

Federal Programs for Families

8 federal programs that support students Title I, Head Start, school meals, McKinney-Vento & more.

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Federal Programs Overview

WHAT IT IS

The federal government provides a minority of K-12 funding (most comes from state and local sources), but it targets that money to specific needs — students in poverty, students with disabilities, English learners, and more. This section explains the major programs in plain English, so you can find and use the help your family may...

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **ESEA / ESSA** — The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act) — home to Title I, Title III, McKinney-Vento, and more
- ✓ **IDEA** — The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act — special education and related services (see our Special Education section)
- ✓ **Other agencies** — Some supports come from other departments — school meals (USDA) and Head Start (Health & Human Services)

TYPES & OPTIONS

- ✓ **Title I** — Extra support for schools serving many students from low-income families
- ✓ **Head Start** — Free early childhood education for eligible families
- ✓ **School meal programs** — Free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch
- ✓ **McKinney-Vento** — Rights and support for students experiencing homelessness
- ✓ **English-learner programs** — Services for multilingual students (Title III)
- ✓ **Migrant Education** — Support for children of migratory workers



AT A GLANCE

Main laws	ESEA/ESSA & IDEA
How it flows	Federal → state → district → s...
Most funding	Formula grants (by need)
Your front door	Your school & district
This area	Currently in flux

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Start at your school** — Ask the front office, counselor, or a family-liaison who to talk to
- ✓ **Ask your district's federal-programs or Title I office** — Districts have staff who administer these programs
- ✓ **Contact your state education agency** — For program-specific offices and rights
- ✓ **Know it's your right to ask** — Schools are required to inform families about many of these supports

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Do these programs cost families money?** — Generally no — they're funded to support eligible students at no cost to the family.
- ✓ **How do I know if I qualify?** — Eligibility varies by program (often income- or situation-based) — ask your school.
- ✓ **Are these programs changing?** — Yes — the federal system is being restructured; confirm current details locally.
- ✓ **Where do I start?** — Your school and district are the front door to all of these.

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Title I

WHAT IT IS

Title I is the largest federal K-12 program . It sends money to schools and districts serving high concentrations of students from low-income families , to help those students meet the same high standards as everyone else. It reaches most districts in the country.

HOW IT WORKS

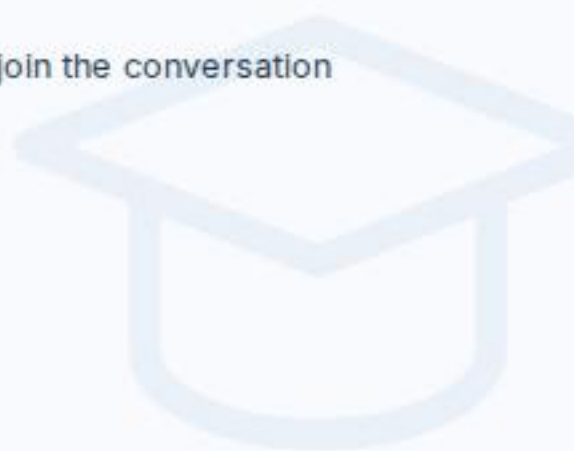
- ✓ **Schoolwide program** — In schools with high poverty, Title I can upgrade the whole school — all students benefit
- ✓ **Targeted assistance** — In other schools, Title I services focus on the specific students most in need of support

WHO IT'S FOR

Title I supports students in eligible high-poverty schools . In a schoolwide program, all students at the school can benefit; in targeted assistance, identified students receive services. You don't "apply" — eligibility is based on the school and (for targeted assistance) student need.

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Ask if your school is a Title I school** — The office or district can tell you
- ✓ **Ask what services it funds** — Understand the support available to your child
- ✓ **Use your family-engagement rights** — Title I schools must involve families — join the conversation



AT A GLANCE

Law	ESEA/ESSA, Title I, Part A
Purpose	Extra help in high-poverty sch...
Reaches	Most U.S. school districts
Two models	Schoolwide & targeted assistan...
Cost	Free to families

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Extra instruction** — Reading and math support, smaller groups, interventionists
- ✓ **More staff** — Instructional aides, specialists, coaches
- ✓ **Materials and technology** — Learning resources and tools
- ✓ **Family engagement** — Family activities and required family-input opportunities
- ✓ **Preschool** — Some districts fund early learning with Title I

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Is Title I only for certain students?** — It depends on the school's model — schoolwide benefits everyone; targeted assistance serves identified students.
- ✓ **Does Title I cost families anything?** — No.
- ✓ **How do I know if my school gets Title I?** — Ask the school or district — many schools are Title I.
- ✓ **Is Title I funding changing?** — Federal programs are in flux — confirm current details locally.

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Everyday Family Supports

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Head Start

WHAT IT IS

Head Start (and Early Head Start for the youngest children) provides free, comprehensive early childhood education to eligible families — along with health, nutrition, and family-support services. It's run through the Office of Head Start (in the Administration for Children and Families, part of the Department of Health and Human...

WHO IT'S FOR

Head Start primarily serves families with low incomes — generally at or below the federal poverty guideline (about \$27,000 for a family of three in 2026) — and children experiencing homelessness, in foster care, receiving certain public assistance, or with disabilities often qualify regardless of income. Early Head Start serves pregnant...

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Find a local program** — Use the Head Start locator (link below) to find programs near you
- ✓ **Contact them directly** — Local programs handle their own enrollment and waitlists
- ✓ **Gather documents** — You'll typically need proof of age, income, and residence — ask what's required
- ✓ **Apply early** — Spots can be limited — get on lists as soon as you can



AT A GLANCE

Agency	Health & Human Services (HHS)
Ages	Early Head Start (0–3), Head S...
Cost	Free for eligible families
More than school	Health, nutrition & family ser...
Find one	EHS/HS locator

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Early learning** — Play-based, developmentally appropriate education
- ✓ **Health services** — Screenings, referrals, and support for medical, dental, and mental health
- ✓ **Nutrition** — Healthy meals and snacks
- ✓ **Family support** — Help connecting families to community resources and goals
- ✓ **Services for disabilities** — Support and inclusion for children with disabilities

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Does Head Start cost anything?** — No — it's free for eligible families.
- ✓ **What ages does it serve?** — Early Head Start: birth to 3; Head Start: ages 3 to 5.
- ✓ **Do I have to be low-income?** — It primarily serves low-income families, but other situations can qualify — ask locally.
- ✓ **How do I find a program?** — Use the Head Start locator, or ask your school district.

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School Meal Programs

WHAT IT IS

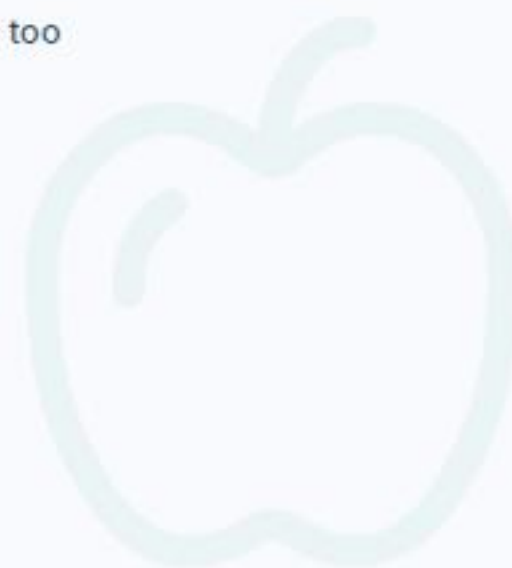
The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program (run by the USDA) provide free or reduced-price meals to millions of students. Well-fed kids learn better — and for many families these programs are an important, easy-to-access support.

WHO IT'S FOR

Eligibility is usually based on household income : children in households at or below 130% of the federal poverty guideline qualify for free meals, and those between 130% and 185% qualify for reduced-price meals (capped at a few cents). Children can also qualify automatically if the family receives certain benefits (like SNAP) or if the...

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Watch for the meal application** — Schools send home (or post online) a free/reduced-price meal application each year
- ✓ **Apply anytime** — You can apply at the start of the year or any time your situation changes
- ✓ **Answer honestly** — Provide the income or case-number information requested
- ✓ **Check for "free for all" schools** — If your school offers universal free meals, you may not need to apply
- ✓ **Ask about summer meals** — Many communities offer free summer meals for kids, too



AT A GLANCE

Agency	USDA
Programs	National School Lunch & Breakf...
Benefit	Free or reduced-price meals
Some schools	Serve free meals to all
Apply	Through your school/district

WHY IT MATTERS

Beyond the meals themselves, qualifying can sometimes connect families to other benefits (some schools use meal eligibility to waive fees or extend other supports). Ask your school what a qualifying application may also help with.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Who qualifies for free or reduced-price meals?** — Mostly household income (free at or below 130% of the poverty guideline, reduced-price up to 185%), with automatic eligibility for some situations —...
- ✓ **Do all schools charge for meals?** — No — some serve free meals to every student.
- ✓ **When can I apply?** — Anytime during the year — not just at the start.
- ✓ **Is applying confidential?** — Yes — meal eligibility is handled confidentially by the school.

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21st Century Learning Centers

WHAT IT IS

The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program is the main federal funding stream for afterschool, before-school, and summer learning programs — especially for students in high-poverty, high-need schools. It supports safe, enriching places for kids when school is out.

WHO IT'S FOR

21st CCLC programs prioritize students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools, but availability depends on which local organizations have grants in your area. Programs are run by schools, nonprofits, libraries, parks departments, and others.

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Ask your school** — Many host or partner with 21st CCLC programs
- ✓ **Ask your district's federal-programs office** — They know which local programs are funded
- ✓ **Check community organizations** — Libraries, Ys, clubs, and parks departments often run programs
- ✓ **Ask about cost and transportation** — Programs are typically free or low-cost — confirm details

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Do these programs cost money?** — Usually free or low-cost — ask the specific program.
- ✓ **What do kids do there?** — Homework help plus enrichment like STEM, arts, and sports.
- ✓ **Who runs them?** — Schools, nonprofits, libraries, and other community organizations with grants.
- ✓ **Is this program changing?** — Federal oversight has been shifting — local programs continue; confirm details locally.

AT A GLANCE

Law	ESEA/ESSA Title IV, Part B
Provides	Afterschool & summer programs
Priority	High-poverty, high-need school...
Cost	Free/low-cost to families
This area	Oversight shifting; confirm lo...

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Academic help** — Homework support, tutoring, and reading/math enrichment
- ✓ **Enrichment** — STEM, arts, music, sports, and hands-on activities
- ✓ **A safe place** — Supervised care during out-of-school hours
- ✓ **Meals or snacks** — Many programs provide food
- ✓ **Family activities** — Some offer family engagement and adult-education opportunities

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Support for Specific Situations

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McKinney-Vento (Homelessness)

WHAT IT IS

The McKinney-Vento Act guarantees important education rights to children and youth experiencing homelessness — including those "doubled up" with others due to loss of housing, in shelters or motels, or unsheltered. Every district has a liaison whose job is to make sure these students can enroll, attend, and succeed.

WHO IT'S FOR

"Homeless" under this law is broad : it includes families and youth who are sharing housing due to hardship, living in motels/shelters/campgrounds, or lacking a fixed, regular, adequate nighttime residence. Unaccompanied youth (on their own) are covered too. If your family's housing is unstable, ask your school's liaison — you may have...

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Ask for the McKinney-Vento (homeless-education) liaison** — Every district must have one
- ✓ **Explain your housing situation** — The liaison determines eligibility and rights
- ✓ **Enroll now** — You don't have to wait for documents
- ✓ **Ask about transportation and services** — The liaison arranges supports



AT A GLANCE

Law	McKinney-Vento Act (ESSA, Title IV, Part A)
Protects	Students experiencing homelessness
Key person	The homeless-education liaison
Rights	Enroll immediately; stay in school
Cost	Free supports

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Immediate enrollment** — Enroll right away, even without the usual documents (like proof of residence or records)
- ✓ **School stability** — The right to stay in the "school of origin" when it's in the child's best interest, even if you move
- ✓ **Transportation** — Help getting to and from school, including to the school of origin
- ✓ **Full participation** — Access to programs, meals, and activities like any other student
- ✓ **A dedicated liaison** — A district staff member who connects families to services and resolves barriers

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Do I have to be in a shelter to qualify?** — No — the definition is broad and includes families sharing housing due to hardship.
- ✓ **Can my child stay at their current school if we move?** — Often yes — school stability is a core right.
- ✓ **Who helps us?** — Your district's homeless-education liaison.
- ✓ **Does it cost anything?** — No — these are free supports and rights.

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Supporting English Learners

WHAT IT IS

Students who are still learning English — often called English learners or multilingual learners — have the right to services that help them learn English and succeed in all subjects. Title III funds these programs, and civil-rights law requires schools to support these students and communicate with their families.

HOW IT WORKS

Schools identify English learners (usually via a home-language survey and a language assessment), then provide language-instruction programs and monitor progress until students are proficient. Program models vary — from English-language development classes to bilingual and dual-language programs.

WHO IT'S FOR

These services are for students whose English is still developing, identified through the school's process. Being an English learner is not a disability and doesn't lower expectations — it's about providing the right support to reach the same high standards.

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Complete the home-language survey honestly** — It helps the school identify who may need services
- ✓ **Ask what program your child is in** — Understand the model and goals
- ✓ **Request translation/interpretation** — It's your right for important communication
- ✓ **Stay engaged** — Attend conferences and ask about progress — you're a key partner

AT A GLANCE

Law	ESEA/ESSA Title III (+ civil r...
Serves	English learners / multilingua...
Rights	Language services & translated...
Family right	Communication you understand
Cost	Free

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Language services** — Programs to build English while keeping up in academic subjects
- ✓ **Access to everything** — EL students can't be excluded from grade-level content, gifted programs, or activities
- ✓ **Family communication** — Schools must communicate with families in a language they understand (including translation/interpretation)
- ✓ **Progress monitoring** — Schools track growth toward English proficiency
- ✓ **Reclassification** — Students exit services when they're proficient, with monitoring afterward

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Do English learners cost families anything?** — No — services are free.
- ✓ **Will my child be separated from other students?** — Models vary — many keep students in grade-level content with support.
- ✓ **Can I get school info in my language?** — Yes — schools must communicate with families in a language they understand.
- ✓ **Is being an EL a disability?** — No — it's about language support, with the same high expectations.

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Migrant Education

WHAT IT IS

The Migrant Education Program (MEP) supports children whose families move for agricultural or fishing work . Frequent moves can disrupt schooling, so the program helps these students stay on track , transfer records smoothly, and get extra academic and support services.

WHO IT'S FOR

The program serves children (and youth) who have moved across school-district or state lines within a set time period so a family member could seek or obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing . Eligibility is determined by trained recruiters — if this describes your family, ask your school about the program.

STEPS TO TAKE

- ✓ **Ask your school about the Migrant Education Program** — They can start the eligibility process
- ✓ **Talk to a recruiter** — Trained staff determine eligibility
- ✓ **Share your work/move history** — It determines eligibility and services
- ✓ **Ask about summer programs** — These are often a key part of the support

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Who qualifies?** — Children of families who move for temporary/seasonal agricultural or fishing work — ask your school.
- ✓ **Does it cost anything?** — No.
- ✓ **What if we move often?** — That's exactly who the program is designed to help — It focuses on continuity.
- ✓ **Who determines eligibility?** — Trained program recruiters/staff.

AT A GLANCE

Law	ESEA/ESSA Title I, Part C
Serves	Children of migratory workers
Helps with	School continuity & extra supp...
Includes	Summer & support services
Cost	Free

WHY IT MATTERS

- ✓ **Records transfer** — Systems to move student records quickly between schools/states
- ✓ **Extra instruction** — Academic support to fill gaps caused by moves
- ✓ **Summer and intersession programs** — Learning when families are between locations
- ✓ **Support services** — Help with needs that affect schooling
- ✓ **Advocacy** — Staff who understand migratory families' circumstances

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