juices. Lunch menus must offer at least ½ cup daily for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 1 cup daily for grades 9-12. All fruits credit based on volume except dried fruits such as raisins and dried apricots, which credit as twice the volume served, e.g., ¼ cup credits as ½ cup of the fruits component. A serving of canned fruit may include the juice, which counts toward the weekly juice limit (refer to “[Juice](#)” in this document). For more information on the fruits component, visit the “[Fruits Component for Grades K-12](#)” section of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.



Vegetables: The vegetables component includes fresh, frozen, canned, and rehydrated dried vegetables, and pasteurized 100 percent full-strength vegetable juice. Vegetable juice cannot exceed half of the weekly vegetable offerings (refer to “[Juice](#)” in this document). Pureed vegetables in smoothies credit only as juice.

Lunch menus must offer at least ¾ cup daily for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 1 cup daily for grades 9-12. Lunch menus for each grade group must include minimum weekly amounts of the five vegetable subgroups: dark green, red/orange, beans/peas (legumes), starchy, and other (refer to the CSDE’s [Vegetable Subgroups in the NSLP](#)).

All vegetables credit based on volume except raw leafy greens such as spinach and lettuce, which credit as half the volume served, e.g., 1 cup credits as ½ cup of the vegetables component. The meal pattern serving refers to the amount of vegetables before added ingredients, such as sauce (e.g., baked beans) and mayonnaise (e.g., potato salad). A serving of canned vegetables must be drained. Dried vegetables (such as potato flakes and dried soup mix) credit based on their rehydrated volume and require a PFS.

For more information on the vegetables component, visit the “[Vegetables Component for Grades K-12](#)” section of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

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Juices: Fruit and vegetable juices must be pasteurized 100 percent full-strength juice. Fruit juices cannot exceed half of the weekly fruit offerings and vegetable juice cannot exceed half of the weekly vegetable offerings. For example, if a five-day lunch menu for grades 6-8 offers 2½ cups of the fruits component, juice cannot exceed 1¼ cups. The juice limit applies to all sources of 100 percent juice served at lunch during the week, including fruit and vegetable juices, frozen juice pops made from 100 percent juice, and pureed fruits and vegetables in smoothies. The juice from canned fruit counts toward the juice limit if the menu planner credits the juice toward the fruits component. For more nutritious meals, serve whole fruits and vegetables instead of juice. For more information, refer to the CSDE’s *Crediting Juice for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP* and *Crediting Smoothies for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP*.



Grains: Lunch menus must offer at least 1 ounce equivalent (oz eq) daily for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 2 oz eq daily for grades 9-12. The weekly five-day menu must offer at least 8 oz eq for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 10 oz eq for grades 9-12. The weekly seven-day menu must offer at least 11 oz eq for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 14 oz eq for grades 9-12. The weekly maximums are not required but provide a guide for planning age-appropriate meals that meet the dietary specifications (refer to “[Dietary specifications \(nutrition standards\)](#)” in this document).

At least 80 percent of the grains offered at lunch must be whole grain-rich (WGR). Grains that are not WGR must be enriched (refer to the CSDE’s *Crediting Enriched Grains in the NSLP and SBP*). Foods in groups A-H of the USDA’s Exhibit A chart are WGR if: 1) they are 100 percent whole grain or contain a blend of whole and enriched grains that is at least 50 percent whole grain; and 2) noncreditable grains are less than ¼ oz eq per portion, i.e., no more than 3.99 grams per portion for groups A-G and no more than 6.99 grams per portion for group H (refer to the CSDE’s *Meeting the Whole Grain-rich Requirement for the NSLP and SBP Meal Patterns for Grades K-12*). Ready-to-eat (RTE) breakfast cereals in group I must be WGR, enriched, or fortified and cannot exceed 6.99 grams of noncreditable grains per portion (refer to the CSDE’s *Crediting Breakfast Cereals for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP*). RTE breakfast cereals are WGR if: 1) the first ingredient is a whole grain and the cereal is fortified, or the cereal is 100 percent whole grain; and 2) noncreditable grains do not exceed 6.99 grams per portion. Fortification is not required if the RTE cereal is 100 percent whole grain.

The serving size of grain products and recipes must meet the required weight (groups A-E) or volume (groups H-I) in the USDA’s Exhibit A chart (refer to the CSDE’s *Grain Ounce Equivalents for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP* and *How to Use the Ounce Equivalents Chart for the NSLP and SBP*) or provide the minimum creditable grains (refer to the CSDE’s *Calculation Methods for Crediting Grains for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP* and *When Commercial Grain Products Require a Product Formulation Statement to Credit in the School Nutrition Programs*).

For more information on the grains component, visit the “[Grains Component for Grades K-12](#)” section of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.

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Meats/meat alternates (MMA): MMA must be served in a main dish or a main dish and one other food item. Lunch menus must offer at least 1 oz eq daily for grades K-5 and 6-8, and at least 2 oz eq daily for grades 9-12. The weekly five-day menu must offer at least 8 oz eq for grades K-5, at least 9 oz eq for grades 6-8, and at least 10 oz eq for grades 9-12. The weekly seven-day menu must offer at least 11 oz eq for grades K-5, at least 12½ oz eq for grades 6-8, and at least 14 oz eq for grades 9-12. The weekly maximums are not required but provide a guide for planning age-appropriate meals that meet the dietary specifications (refer to “[Dietary specifications \(nutrition standards\)](#)” in this document).

The serving size of MMA refers to the edible portion of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish as served, e.g., cooked lean meat without bone, breading, binders, extenders, or other ingredients. A 1-oz eq serving equals 1 ounce of lean meat, poultry, or fish; 1 ounce of cheese (low-fat recommended); 2 ounces of cottage or ricotta cheese (low-fat recommended); ¼ cup of legumes, i.e., cooked beans and peas (refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Legumes in the NSLP and SBP](#)); ½ large egg; 2 tablespoons of nut or seed butters (refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Nuts and Seeds in the NSLP and SBP](#)); 1 ounce of nuts or seeds, e.g., almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, filberts, macadamia nuts, peanuts, pecans, walnuts, pine nuts, pistachios, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, and soy nuts; ¼ cup (2.2 ounces) of commercial tofu containing at least 5 grams of protein (refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Tofu and Tofu Products in the NSLP and SBP](#)); 1 ounce of tempeh; 3 ounces of surimi; ½ cup of yogurt or soy yogurt (refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Yogurt for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP](#)); and 1 ounce of alternate protein products (APPs) that meet the USDA’s requirements in [appendix A](#) of the NSLP regulations (refer to the CSDE’s [Requirements for Alternate Protein Products in the NSLP and SBP](#)). Nuts and seeds cannot credit for more than half of the MMA component at lunch.

Commercial processed products that contain added ingredients (such as combination foods, deli meats, hot dogs, and sausages) do not credit based on weight, i.e., 1 ounce does not equal 1 oz eq of MMA; these foods require a CN label or PFS to document crediting information (refer to the CSDE’s [Crediting Commercial Meat/Meat Alternate Products in the NSLP and SBP](#) and [Crediting Deli Meats in the NSLP and SBP](#)).

For more information on the MMA component, visit the “[Meat/Meat Alternates Component for Grades K-12](#)” section of the CSDE’s [Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage.



Dietary specifications (nutrition standards): Lunch menus for each grade group must meet the weekly limits for calories, saturated fat, and sodium. In addition, the nutrition label or manufacturer specifications for all foods and ingredients used in school meals must indicate zero grams of trans fat per serving. For more information on the dietary specifications, refer to the CSDE’s [Weekly Calorie Ranges for School Meals for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP](#), [Transitional Sodium Limits for the NSLP and SBP](#), [Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12](#) (section 6), and visit the “[Dietary Specifications \(Nutrition Standards for School Meals\)](#)”

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section of the CSDE’s [Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs](#) webpage. Menu planners should consider nutrition information and limit noncreditable foods (refer to the CSDE’s [Noncreditable Foods for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP](#)).



Offer versus serve (OVS): OVS at lunch is required for senior high schools but is optional for all other grades. To implement OVS, lunch menus must offer all five components (MMA, grains, vegetables, fruits, and milk). Table 1 shows a sample OVS lunch menu for grades 9-12.

For a reimbursable meal with OVS, students must select at least three components, including at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables and the full serving of at least two other components. Except for fruits and vegetables, student selections of less than the minimum daily serving do not count as a food component for reimbursable meals with OVS. For more information on OVS, refer to the CSDE’s [Overview of OVS in the NSLP](#), [Offer versus Serve Guide for School Meals](#), and module 15 of the CSDE’s [What’s in a Meal](#) training program, and visit the CSDE’s [OVS](#) webpage.

SFAs must provide adequate training for school food service staff on how to recognize reimbursable meals with OVS. In addition to regular training, a recommended best practice for cafeteria managers is conducting a daily pre-service meeting with cashiers and servers to review each menu choice and what students must select for a reimbursable meal. This helps to ensure that all staff (including substitutes) can accurately identify reimbursable meals.

Table 1. Sample OVS lunch menu for grades 9-12

Each lunch includes five components: milk, fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat/meat alternates. Choose **at least one** fruit or vegetable and two other components. For a nutritious meal, take all choices!

Choose at least one serving (½ cup)			
MMA and grains *	Vegetables	Fruits	Milk
Choose 1	Choose up to 2	Choose up to 2	Choose 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baked chicken with enriched cornbread • Hamburger on whole grain-rich bun • Southwest chili with whole-grain roll 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrot sticks • Broccoli florets • Garden salad • Green beans • Seasoned corn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apple • Banana • Blueberries • Green grapes • Sliced peaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fat-free milk • Low-fat milk • Low-fat chocolate milk

* All entrees include grains and meat/meat alternates (two components).

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Required signage: SFAs are required to post two different types of cafeteria signage. This signage must clearly indicate the food components for each daily menu choice and what students may select for a reimbursable meal.

1. **Signage to identify the foods and amounts offered for all planned reimbursable meals:** SFAs must post signage to identify all planned reimbursable meals (i.e., offered full meals), including the components and portions and any choices or combination of choices available within each component. This signage must be located near or at the beginning of each serving line. This requirement applies to all schools, including schools that do not implement OVS and schools that implement family-style meal service.
2. **Signage that indicates the required student selections for reimbursable meals with OVS:** SFAs must post signage that indicates the required student selections for all reimbursable meal choices with OVS. This signage must be located at all applicable points in the serving line where the food components are available. For example, if the lunch menu for grades 9-12 offers all fruits in ½-cup servings, the serving line signage must indicate that students may select up to two choices but must select at least one choice. This requirement applies only to schools that implement OVS.

For more information, visit the [“Signage for OVS”](#) section of the CSDE’s Offer versus Serve for School Nutrition Programs webpage.

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Resources

Comparison of Meal Pattern Requirements for the Grains Component in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Crediting/Comparison_Grain_Crediting_SNP.pdf

Comparison of Meal Pattern Requirements for the Milk Component in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Crediting/Comparison_Milk_Requirements_SNP.pdf

Crediting Summary Charts for the Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in the School Nutrition Programs (CSDE):

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Crediting/Crediting_Summary_Charts_SNP_Grades_K-12.pdf

CSDE Operational Memorandum No. 06-19: Summary of Federal and State Milk Requirements for the NSLP, SBP, SSO of the NSLP, ASP of the NSLP, and Special Milk Program (SMP):

<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Memos/OM2019/OM07-19.pdf>

CSDE Operational Memorandum No. 07-19: Compliance Issues with the Vegetables and Fruits Components for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP:

<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Memos/OM2019/OM07-19.pdf>

Fruits Component for Grades K-12 (CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs/Documents#Fruits>

Grains Component for Grades K-12 (CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs/Documents#Grains>

Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs (CSDE webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Meal-Patterns-School-Nutrition-Programs>

Meat/Meat Alternates Component for Grades K-12 (CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs/Documents#MMA>

Menu Planning for Child Nutrition Programs (CSDE website):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Menu-Planning>

Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12 (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Menu-Planning-Guide-for-School-Meals>

Menu Planning Resources for School Meals (CSDE):

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Menu-Planning>

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Milk Component for Grades K-12 (CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs/Documents#Milk>

Noncreditable Foods for Grades K-12 in the NSLP and SBP (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Crediting/Noncreditable_Foods_SNP_grades_K-12.pdf

Nutrition Standards for School Meals (USDA):
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards-school-meals>

Offer versus Serve for School Nutrition Programs (CSDE webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Offer-versus-Serve-for-School-Nutrition-Programs>

Resources for the School Meal Patterns (CSDE):
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/NSLP/Meal_Pattern/Resources_School_Meal_Patterns_grades_K-12.pdf

Vegetables Component for Grades K-12 (CSDE's Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs webpage):
<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Crediting-Foods-in-School-Nutrition-Programs/Documents#Vegetables>

What's in a Meal: National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 (CSDE Training Program):
<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Meal-Pattern-Training-Materials>

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For more information, refer to the CSDE's *Menu Planning Guide for School Meals for Grades K-12* and visit the CSDE's *Meal Patterns for Grades K-12 in School Nutrition Programs* and *Crediting Foods in School Nutrition Programs* webpages 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/NSLP/MealPattern/Overview_Menu_Planning_NSLP_grades_K-12.pdf.

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