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To: Child Nutrition Programs
From: Colleen Fillmore, Ph.D., R.D., L.D., Child Nutrition Programs Director
Date: March 4, 2008
Subject: Use of Vending Machines in the School Meals Programs
Policy Memo SP-13-2008

Since the January 22, 2007 memo "Vending Machines in the School Meal Programs," SP-03-2007, USDA have received numerous questions regarding how they may be used in the School Meal Programs. The following Questions and Answers (Q&As) are provided in response to these questions and as additional guidance in the use of vending machines.

USDA continue to develop guidance on the operation and management of vending machines in the school meal programs and expect to periodically add to these Q&As as the need arises. For further information call the Child Nutrition Division at 208-332-6820

Questions and Answers on Vending in the School Meal Programs

1) Are reimbursable meals offered through vending machines subject to the Offer vs. Serve (OVS) provisions?

Yes, as stated in the SP-03-2007 memo, vending machines offering reimbursable meals are subject to the same procedures, menu planning requirements, competitive food rules, and OVS requirements that are applicable to meals offered on a service line with a cashier.

2) May meals vended after any OVS configurations run out be reimbursed?

Once a vending machine can no longer dispense a complete reimbursable meal it must no longer be available for the purpose of serving reimbursable meals. A "complete meal" means a meal containing all planned components/menu items, before the exclusion of components/menu items permitted by OVS.

3) In a school offering OVS, does predetermination of menu selections in a vending machine (resulting in a less than complete set of choices while others may have a different set of choices), undermine the intent of the OVS requirement?

No, this is similar to multiple service lines in which every line may not offer all items. At a minimum, any vending machine used as part of the school meals programs must be able to dispense a complete meal. We encourage schools to stock as wide a variety as possible for students utilizing these machines, but understand that the choices may not be as robust as those offered in a traditional line.

4) How is free, reduced price or paid eligibility tracked when using a vending machine?

In order to distribute reimbursable meals, the school must be able to determine the student's eligibility status, whether they are using a vending machine or a traditional serving line. How this is done would be determined by the school district's point of service system and procedures.

5) Do vending machines need to allow a student to add money on to his/her account and/or pay the difference between the account balance and the price of the item to be purchased, if the student doesn't have sufficient funds in the account?

Vending machines do not have to accept money from students, but there does have to be a mechanism for the student who has money to participate in the program. This mechanism could be a student providing the money to a school representative who adds the money to the students' account so that it is available for the meal; or assuring that the student has access to a traditional meal line that accepts cash.

6) Are vending machines limited to the same time restrictions as other types of lunch service (10 AM to 2 PM) when serving lunch under the NSLP?

Yes

7) Do the identifiers (name, ID number, biometric, cashier, etc) for a vending machine need to be the same as in a traditional line?

The reimbursable school meal vending machine must have the same number of identifiers as the traditional line, but the identifiers do not have to be the same ones. For example a cashier may be an identifier in a traditional line, along with a pin number. The vending machine used in the school would need equivalent identifiers, but they could be a biometric check and a pin number.