

Special Dietary Needs in Schools

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As a result of the implementation of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, more and more children with disabilities are enrolling in regular school programs. It is therefore necessary for school nutrition programs to understand their role in accommodating the special dietary needs of these school children. Based on the USDA's nondiscrimination regulation (7 CFR 15b), and the regulations outlined in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, schools should make meal substitutions for children who are unable to consume the regular school meal due to their disability, as long as their need is certified by a licensed physician. Some of the recognized disabilities that may require dietary substitutions are diabetes, autism, language or speech impairment, and anaphylactic (life-threatening) food allergies, just to name a few.

The medical statement for each child's special dietary need must include the identification of their disability, the foods to be restricted, and the food choices that can be substituted for them. It is important to note that under no circumstances should the schools revise or alter the diet order prescribed by the child's medical provider. Children with special dietary needs that qualify for free or reduced meals should receive no extra charge for their meals and food substitutions.

Generally, accommodating for the special dietary needs of students requires little additional expense to the school food service establishment. However, if additional expenses are required above what the school can manage, funding sources such as Medicaid, are available for both the school and the child. If this is the case, the funding received by the school food service must be added to the nonprofit school food service account.

Any child, who wishes to participate in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program, should be able to do so and receive a safe and well balanced meal. School nutrition programs may make menu substitutions for children who do not have a disability at their discretion. This practice is encourage by the USDA and quite frequently happens. Check with your local school nutrition program if these services would benefit you and your family.