

Flexibility in Meal Service

GSRP legislation requires programs to provide nutritional services to all children supported by federal, state and local resources as applicable. That requirement has always been interpreted by MDE to indicate that all children must be served the meals and snacks provided by the program and is fully outlined in the [Classroom Requirements](#) section of the Implementation Manual. However, multiple conversations with program staff and parents have made it clear that more and more families are adopting specialized diets or desire food that reflects the home and community cultures, is high in nutrients and low in saturated and trans-fat, added sugar, and salt. Some of these features are not easily met by programs.

ISDs and local programs may adopt new meal service policies allowing families to provide meals and/or snacks for their children. There are several conditions that must be met.

- Families must not be expected or encouraged to provide food for their child or the program.
- Meal and snack service meeting Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)/National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) requirements must continue to be provided.
- All licensing requirements for food service must be met.
- In GSRP/Head Start Blend classrooms, the highest standard from either program must be adhered to.
- Family style meal service must continue. Children of families who provide food intermingle with the rest of the class at snack/meals, sitting and eating with the rest of the class and participating in all other aspects of the family style meal.
- Meals and snacks provided by families must also meet CACFP/NSNP requirements except when documented food allergies or intolerance or family beliefs prohibit. If inappropriate foods are provided, teaching staff with the support of food service providers, program administrators, and ECS must work with families to meet the requirements or utilize the provided meals.
- Families providing their own meals and snacks must sign an agreement stating their intent and their understanding of the requirements. A sample is provided.

Programs will also want to consider several situations that may occur if flexibility is offered. These and more should be incorporated into program policies, staff training and written guidance provided to families.

- Will refrigeration be provided for meals brought from home? Will families be limited to foods that do not requiring heating/warming?
- How will staff manage possible child reactions to their own or other's meals?
- If parents choosing this option do not send in food for their child, how will the program ensure there is sufficient food to provide meals and snacks for that child?
- If a child brings food that does not meet the requirements, will they be allowed to eat it or will it be replaced? Who will communicate with and advise the family?

This added flexibility for parents does not remove the requirement that parents must incur no cost for program elements, unless in this case only, they choose to supply their child's food. This guidance also does not remove the requirement to evaluate subrecipients each year on family-style meal service with nutritious food.