

Protein at Breakfast



Background

The release of the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) in January 2026, marked a shift in federal nutrition policy. The Guidelines serve as an important policy foundation because federal child nutrition programs are legally required to align with them, which they currently do with an average HEI score of 80.

The expectation is that the newly released DGAs will shape a new round of USDA school meal regulations. One area that is expected to be included in the rule is to require that protein be offered at breakfast. Under the current School Breakfast Program (SBP) meal pattern, schools must offer three food components at breakfast: fruits, grains, and milk. Notably, there is no required meat/meat alternate (protein) component at breakfast. While schools may choose to offer protein-rich items such as eggs, yogurt, cheese, nut butters, or breakfast meats, they are not required to do so in order to serve a reimbursable meal. Importantly, many schools do serve proteins as an option 2-3 days per week, while working to offset costs the remaining weekdays through grain-only breakfasts or at other mealtimes. To offset expenses, many school breakfast menus meet the patterns including whole grain-based and nutrient dense menu items such as muffins, cereals, breakfast breads, pancakes, or biscuits to meet meal pattern requirements in a way that is often less expensive than breakfast items containing protein. Maintaining such flexibility is critical for these programs.

If USDA were to require a dedicated protein component at breakfast—or require schools to replace a grain serving with a meat/meat alternate component—the cost of producing breakfast would increase. For school districts serving hundreds of thousands of breakfasts annually, even replacing a grain item with a single protein serving could add hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual operating costs.

Concerns: What Members are Saying

Support for protein with funding concerns	“We already serve protein-rich breakfast options and support giving students more opportunities to choose them. Our concern is that if a daily meat/meat alternate requirement is added, the federal reimbursement rate does not reflect the additional food costs that would come with serving those items every day.” “Adding a required meat/meat alternate at breakfast may sound simple, but protein foods generally cost more than grain-based items. Without additional funding, school meal programs would be expected to absorb those costs within budgets that are already stretched.” “Many districts have successfully incorporated eggs, yogurt, cheese, and other protein items into breakfast menus when it makes sense. The challenge is turning those options into a daily mandate without a corresponding increase in reimbursement to cover the higher cost of the meal.”
Food, labor, and operational costs	“We can serve more protein at breakfast, but it comes with real costs. Eggs, yogurt, cheese, and other protein foods typically cost more than grain items, and they also require more handling, cold storage, packaging, and staff time. Those expenses add up quickly and are not covered under current federal funding levels.”
Alternative service model feasibility	“Breakfast participation depends on service models like grab-and-go, breakfast in the classroom, and kiosk service. Adding a daily protein requirement would make those models more difficult to operate because protein items often require

	additional handling, packaging, refrigeration, and food safety controls.”
Student acceptance and participation	“I’m concerned that we could end up spending significantly more on breakfast without seeing a corresponding increase in participation. If students don’t choose the new protein items, districts will be left with higher costs but no additional revenue to offset them.” “Just because a protein item meets a nutrition standard doesn’t mean students will eat it. If a required meat/meat alternate component doesn’t align with student preferences, we could see more food ending up in the trash and higher levels of waste in an already tight budget environment.”
Menu planning and crediting flexibility	“One of the most important principles in school meals is flexibility. Many protein foods that could help meet a breakfast meat/meat alternate requirement are also significant sources of sodium, and it can be difficult to fit those items into menus while staying within existing nutrition standards.” “We already serve a number of breakfast items that contain protein, but crediting combination foods is not always straightforward. Adding another required component could increase administrative complexity and make menu planning more challenging for districts that are already balancing multiple nutrition requirements.”

BREAKFAST COST COMPARISON

*Cost of a Current School Breakfast vs.
Breakfast with a Required Protein Component*

CURRENT GRAIN-BASED BREAKFAST

2-Grain Muffin Meal



2-Grain Muffin



Pears (½ cup)



Apple Juice (½ cup)



1% Milk

COST COMPONENT	COST
Food Cost	\$2.02
Labor	\$0.68
TOTAL MEAL COST	\$2.70

+\$0.50

Additional Cost
Per Breakfast
Served

19%

increase over
the grain-based
breakfast
example

BREAKFAST WITH PROTEIN

Breakfast Sandwich Meal



Egg, Cheese &
Whole Grain
English Muffin



Pears (½ cup)



Apple Juice (½ cup)



1% Milk

COST COMPONENT	COST
Food Cost	\$2.10
Labor	\$1.10
TOTAL MEAL COST	\$3.20

WHY COSTS INCREASE



HIGHER FOOD COSTS

Protein entrées
cost more than
grain-based options.



MORE LABOR

Additional
preparation and
assembly time.



STORAGE & REFRIGERATION

Protein foods often
require cold storage
and handling.



FOOD SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

Additional monitoring
and handling
procedures.