



# Adult Meals: DEFENDING THE INCREASE

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It seems a bit crazy to be writing an article for school nutrition program professionals that addresses adult meals, but this is 2021 mid-pandemic mania. With food shortages, order substitutions, delivery issues, unfilled staff vacancies, virtual versus in person learning schedules, and normal back to school challenges, there is enough on your “needs immediate attention” list. The purpose of this article is to lend some support for defending the increase in adult meal prices that USDA has required for the 2021-2022 school year.

From the time of its humble beginning, school nutrition programs were designed and legislated to be for children. Adult meals should never be entered on a claim for reimbursement as meals served to children, and schools get no additional funds to feed adults. The average cost of an adult meal must fully cover the food and labor costs, including the average value of commodities received. The meal offered to adults should be of the same serving sizes and food choices available for students. When there are special serving lines just for adults that cannot be accessed by students, it should be considered and priced as a catering event. After all, this is a program designed to fund quality, nutrient dense meals for children. If an adult has access to the meals served to students and wants to participate, it has always been considered a benefit to the adult.

Each year there are always questions from directors about program versus nonprogram adults. This is often the case for sponsors participating in the Summer Food Service Program, but the terms really encompass all child nutrition programs. So, who is a program

adult? A program adult is a food service employee who works in food service in some capacity and is paid from the food service account. It is an allowable expenditure from the food service account to cover the cost of providing a program adult meal during their workday, assuming the meal is the equivalent of a normal reimbursable meal. The school food authority makes the determination as to whether to provide that meal to their workers. Nonprogram adults are all other adults who have access to school nutrition programs and choose to eat a meal. The meal served to them must meet the adult meal price requirements to fully cover the cost of that meal. Meals served to program or nonprogram adults are never to be claimed for reimbursement as reimbursement is specifically mandated to eligible participants, which are students normally 18 and younger or enrolled in a preK-12 educational program.

It has been suggested by some that school food service just charge a la carte prices for individual meal items. Keep in mind, the a la carte prices of each of the food items in a meal should normally add up to be higher than the amount of reimbursement received for student meals, as there is also the need to remember the nonprogram foods revenue compliance requirement. Additionally, the general guidance regarding Offer Versus Serve and the pricing of meals and individual items, recommends that the cost of three of the five items be equal to or higher than the price of the reimbursable meal. The reimbursable meal should always be the best deal. Now might be a good time to look at a la carte prices to determine if they are set high enough, given the rising costs of food. Keep in mind that a la carte pricing needs to reflect about three times the raw food cost of an item.

If the average cost of an entrée is seventy-five cents, then the minimum amount to charge would be \$2.25. Moreover, as the school year progresses, revisiting a la carte prices might be an important task to consider ensuring your food service budget remains healthy.

How do we address the adult meal price issue with school administration? Certainly, everyone is challenged financially during this pandemic and our education professionals are no different. USDA, in trying to help school food authority budgets by paying the highest reimbursement rates possible for those participating in Seamless Summer Option during the 2021-2022 school year, has created a quagmire for our food service directors to remain in compliance with the adult meal price requirements and maintain a congenial working relationship with school administration and staff. If an adult wants to purchase a meal at school, even at \$4.60 it is still a bargain. A typical school meal may include a chicken sandwich, side salad, steamed broccoli, rosy applesauce, and milk. The cost of a comparable meal at a local fast-food restaurant would be substantially higher.

While there are likely no additional funds floating around the school from the general fund, there are some possible options to lessen the adult

meal price burden. Perhaps the local PTO or other service organizations would consider kicking in a portion of the adult meal price. The cost listed in CNPweb would still have to be the full required price, but the organization could be billed monthly for the balance that is not paid by the adult. Not many school corporations have extra funds available in their general fund account, but supplementing adult meals through a nonfederal fund would also be allowable. In conclusion, outside organizations or a general fund transfer could supplement the cost of adult meals, however the food service fund cannot cover the cost of supporting adult meals.

In the end, keeping our customers happy and healthy is what it is all about in our service to school children. Remember that our role in child nutrition, in whatever capacity that we serve, is to provide nutrition packed meals to students now so that they can learn and grow into responsible adults. It is only the meals served to children that we ever claim and receive reimbursement, and they are the major focus and reason for our profession. We appreciate and support our partners in education through their efforts in instructing our students, but we cannot supplement their meals through child nutrition program funds.



## QUIZ TIME!

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- 1) Supplementing adult meals using funds in a school district's general fund account is allowable. **T / F**
- 2) Charging \$4.60 for an adult meal is too much! **T / F**
- 3) If you have serving lines just for adults that can't be accessed by students, the food sold in those lines should be considered and priced as a catering event. **T / F**
- 4) A la carte pricing should be set at about four (4) times the raw food cost of the item. **T / F**
- 5) The school food authority (SFA) can decide whether or not to provide a “program adult” meal to their workers. **T / F**
- 6) Meals served to program OR nonprogram adults are NEVER to be claimed for reimbursement. **T / F**
- 7) The average price paid for an adult meal should cover no more than 50% of the food and labor costs. **T / F**
- 8) School nutrition programs were originally designed to provide nutrient dense meals for teachers and other school staff. **T / F**
- 9) Regarding Offer Versus Serve and the pricing of meals and individual items, the cost of three of the five items should be equal to or higher than the price of the reimbursable meal, making the reimbursable meal the best “deal.” **T / F**
- 10) It is an allowable expense from the food service account to cover the cost of providing a program adult meal during a workday, but the meal MUST be the equivalent of a normal reimbursable meal. **T / F**

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