Food and Nutrition Service   **August 2019**

EVALUATION OF THE SCHOOL MEAL DATA COLLECTION PROCESS (SUMMARY)

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are federally funded meal programs operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions (RCCIs). Approximately 30 million students in about 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and RCCIs receive school lunches through the NSLP, and more than 14 million students receive school breakfasts through the SBP on an average school day.

This study describes and evaluates the methodologies and processes used by schools, school food authorities (SFAs), and State agencies to collect and report data on three Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) forms used for the Federal school meal programs: the *Report of School Program Operations* (FNS-10), the *SFA Verification Collection Report* (FNS-742), and the *State Agency Direct Certification Rate Data Element Report* (FNS-834). In addition to describing the processes, the study identifies potential sources of error when completing the three forms and provides useful practices and recommendations for improving data collection processes.
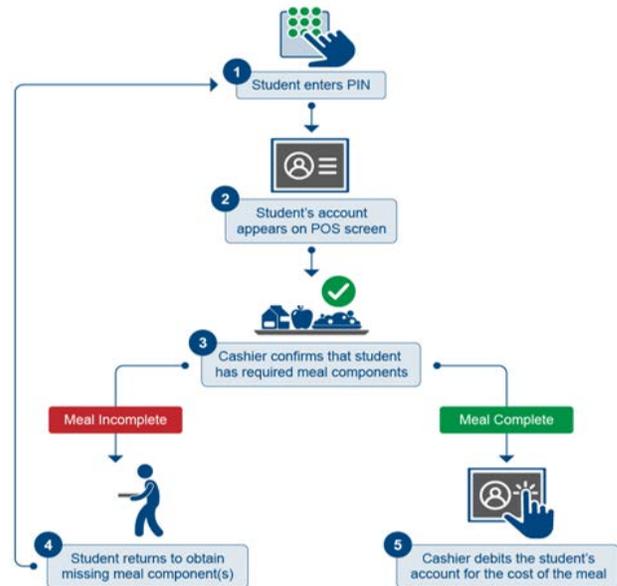
Methodology

This process study collected qualitative data through in-person interviews with respondents across four States: Alabama, New York, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Respondents in each State included State directors and staff from the NSLP State agency and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) State agency, 10 SFA directors, and 30 school food managers per State.

Results

Report of School Program Operations (FNS-10) Processes

- The vast majority of SFAs receive lunchtime meal counts from their schools via a shared data system after the meal counts are entered at the point of sale (see Figure 1).
- The State-level review involves examining the results of the automated edit checks.

Figure 1. FNS-10 School-Level Process

pos = point of sale

Mistakes and Challenges

- **School food managers cite mistakes by individuals and software failures as the most common sources of reporting error.** The school food managers indicated that the errors by individuals are relatively rare in frequency.

Useful Practices

Respondents involved in FNS-10 reporting recommended:

- At the school and SFA levels, use an integrated electronic meal counting system with backup paper rosters at the point of sale (POS) terminal in the event of unexpected system failures.
- At the State level, customize the portal and data fields for SFA data entry as much as possible based on each SFA's particular circumstances.

SFA Verification Collection Report (FNS-742) Processes

- The majority of SFAs track and store household applications, verification information, and direct certification data electronically.
- All sampled SFAs submit FNS-742 data by manual entry through the online State portal.

- States then upload FNS-742 files to the Food Program Reporting System (FPRS).

Mistakes and Challenges
- **Almost half of SFAs (17 of 39) reported timing and delays as the top sources of error.** The most frequently mentioned source of confusion that contributes to errors is having two different time periods for capturing data reported on the FNS-742. Program operators are instructed to report the number of approved applications as of October 1 each year, and the number of students as of the last operating day of October.
- **All four States and over one-quarter of SFAs (11 of 39) felt that most mistakes can be attributed to human error,** such as data entry errors when SFAs are submitting FNS-742 data to the State or the State is submitting data to FNS via FPRS.
- **Both State and SFA directors point to specific confusing data elements and/or reporting instructions** for the FNS-742 as the root source of some errors.

Useful Practices
Respondents involved in FNS-742 reporting recommended:
- At the SFA level, increase automation and reduce manual processes.
- At the State level, ensure SFAs have access to and are aware of plain-language, step-by-step training, instructions, and program materials about the certification and verification processes and reporting.
- At the State level, customize the portal for reporting FNS-742 data to mirror FPRS.

State Agency Direct Certification Rate Data Element Report (FNS-834)
Processes
- There are two data elements on this form that State agencies report annually.
  - The State agency that administers the school meal programs reports one data element on this form – the number of children on SNAP in special provision schools not in a base year.
  - The SNAP State agency reports the other data element on this form – the number of school-age children in SNAP households.

Mistakes and Challenges
- **Overall, State-level respondents say the FNS-834 is straightforward and easy to produce.**
- **States mention few challenges to identifying all children in eligible households.** This includes identifying children in SNAP households that do not attend NSLP schools or are homeschooled and would not be on school enrollment lists.

Useful Practices
Respondents involved in FNS-834 reporting recommended:
- At the State level, foster collaborative relationships between staff in the NSLP State agency and the SNAP State agency.

Overall Recommendations

The following high-level recommendations are based on findings from the study interviews and may help improve reporting processes and data accuracy:
- Involve a diverse range of operators in design and testing of forms before implementation.
- Ensure that the software companies that create the data systems for schools and SFAs are aware of and fully understand program requirements and changes.
- Increase promotion of available toolkits and program materials associated with the certification and verification process, in particular the recently issued Verification Toolkit.
- Target support and training for teachers and other non-foodservice staff serving program meals outside of the cafeteria.
- Provide case-by-case flexibility to State agencies in applying the SNAP Direct Certification threshold standard.

For More Information