

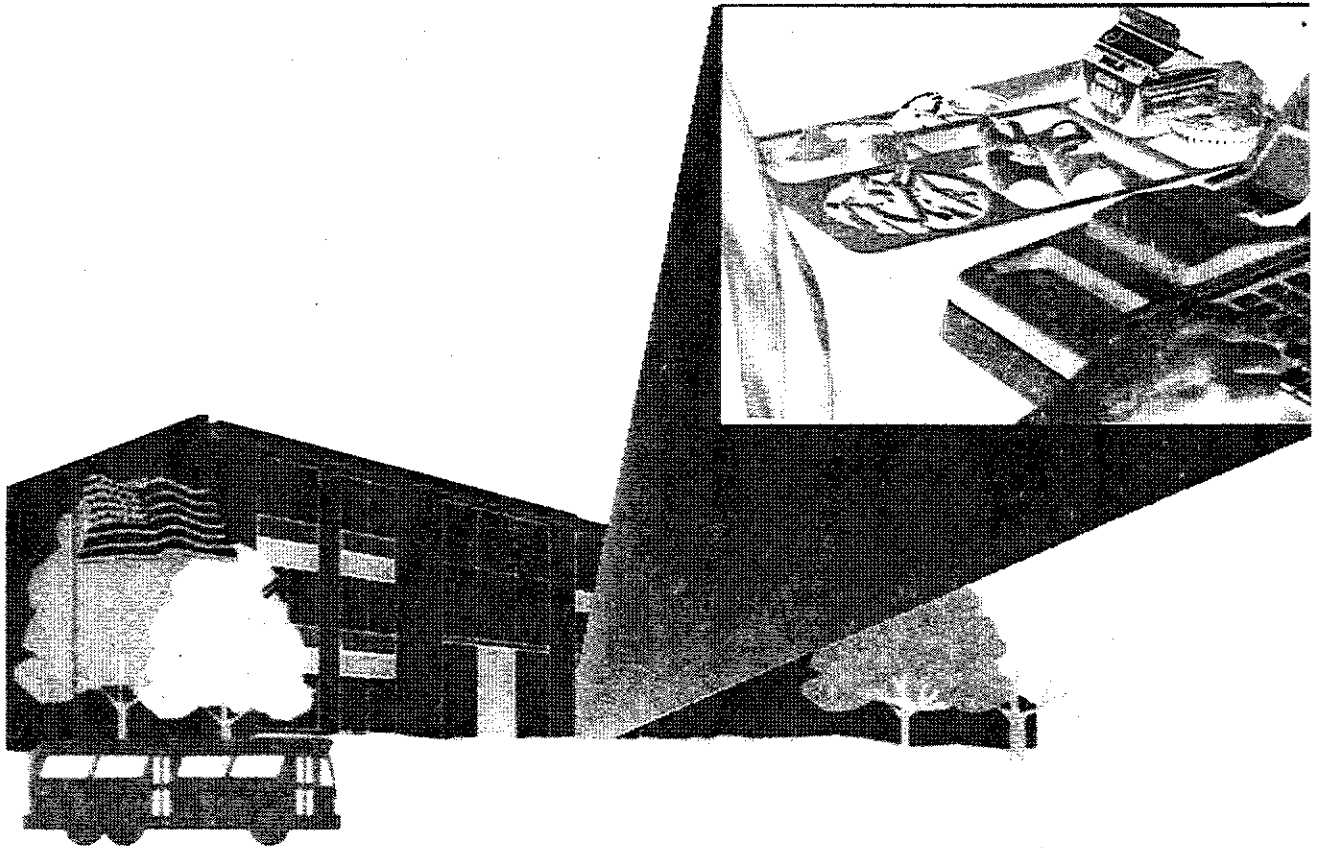


United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

FNS-270

# Meal Counting and Claiming Manual



This manual contains information on Federal policy regarding meal counting and claiming systems in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Policies in your State may vary. State agencies may institute State policies that do not conflict with the Federal requirements. Check with your State agency if there are any questions regarding State policy.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are equal opportunity programs. If you believe you or anyone has been discriminated against because of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or handicap, write immediately to the Secretary of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.

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## Introduction

This manual contains information on the selection and implementation of a meal counting and claiming system for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

There are four parts to the manual. Part 1 explains the six elements of an acceptable meal counting and claiming system. Part 2 describes actual example systems including procedure variations for each. Part 3 contains exercises and further information on specific areas of the meal count system. Part 4 provides a glossary of terms, bibliography of references, and sample forms that may be used in the meal counting and reporting processes.

In order to provide practical guidance, descriptions of several acceptable systems currently being used are described. These are just a few of the systems possible, and many variations of procedures exist.

It should be noted that any system, no matter how well structured, can fail if it is not implemented correctly. It is essential to ensure that all personnel involved in the system are properly trained and that all officials in the school system understand their roles in making the school food service programs accountable.

## PART 1

### Elements of an Acceptable Counting and Claiming System

Federal reimbursement is provided for each meal that meets program requirements and is served to an eligible student. To obtain this reimbursement, school personnel must accurately count, record, and claim the number of meals actually served to students by category, i.e., paid, reduced-price, and free. Additionally, the number of meals served free and reduced-price and claimed for reimbursement must have adequate documentation on file to support the claim.

To do this, any school food service meal counting and claiming system must contain all of the basic elements listed below. How each element is implemented may vary depending on the specific procedures chosen by a school food authority (SFA) (may also be called "school district" or "school division"). All necessary elements of a system must be in place and all food service personnel adequately trained before any meal counting and claiming system can meet the accountability requirements.

#### Elements of an acceptable counting and claiming system include:

- Eligibility documentation
- Collection procedures
- Point of service meal counts
- Reports
- Claim for reimbursement
- Internal controls

Each of these elements is essential to operating an accountable system. Although this manual focuses on those elements that involve actual meal counting and claiming, it is important to realize that all elements work together to make an acceptable system. No part should be left out or underemphasized.

We will now briefly examine each element in more detail before actually describing examples of individual systems. For more information concerning system requirements, refer to the *AccuClaim Manual Meal Counts Count!*, FNS 260, January 1990.

#### Eligibility Documentation

**You must have documentation based on correct free and reduced-price eligibility determinations supporting the eligibility of each student receiving free and reduced-price meals. This documentation is either: (1) a current, approved free and reduced-price application; or (2) if chosen as an option by the school food authority, a list of names of students obtained directly from the appropriate food stamp or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) office indicating that such children are members of households receiving food stamps or AFDC benefits. This documentation provides the basis upon which students are provided free and reduced-price meal benefits which may be claimed for Federal reimbursement. (For further information concerning free and reduced-price eligibility, see *Eligibility Guidance for School Meals*.)**

*For requirements concerning eligibility documentation for residential child care institutions (RCCIs), contact your State agency.*

## Collection Procedures

Collection procedures refers to all the steps within the meal count system involved in paying for meals and issuing and collecting the medium of exchange. A medium of exchange is defined as cash or any type of ticket, token, ID, name, or number which eligible students exchange to obtain a meal.

Collection often occurs simultaneously with meal counting and is discussed in each example system (see **Payment Alternatives** sections). Collection procedures should facilitate rather than inhibit the meal count system. Also, overt identification must be prevented during issuing and collecting the medium of exchange. Further information may be obtained on approved collection procedure options from your State agency.

**OVERT IDENTIFICATION:** Eligibility information must never be publicized or used in such a way that students' eligibility categories may be recognized by other students. Students receiving free or reduced-price benefits must not, at any time, be treated differently from students who do not receive these benefits. SFAs are required to ensure that there is no physical segregation, discrimination, or overt identification of any student eligible for free or reduced-price benefits.

## Point of Service Meal Counts

Meals are counted at that point in the food service operation where it can be accurately determined that a reimbursable free, reduced-price, or paid meal has been served to an eligible student.

**REIMBURSABLE MEALS:** All meals served in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and counted for reimbursement must meet the meal pattern requirements as specified in the program regulations and be served to eligible students. For further information concerning reimbursable meals and offer versus serve, see the *Meal Pattern Requirements and Offer Versus Serve Manual* FNS-265, August 1990.

There are different ways to count meals served by category each day. Your procedures must ensure that meals counted: (1) meet the meal pattern requirements, (2) are served to eligible students, and (3) are counted daily by category. (Information on exceptions for special provision schools may be obtained from your State agency.) Also, only one meal per student per meal service may be claimed for reimbursement. Adult meals, a la carte items, and second meals are not reimbursable and should be accounted for separately. Meal count method options are described in "Example Meal Counting and Claiming Systems" in Part 2 of this manual.

## **Reports**

**The numbers of reimbursable meals served daily, by category to eligible students are recorded and reported by school food service personnel to the SFA. The particular recording method used must ensure that correct counts by category are reported in a way that can be easily read, edited, and consolidated into an accurate monthly claim for reimbursement.**

School reports may be referred to as "daily record of operations," "daily/weekly food service reports," "daily report of participation," etc. Any report format used must provide a complete record of the day's meal service so that the required information can be transferred to the SFA. Sample meal count reporting forms are provided on pages 49-56.

## **Claim for Reimbursement**

**School meal counts, by category, are submitted to the SFA on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. The counts from all schools are combined to generate a monthly claim for reimbursement. This is called consolidating the claim. After the claims are consolidated, they are submitted by the SFA to the State agency. The State agency is responsible for paying the Federal reimbursement for the reimbursable meals claimed as served by category during the claiming period.**

Reimbursement rates are different for each category of meal benefit (free, reduced-price, and paid) and for each type of meal service (lunch, breakfast, and supplements). Thus, accurately counting, recording, and consolidating the number of meals served by category is the only way a claim for reimbursement can be properly submitted and an SFA be correctly paid for the meals served.

While there are standard procedures for filing claims for reimbursement to the State agency, the procedures for consolidating school meal counts may vary. The kinds of forms that are developed and used, the personnel who are responsible for consolidating the counts and submitting the claims, as well as how the information is collected and presented, may vary from SFA to SFA. (All variations depend on procedures prescribed by the State agency.)

To summarize the relationship between school-level reporting and SFA-level claim consolidation, school-level reports are generated by counting and recording numbers of reimbursable meals served by category each day. These reports are sent to the SFA where they are consolidated to produce a claim for Federal reimbursement based on the total number of reimbursable meals served in the SFA by category during the claiming period. The resulting claim for reimbursement is then sent to the State agency where it is (1) processed for payment for the appropriate amount of Federal reimbursement, and (2) consolidated into State-level reports to USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).



## Internal Controls

**An SFA must establish internal controls to ensure that an accurate claim for reimbursement has been made. Internal controls protect SFAs from having erroneous claims and potential overclaims. Edits and monitoring are examples of internal controls.**

Edits compare meal count data to other information (e.g., number of eligible students and attendance figures, etc.) to identify possible problems in the meal count system. Any meal counts that do not seem reasonable should be explained or investigated to ensure accuracy. A test of reasonableness cannot be defined for all circumstances but examples of what **could** be considered "unreasonable" unless explained include:

- Meal counts that exceed the number of eligible students in attendance on any given day.
- Constant counts - meal counts are the same every day.
- Meal counts where extremely high percentages of eligible students eat every day.
- Pattern counts - counts that seem to repeat in patterns.
- Served count equal to delivery count for vended meals.

Monitoring ensures that the school's meal count reports are based on the approved counting system and that the counting system, as implemented, yields the actual number of reimbursable free, reduced-price, and paid meals served for each day of operation. If monitoring discloses problems with a school's meal counting or claiming procedures, the SFA must ensure that a corrective action plan is implemented and problems are resolved.



To review, the six elements that are essential to operating an accountable meal counting and claiming system are:

- Eligibility documentation
- Collection procedures
- Point of service meal counts
- Reports
- Claim for reimbursement
- Internal controls

These elements should always be kept in mind while choosing the meal counting and claiming system to be used in your food service operation. We will now look at choosing a system in more detail.

## Choosing a System

Systems should be chosen based on the degree of meal accountability, needs, priorities, and available resources of the school or SFA. Several factors should be considered before making a decision. The system chosen will depend on the number of meals served, number of students participating in the program, grade levels involved (high school or elementary), cost of implementing and maintaining a collection procedure, personnel (office or food service) who will be responsible for sales and recordkeeping, and the number of employee hours available for sales and recordkeeping.

**Whatever system is chosen, it must provide an accurate POINT OF SERVICE count:**

- Of reimbursable meals served (one per eligible student per day)
- By category (free, reduced-price, and paid)
- Each day
- Without overtly identifying students' eligibility categories

There are several main areas to examine when choosing a meal count system including meal accountability, administrative considerations, and cost of implementation. The manner in which these areas are involved in the actual meal count system will vary depending on the type of system implemented. Because the meal count system is an integral part of the food service program in general, all facets of the program that are affected should be reviewed. For instance, if the way that meals are counted does not provide a clear and correct accountability trail, the system would not reflect good management practice even though the actual meal counts may be correct. Thus, the following are some areas of consideration:

**Meal Accountability:**

- Point of service capabilities
- Prevention of overt identification
- Student eligibility recorded and controlled
- Reimbursable meals served/counted

**Administrative Considerations:**

- Edits and internal checks
- Reports, personnel/training
- Account balances maintenance
- Financial analysis (budget/sales)

**Cost of Implementation:**

- Daily operations
- Personnel training (cost/time)
- Hardware\*
- Software program\*
- Support/updating processes\*
- Maintenance/repair (registers, computer terminals, etc.)

\* Indicates concerns specifically for automated (i.e., computer or automated cash register) systems.

Some factors to consider in determining whether a manual or an automated system would best fit a school's needs are the (1) cost, (2) size and characteristics of the school and SFA, (3) number of personnel needed to operate the system, and (4) amount of time needed to operate the particular system during the meal-service operation as well as in making counts and reports. The process of system selection is very complex and unique to the individual school or SFA. For assistance in defining your needs and identifying a system that will meet them effectively, contact your State agency.

## PART 2

### Example Meal Counting and Claiming Systems

Following are brief descriptions of several meal counting and claiming systems. Remember, any of the systems presented in this manual may be acceptable, but **ONLY** if they are implemented correctly. Meal counting and claiming systems may look good on paper, but if not operated correctly could result in inaccurate meal counts.

It is not possible in this manual to describe every system. Each system presented here could include a number of variations and modifications. Also, many of the systems can be used alone or together with other systems. Whatever the system, it must fit the needs of the individual school and school food authority (SFA), prevent overt identification, and provide accurate daily counts by category. Also, not all State agencies approve of all systems and individual selections are subject to State agency approval.

Some information, such as coding and payment alternatives, is repeated in the example descriptions with the intention of each description standing alone as a reference guide for a particular type of system. With such a format, all details pertaining to a specific system may be found in one place.

**The example systems described in this manual are:**

1. **Roster** systems including coded/uncoded rosters, number lists, and class lists
2. **Coded ticket/token** systems with various ticket procedures
3. **Automated tab tickets**
4. **Bar-coded and magnetic strip cards**
5. **Coded ID cards** used in manual and automated systems
6. **Verbal identifiers** and the various ways they may be used

**Each example system includes:**

- System description
- Coding alternatives
- Point of service accountability example procedures
- Payment alternatives
- Advantages and disadvantages
- Equipment needed

*For information on meal counting and claiming systems for residential child care institutions (RCCIs), contact your State agency.*

## Roster

### Roster Description

For the purposes of this manual, the word "roster" will refer to a list of eligible students used at the point of service to record reimbursable meals served. Rosters may be manually prepared lists or computer-generated printouts. When rosters are used at the point of service to record the number of reimbursable meals served by category, they must meet several requirements.

Rosters must be based on current and correctly approved free and reduced-price applications of all students enrolled in the school and must include those who have not been approved for free or reduced-price meals (i.e., eligible for paid meals). A roster must be up to date and accurately reflect the correct eligibility category of each student in order for the meal count by category to be correct. Inaccurate counts may occur if the rosters are not current with the status and total numbers of eligible students, or if the meals served are not counted at the point where it can accurately be determined that they are reimbursable.

Rosters must be updated in accordance with Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) regulations and policies when there is any change in eligibility determinations. The names of students who have withdrawn from school should be marked off, and the date of withdrawal should be noted. Names (or codes) and eligibility categories of newly enrolled students must be added and the date noted. Eligibility changes due to change in family size, income, and/or verification must also be made and dated.

### Roster Coding Alternatives

The procedures used with a roster must prevent overt identification. The roster should be coded in such a way that a student's eligibility category is not identifiable by anyone other than the food service personnel taking the count. Any roster used at the point of service and visible to students should use a code that is difficult for students to discern but easy for the cashier to recognize and count correctly.

If a roster is never visible to students, any coding method may be used. For any roster visible to students, single-symbol coding, (for example, "A," "B," "C"; "X," "Y," "Z"; "1," "2," "3," etc.) used to indicate free, reduced-price, or paid categories is not recommended because of the ease with which students are able to recognize the meaning of the code (some States may prohibit all single-symbol coding). For the same reason, multiple coding of the same symbol, for example "AAA," "BBB," "CCC," etc., are also not recommended. Some codes have been prohibited at the Federal level because they are too recognizable and therefore allow overt identification. These include the actual designations of free, reduced-price, and paid; or use of "F," "R," "P"; or different colored rosters for free, reduced-price, and paid. The following coding alternatives would be acceptable:

**Coding by series:** Using four- or five-digit numbers in a series. One way to do this would be to designate the numbers 1000 through 1999 for "free," 2000 through 2999 for "reduced-price," and 3000 through 3999 for "paid."

**EXAMPLES: #1453 = free; #2314 = reduced-price; #3000 = paid**

**Coding by student ID number:** Using the last digit in a student's ID number to indicate the appropriate eligibility category. For example, a number ending in 0 reflecting the free category, a number ending in any odd numeral signifying the reduced-price category, and a number ending with an even numeral indicating the paid category.

**EXAMPLES: #12340 = free; #22355 = reduced-price; #45656 = paid**

**Coding by variations:** Varying the way in which the student's enrollment data is written on the roster or varying the placement of some other item on the roster.

**EXAMPLES: 10/2/90 = free; 10-2-90 = reduced-price; 10-2-1990 = paid**

**Coding by subtle differences:** Employing different printing styles or spacing or underlining parts of the student's name, etc., to indicate different categories.

**EXAMPLES: Scott Daniels = free; Scott Daniels = reduced-price; Scott Daniels = paid**

**Coding by number of digits:** Varying the length of coded numbers by category. For example, free is indicated by four-digit numbers, reduced-price is indicated by five-digit numbers, and paid is indicated by six-digit numbers.

**EXAMPLES: #3232 = free; #43564 = reduced-price; #333356 = paid**

Rosters should be organized so that names or numbers can be easily located (i.e., listed alphabetically, or alphabetically by class, and/or by grade). Many types of rosters are possible. However, several things should be on any roster if it is used as a means of counting meals by category at the point of service.

In order to facilitate accurate counts, rosters should include:

1. Name of the student (or identification number)
2. Student's current eligibility category in code
3. Enrollment and eligibility changes noted and dated
4. Easy system of marking meals served

## Roster Point of Service Accountability Procedures

The roster may be used together with different meal count procedures. For example, a roster may be used with a verbal identifier such as a name or number that the student gives to the cashier. The roster may also be used with a ticket/token system or ID card system. Following are brief descriptions of several types of rosters and how they may be used. Specifically, the roster systems that will be described here are coded and uncoded rosters, number lists, and class lists.

• **Coded Roster** - The cashier or other person counting the meals is given a list of names of students participating in the food service program. A code indicating the appropriate eligibility category -- free, reduced-price, or paid -- is marked next to each name. At the point of service where each student receives a reimbursable meal, the student tells the cashier or meal counter his or her name or number or shows an ID card. The cashier matches either the name or number given verbally or on the card with the appropriate name or number on the roster and makes a mark or check at the appropriate place on the roster to indicate that the student has received a reimbursable meal. After the meal service, the cashier tallies up the meals marked by category and records them in a daily count by category. For the following example of a prepayment roster system, free eligibles are indicated by the numbers 1000-1999, reduced-price eligibles 2000-2999, and paid eligibles 3000-3999. At the end of day 2 the coded roster appears as follows:

CODED ROSTER						
Week of: 10/2		Day				
Name	Number	1	2	3	4	5
John Smith	2345	X	X	/	/	/
Susan Roberts	1872	X	X	/	/	/
David Brown	2555	X	X	/		
Scott Daniels	3232	X	/	/	/	/

Meal-service days (or dates)

Paid meal = /

Meal served = \

Meal paid and served = X

- John** - Eligible for reduced-price benefits, has prepaid for the whole week (/), and received a reimbursable meal on days 1 and 2.
- Susan** - Eligible for free meals and is always marked on the roster as prepaid. She received reimbursable meals on days 1 and 2.
- David** - Eligible for reduced-price benefits, prepays daily before each meal service. He has received meals on days 1 and 2 and has already prepaid for a meal on day 3.
- Scott** - Eligible for paid meals and has prepaid for the week. He received a reimbursable meal on day 1 but was absent on day 2.

• **Uncoded Roster** - The cashier or other person counting the meals is given a list of all participating students' names. Money is collected prior to the meal service and marked on the roster as prepaid. Students eligible for free meals are always marked as prepaid. As students pass the point of service, they identify themselves to the person with the roster or list who puts a mark by the student's name to indicate they were served a reimbursable meal.

Students may identify themselves in a variety of ways. They may give a verbal identifier like their name or an assigned number, or they may present an ID card that shows the cashier the student's identity. After the meal service, the marks on the roster are compared to a master list of names or ID numbers that shows each student's eligibility category for free and reduced-price benefits. From this comparison, the cashier is able to make a count by category. The following is an example format of what an uncoded roster might look like for the afternoon of the date 10/5:

Meal-service dates

Prepaid meal = /

Meal served = \

Meal prepaid and served = X

UNCODED ROSTER					
Date	10/2	10/3	10/4	10/5	10/6
Student's Name					
John Smith	X	X	X	X	/
Susan Roberts	X	X	/	X	/
David Brown	X	X	X	/	/

**John** - The cashier compares the roster with the master list and finds that John is eligible for reduced-price meals and has prepaid and received all meals for the week up through 10/5.

**Susan** - Was absent on 10/4. The cashier compares the roster with the master list and finds that Susan is eligible for free meals and so is always marked on the roster as prepaid.

**David** - Prepaid for the week but did not eat on 10/5. The cashier, seeing that David is eligible for reduced-price meals when she compares the roster to her master list, will credit David for that meal the following week.

The main difference between using an uncoded roster and a coded roster is that a coded roster provides a count by category at the same time the meal count is taken. Unlike an uncoded roster, the coded roster does not need to be compared to a master list to get a count by category.

• **Number List** - The number list is not really considered a roster, but procedures are similar to the roster system so it will be described here. Each participating student is given an identification number. The numbers may or may not be coded to reflect each student's eligibility category. If a prepayment system is used, numbers of the students who have prepaid may be marked with a slash in the opposite direction, or circled or underlined, etc., at the time of payment and then marked again when the meal is actually received. At the point of service, all students provide the number, either verbally or by presenting an ID card, to the person counting the meals who marks by or through the student's number on the list to indicate they were served a reimbursable meal.

After the meal service, if the number list is coded, a count by category can be made by simply tallying the numbers in each category that were marked. If the number list was not coded it must be compared to a master list of names or ID numbers of students eligible for free or reduced-price benefits, and paid eligibles to obtain a count by category.

This is an example of a coded number list sheet that might be used during a meal service to count meals served by coded identification numbers. Numbers 1000-1999 indicate free eligibles, 2000-2999 indicate reduced-price eligibles, and 3000-3999 are for paid students. Numbers are crossed off as the coded identification

<b>NUMBER LIST date 10/2/90</b>		
<del>1000</del>	<del>2000</del>	<del>3000</del>
1001	<del>2001</del>	<del>3001</del>
<del>1002</del>	2002	<del>3002</del>
1003	<del>2003</del>	<del>3003</del>
<del>1004</del>	<del>2004</del>	3004

numbers are presented at the point of service. For this example day, students with the following identification numbers received a reimbursable meal: 1000, 1002, 1004, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 3000, 3001, 3002, and 3003. This resulted in a meal count by category of: 3 free, 4 reduced-price, and 4 paid meals served.

When a number list is used in a large school, it is advisable to require that all students be asked to present an ID card (at least on a spot basis) or other identification to cross-check eligibility and to prevent the unauthorized use of numbers. If more than one list is used (multiple serving lines) the list should be compared after the meal service to make sure that only one meal per day per number is claimed and to help control trafficking.

• **Class List** - Class lists are a type of roster usually kept by the teachers and may be turned in to food service personnel prior to the meal service each day. (Note: some States do not permit teachers to do this.) The food service cashier or other person counting the meals at the point of service records the meals served on the class list, totals a count after the meal service, and then returns the list to the teacher. If coded class lists are used for meal counts, they must be updated in accordance with FNS regulations and policies. If the class lists are not coded, they must be compared to a master list of names of students eligible for free and reduced-price benefits to obtain a count of meals served by category.



This is different from a general food service "roster" that contains the names of all participating students in a school and is kept by the food service manager or other staff member who is responsible for counting the meals. Class lists may be used by the teachers for purposes other than food service, while the food service roster is basically used to count and record meals served. The formats for coded and uncoded class lists and rosters may look the same. They are just employed differently.

Food service staff may request an estimated participation count from the classrooms since this aids in their planning of meal quantities. Actual meal counts may NOT be taken by the teacher before the meal service and turned into the cashier. This would not result in a point of service meal count.

### **Payment Alternatives in a Roster System**

Basically, there are three methods of payment for meals: prepayment, cash on line (at the point of service), and post-billing. Cash on line, while an option, must generally be used in conjunction with a prepayment or post-billing system. **An all-cash line, where reduced-price and paid students pay and free students do not is almost always unacceptable because it does not prevent overt identification.** An exception to this is a cash on line system where each transaction between student and cashier occurs out of sight of everyone else. Again, every system must be approved by the State agency.

The same payment options must be available to all students regardless of eligibility category. For instance, if students eligible for paid meals have the option to pay on a weekly basis, students eligible for reduced-price meals must also have this option.

School food authorities may choose to charge meals on an individual basis for students who do not have their money. Charges may be indicated on a roster by marking an "O," "--," or other clear symbol at the time the student receives the meal and then putting a slash or line through the symbol when the meal is actually paid for. Meal counts must be made when meals are served and not when meals are paid for.

- **Prepayment** - It is important that students are able to prepay for meals in a common location, at designated times during the week so that overt identification is prevented. Prepayment in a roster system may be indicated by means of premarking a roster. There are many ways rosters can be used to record both payment and participation. For example, as money is received for meals, either by mail from the parents or brought in by the students, a slash in one direction can be made on the roster to indicate prepayment. (Free eligible students would also be marked as prepaid to prevent overt identification.) A slash in another direction indicates the student ate on a particular day. Meal counts must be made each day when meals are actually served and not when the meals are paid for. Slashes indicating prepayment for days that a student does not eat should be brought forward to the next week and are again only counted WHEN the student is served a reimbursable meal. (Check with your State agency for meal crediting policies.)

For example, if Johnnie's parents paid for all his meals in advance for 1 week, the cafeteria or office staff personnel would make a slash (diagonal mark - \) on the meal-service roster for 5 days. Then, during the week, as Johnnie passes the point of service, the cashier makes a slash in the other direction (making an "x") to indicate that the meal was received. With this system, a count by category may be obtained at the same time a log is kept of prepaid meals. Parents could be notified when more money is needed for additional meals. (For examples of rosters marked in this way see pages 12 and 13.)

- **Cash On Line** - As mentioned above, means of preventing overt identification must be considered when cash is accepted on the meal service line. Usually this means that cash on line is used along with a prepayment or post-billing system. As students pass the point of service and pay for their meal, the cashier finds their name or number on the roster and marks them as having paid for and received a reimbursable meal. To help reconcile cash receipts for the day, use different marks for prepayment, post-billing, and cash received on line.

- **Post-Billing** (may also be called a "charge system") - Parents would be billed based on the number of meals received by their child as indicated on the roster that was marked at the point of service each day. The food service or office staff personnel would tally the number of meals from the roster each month and then send the bill to the parents with the appropriate amount due according to the student's eligibility category. If the bills are sent to the parents via the students, all students must take a "bill" home in order to prevent overt identification. For free eligible students, this may mean sending just a statement of the number of meals received by the student. If the bills are sent home through the mail, this is not necessary. Meals must be counted when meals are served and not when they are paid.

### **Advantages of a Roster System**

An advantage in using a coded roster system for counting meals is that counts by category are taken simultaneously with the actual meal count. Also, the roster system, implemented manually, provides no threat of mechanical or computer malfunction inherent in automated systems. Thus, as long as several persons are trained to use the system in case someone is absent, there is no need to develop another manual backup system.

### **Disadvantages of a Roster System**

One disadvantage of a manual roster meal count system is that it may be too time consuming for larger schools. The time needed on the meal service line as well as after the meal service in tallying the meal count marks manually may be too prohibitive. Additional time is needed if an uncoded roster is used to compare the counts to a master roster in order to obtain the count by category. This comparison also increases the possibility of clerical errors. *Computer-generated rosters are no guarantee of accuracy and should be monitored closely for errors.*

## **Coded Ticket/Token      Coded Ticket/Token Description**

This system includes any kind of tickets or tokens which are presented by the students to the food service staff to obtain a meal. When a ticket or token is used to obtain a meal count, several requirements **must be met**. The ticket/token used **must prevent overt identification and must provide an accurate count by category of reimbursable meals served to eligible students**. Tickets are usually coded to reflect eligibility categories of the students so that counts by category may easily be made. (If tickets are uncoded, there must be some way to determine the eligibility category of each student who receives a meal.)

### **Ticket/Token Coding Alternatives**

Eligibility codes and the issuance of coded tickets/tokens must be based on current and correctly approved free and reduced-price applications. Changes in eligibility must be made in accordance with FNS regulations and policies. Since students in the free category must also obtain tickets, issuance of the tickets must not make it obvious that some students pay and some do not. Care must also be taken at the point of service that categories are not obvious to other students.

As there are many ticket/token formats and variations, there are also many ways in which tickets/tokens can be coded to reflect students' eligibility categories without openly exposing them. Tickets should be coded in such a way that a student's eligibility category is not identifiable by anyone other than the food service personnel taking the count. Tickets should use a code that is difficult for students to discern but easy for the cashier to recognize and count correctly.

Single-symbol coding, for example "A," "B," "C"; "X," "Y," "Z"; "1," "2," "3," etc., used to indicate free, reduced-price, or paid categories is not recommended on tickets/tokens because of the ease with which students are able to recognize the meaning of the code. (Some States may prohibit all single-symbol coding.) For the same reason, multiple coding of the same symbol, for example "AAA," "BBB," "CCC," etc., is not recommended. Some codes have been prohibited at the Federal level because they are too recognizable and therefore allow overt identification. These include the actual designations of free, reduced-price and paid; "F," "R," "P"; or different colored tickets for free, reduced-price, and paid. The following coding alternatives would be acceptable:

**Coding by series:** Using four- or five-digit numbers in a series. 1000 through 1999 for "free," 2000 through 2999 for "reduced-price," and 3000 through 3999 for "paid."

**EXAMPLES: #1453 = free; #2314 = reduced-price; #3000 = paid**

**Coding by student ID number:** Using the last digit in a student's ID number to indicate the appropriate eligibility category. For example, a number ending in 0 reflecting the free category, a number ending in any odd numeral signifying the reduced-price category, and a number ending with an even numeral indicating paid category.

**EXAMPLES: #12340 = free; #22355 = reduced-price; #45646 = paid**

**Coding by variations:** By varying the way in which the issuance date or other information is written or placed on the ticket/token.

**EXAMPLES: 10/2/90 = free; 10-2-90 = reduced-price; 10-2-1990 = paid**

**Coding by subtle differences:** Employing different printing styles or spacing or underlining parts of student's name, etc., to indicate different categories.

**EXAMPLES: Scott Daniels = free; Scott Daniels = reduced-price;  
Scott Daniels = paid**

**Coding by number of digits:** Varying the length of coded numbers by category. For example, free is indicated by four-digit numbers, reduced-price is indicated by five-digit numbers, and paid is indicated by six-digit numbers.

**EXAMPLES: #3232 = free; #43564 = reduced-price; #333356 = paid**

### **Ticket/Token Point of Service Accountability Procedures**

• **Tear-Off or Theater-Style Tickets** (used in manual systems) - Students are issued a booklet of tickets (weekly or longer periods of time) or individual tickets (daily) with each ticket representing one lunch. The tickets may be dated or color-coded to indicate which day they are to be used (i.e., coded by day or week -- NOT BY ELIGIBILITY CATEGORY!), and students' names should be printed on the tickets to prevent misuse. As the student receives a reimbursable meal, the cashier takes the appropriate ticket and puts it in a cashbox to be tallied after the meal service to provide the count by category.

The following is an example of coded theater-style tickets (free = 1000-1999, reduced-price = 2000-2999, paid = 3000-3999):

Name _____
Admit One
#1000

Name _____
Admit One
#2625

Name _____
Admit One
#3004

• **Five-Day Punch Ticket or Pass** - Students prepay weekly and receive a 5-day ticket or pass which is punched or marked in the appropriate place by the cashier as they receive a reimbursable meal at the point of service. The ticket may be divided into individual sections indicating specific days. In systems where students keep their tickets the cashier punches or marks the tickets at the point of service. At the same time, information from the coded ticket is used to make the meal count by category for the day. This could be by special keys on a cash register (see "Tickets with Programmed Cash Register") that record meals by category along with money collected, a meal counter (mechanical tabulator that is used by pushing down the appropriate counter buttons or keys), or by marking a roster. In systems where the cashier keeps the tickets, a count of the tickets collected in each category would be made after the meal service. Tickets are returned to students before the next meal service. The following tickets would be acceptable using the coding method described above:

<i>Mountain School District</i>				
<i>Meal Pass</i>				
Name: <u>Susan Roberts</u> #1826				
Date <u>10/2-10/6</u>				
<del>M</del>	<del>X</del>	W	TH	F

**Susan** - Eligible for free meals and, for the week 10/2, received meals on Monday and Tuesday.

<b>PRAIRIE CITY SCHOOLS</b>				
Meal Ticket # <u>2555</u>				
Name: <u>John Smith</u> Week of: <u>10/2</u>				
M	T	W	T	F
2	3	4	5	5

**John** - Eligible for reduced-price meals as indicated by the number 2555. The ticket, punched at the point of service, indicates that John has received one meal so far this particular week.

• **Ticket/Token with Tally Sheet** - Students prepay daily, weekly, or monthly to receive their tickets/tokens and present them at the point of service to obtain a reimbursable meal. The cashier or other person marking or punching the tickets makes a mark on a tally sheet under the appropriately coded meal category section for each student served according to the type of ticket/token shown. The tallies are totalled for each meal category at the end of the meal service each day and are then

recorded. A tally sheet may also be used as a way to check the accuracy of the ticket/token count. An example tally sheet might look like this:

<b>DAILY MEAL TALLY SHEET</b>			<b>DATE</b> 10/2	<b>SCHOOL</b> Elm Elementary	
<b>Lunch/Breakfast</b> (circle one)				<b>Milk</b>	<b>Adult</b>
1000-1999	2000-2999	3000-3999			
III III III	III III	III	III III	III	
III III	III I	III	III		
III III	III	III	<u>A la carte</u>	<u>Extra sales</u>	
III III	III	II	III III		II

- **Tickets/Tokens with Programmed Cash Register** - Students prepay for their meal tickets/tokens and present them on the meal-service line at the point of service. The cashier or other person taking the meal count takes the tickets and punches a coded key on the cash register that corresponds with the code on the ticket. A different key on the cash register is designated for each category of meal (free, reduced-price, and paid). The register automatically tallies the number of meals served in each category at the end of the meal service each day. Or, the cashier may use the register tape to count the number of meals served by category as well as to find the sums of extra sales and adult meals. Cash registers must not have a window facing the students that indicates "0.00," "\$.40," or "\$1.00" (or any other dollar amount that would reflect a student's eligibility category). This would be a form of overt identification. Some systems permit/encourage entering fictitious amounts into the cash register to mask actual amounts due or paid.

#### Payment Alternatives in a Ticket/Token System

Basically, there are three methods of payment for meals: prepayment, cash on line (at the point of service), and post-billing. Cash on line, while an option, must generally be used in conjunction with a prepayment or post-billing system. **An all-cash line, where reduced-price and paid students pay and free students do not is almost always unacceptable because it does not prevent overt identification.** An exception to this is a cash on line system where each transaction between student and cashier occurs out of sight of everyone else. Again, every system must be approved by the State agency.

The same payment options must be available to all students regardless of eligibility category. For instance, if students eligible for paid meals have the option to pay on a weekly basis, students eligible for reduced-price meals must also have this option.

SFAs may choose to charge meals on an individual basis for students who do not have money. Charges in a ticket/token system may be indicated by special coded