Students are not required to eat their school meal and can opt out of any of the dishes served.

Students have a harder time learning on an empty stomach.
A group of students in Aisling Roche’s film studies class at the Academy of Urban Planning (AUP) worked with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) and CUP teaching artist Lindsay C. Harris to find out who makes decisions about school food at the school, city, state, and federal levels. Students interviewed each other, school staff, family members, and professionals working in food justice and the Department of Education. Based on their responses, students designed school meals visualizing the factors considered at each level.


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NYC provides about 850,000 meals a day to students.

Menu writers have to follow federal guidelines about the amount of grain, protein, fruits, milk, different colored vegetables, and total calories in school lunches.

There is a team of menu writers and chefs that make menus based on the federal standards.
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The state monitors the districts to make sure they comply with the federal nutrition standards. US Department of Agriculture representatives for each state approve the districts for federal reimbursement. If schools follow new nutritional guidelines, they will get an additional 6¢ per meal.
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The US Department of Agriculture creates nutrition standards that school cafeterias have to follow.

The National School Lunch Program offers free or low cost meals to students in public or nonprofit schools.

Schools get money from the federal government for each meal they serve. After expenses, schools have a little over $1 to spend on each meal.
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“It’s a federal program and despite its dysfunction, it’s really one of the most beautiful programs in the country - the merger of education needs, agriculture needs, and feeding children so they can be successful.”

Beatriz Beckford, WhyHunger