

### **Timeline for “School Lunch: The Science and Politics of Food”**

1. 1852: Massachusetts passes the first compulsory education law in the United States.
2. 1862: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is founded. President Lincoln refers to it the “People’s Department” because so many Americans at the time were living on farms.
3. 1887: Wilbur Olin Atwater, a researcher at the USDA, starts studying the caloric needs of working-class individuals. The focus of nutrition science at this time is primarily on caloric content and metabolism.
4. 1890s: Some schools start offering school lunches in partnership with private charities, a characteristic move of the Progressive Era (1900-1920), when domestic life was scrutinized and rationalized in response to the unhealthy conditions brought about by industrialization
5. 1906: Harvey Wiley, head of the Bureau of Chemistry at the USDA, investigates the adulteration of industrially produced food with additives like chalk, wood shavings, and formaldehyde. This leads to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, a milestone in the federal regulation of food safety.
6. 1917: A public health study in New York City finds 90% of poor Black children have rickets, a bone disease caused by a lack of vitamin D, calcium, or phosphorus. This exemplifies a trend by which nutrition science starts to shift from questions of how much food to more nuanced investigations of the chemical composition of food.
7. 1918: BY this date, compusory education laws have been passed in all 50 states. This contributes to a shift in cultural understanding by which childhood is recognized a distinct period in the lifespan, one with (among other things) distict nutritional requirements.
8. 1917-18: The U.S. enters and fights in WWI on the side of the Allies. National attention is focused on the physical health of prospective soldiers, many of whom show signs of nutritional deficiency.
9. 1910-1920: Crop yields in the U.S. jump 13% with the use of new synthetic fertilizers, which contributes to agricultural surpluses, even as many Americans struggle to buy food.
10. 1929: The stock market crashes, setting off the Great Depression when many Americans are hungry. Motivated by the problem of agricultural surpluses, the USDA starts to purchase extra food and distributes it to schools.
11. 1941: The U.S. enters WWII. Farms and factories are working overtime to feed and supply the military. Unemployment and food insecurity drop. The U.S. National Research Council at the request of the National Defense Advisory Commission starts to issue Recommended Dietary Allowances with an emphasis on protein, energy, specific vitamins, and minerals.

12. 1946: President Harry Truman signs the National School Lunch Act, bringing the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) into being.
13. 1963-64: Molly Orshansky, an analyst at the Social Security Administration, establishes the idea of a poverty threshold based on the cheapest of four food plans developed by the USDA. Figuring that a household of three people spends 30% of its total income on food, she multiplied the total cost of the economy food plan to draw the line. This helped draw national attention to the unequal distribution of food across the country.
14. 1968: The Committee on School Lunch Participation is formed by a group of women's civil rights and religious activists. Led by Jean E. Fiarfax, the group publishes an influential report, *Their Daily Bread*, which called attention, among other things, to the fact that an estimated 6.5 million children were going hungry. By this time, there were stark disparities in support for school lunch programs across the country.
15. 1970s: With initiatives set in motion by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon during the 1960s and early 1970s, the NSLP grew dramatically. Federal funding had increased to \$4 billion per year by the late '70s, overall participation among students nearly doubled to 60%, and over 40% of those students who took part in the program did so for free or at a reduced cost.
16. 1979: The USDA relaxes nutritional requirements for school lunch programs, part of a complex economic situation. Snack foods from private companies proliferate in schools, while the quality of full meals goes down, fueling concerns about students' poor nutritional choices and unhealthy outcomes. The main concern gradually becomes not a lack of calories or nutrients, but rather, too much food.
17. 1980: The USDA launches an aggressive communications campaign in response to this state of affairs.
18. 1992: The USDA presents its iconic food pyramid to the nation.
19. 1994, 2010, 2024: New nutritional standards issued successively for the NSLP, reflecting ongoing developments in the understanding of health, nutrition, and (increasingly) sustainability. These emphasize increasing the amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in student meals, while reducing fat, salt, and added sugars. Trans fats have been banned now entirely.