

**SPECIAL NUTRITION PROGRAM OPERATIONS STUDY, SY 2011-12: SUMMARY**

**Background**

The Special Nutrition Program Operations Study (SN-OPS) is a multiyear study designed to provide the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) with a snapshot of current State and School Food Authority (SFA) policies and practices, including information on school meal standards, competitive foods standards, professional standards, school lunch pricing and accounting, and standards for school wellness policies. The information in this first year study will provide a baseline for observing the improvements resulting from the implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA).

**Methods**

The first year of SN-OPS was based on data collected during school year (SY) 2011-2012 through surveys of all State Child Nutrition (CN) directors and a stratified sample of SFA directors, which was weighted to represent the population of SFAs.

The initial round of data collection attempted to gain a full census of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and the five U.S. territories. The survey of SFA directors used a stratified sample of SFAs serving at least one school participating in National School Lunch Program (NSLP) from the entire list of 14,797 public school SFAs (as of 2010).

**Findings**

**Participation**

*School participation in the NSLP was nearly universal and participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) was high among SFAs.* Ninety-seven percent of SFAs had all of their schools participating in NSLP, and 79 percent of SFAs had all of their schools participating in SBP (table 1).

**Table 1. Percentage of SFAs with All Schools within each Grade Level Participating in NSLP and SBP, SY 2011-12**

Program	Elementary	Middle	High	Other	All schools
NSLP	99.1%	99.7%	99.0%	92.7%	96.6%
SBP	85.9%	88.2%	88.1%	77.8%	78.8%

SFA = School Food Authority SY= School Year  
NSLP = National School Lunch Program SBP = School Breakfast Program

SFA directors reported that, overall, 7 percent of students did not have access to the SBP, and 2 percent did not have access to the NSLP during SY 2011-12.

*SFA directors reported that over half (51 percent) of their students were approved for either free or reduced price (F/RP) meals.* Forty-four percent of students in all schools were approved to receive free meals during SY 2011-12. Additionally, SFAs reported that 7 percent of students were approved for reduced-price meals. These percentages were fairly consistent across school levels.

**Operations**

*In general, SFA directors have a considerable amount of experience in the field of school-food service.* Eighty-nine percent of SFA directors had more than 5 years of food service experience and nearly half (47 percent) had more than 20 years of total experience.

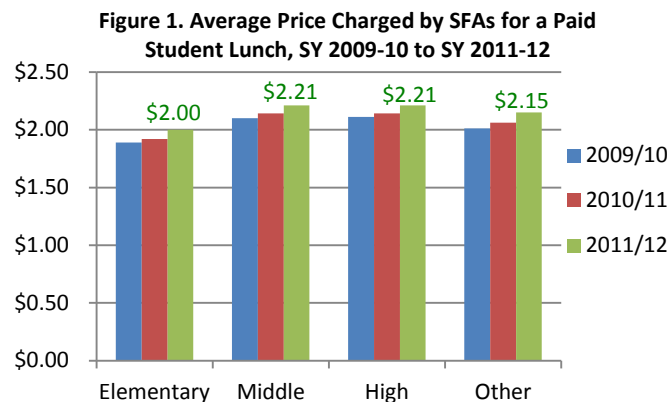
*SFAs have varying types of kitchen facilities and meal service systems available at their schools.* Fifty-five percent of SFAs have only onsite kitchens at the individual schools, while 17 percent have only centralized (offsite) kitchens, and the remaining 29 percent have a mixture. Similarly, 21 percent of SFAs used food service management companies (FSMCs) to manage the food service operations in at least some of their schools.

*Nearly all SFAs (96 percent) reported that all schools in their district had a written food safety plan based on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) principles by SY 2011-12.* In addition, 84 percent of SFAs reported that all of their schools had two or more safety inspections during SY 2010-11.

*Competitive foods are widely offered by most SFAs with 80 percent of SFAs reporting that their schools provided at least one competitive food source.* The most common competitive food source was offering à la carte items during breakfast (53 percent) and lunch (71 percent). In addition, 29 percent of SFAs reported their schools had vending machines; 19 percent had snack bars; and 26 percent had other competitive food venues, including school stores.

## SFA Finances

*On average, SFAs charged considerably more for paid meals purchased by secondary school students than by elementary school students (figure 1).* In SY 2011-12, the average price for a paid lunch in secondary schools was about 11 percent higher than in elementary schools. This may reflect the differences in portion sizes, and hence food costs, between elementary and secondary schools.



SFA = School Food Authority  
SY = School Year

*The majority of SFAs raised prices after the implementation of the paid meal equity provision in 2011; the typical increase was 10 cents.* In elementary schools, only 16 percent of SFAs raised prices for SY 2010-11 (the year before the HHFKA paid meal equity provision became effective), whereas 55 percent raised prices for SY 2011-12. A similar pattern was observed for middle, high, and other schools. Under HHFKA regulations, the paid meal equity provision requires SFAs to either set the average price of a paid school lunch at no less than the difference between the reimbursement rate for free and paid meals or make up for the revenues lost to the SFA through the “underpricing” of paid lunches with funds from non-Federal sources.

*SFAs have been providing meals to children who cannot pay for them.* In SY 2010-11, 88 percent of SFAs regularly provided either a reimbursable school meal or some form of alternative meal to children who were not approved for a F/RP meal and who could not pay for a meal (Table 2). On average, for all SFAs that lost some revenue as a result of unpaid meals, the net revenue lost was less than 1 percent (0.51 percent) of total expenditure for the year.

**Table 2. Among SFAs with Unpaid Meal Costs, the Percentage of SFAs with Various Practices for Providing a Meal to Students Who Cannot Pay, SY 2010-11**

SFA practice	Percentage of SFAs
Serve a reimbursable meal	50.4%
Serve an alternative meal	38.0%
Serve a reimbursable meal for a limited number of times and then serve an alternative meal	5.4%
Do not serve the child a reimbursable or alternative meal	1.3%
Other	4.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

SFA = School Food Authority

## State Policies and Support

*Some States provided a subsidy to SFAs beyond the Federal reimbursement that SFAs received for the F/RP meals served to income eligible students.* Forty-two percent of States provided a subsidy for breakfast and lunch; 9 percent provided a subsidy for breakfast only; 11 percent provided a subsidy for lunch only. Just over one-third of States did not provide subsidies to their SFAs.

*A substantial number of States reported having SFAs that use Provisions 2 and 3 and direct verification to lessen the administrative burden associated with determining students’ program eligibility.* Overall, many more States (77 percent) had at least some SFAs using Provision 2 as compared to Provision 3 (28 percent), and just about half (48 percent) of the States reported having at least one SFA using direct verification.

## Additional Information

The full report provides information on participation in NSLP, SBP and other nutrition programs, SFA staff credentials and responsibilities, kitchen facilities and meal service, food safety and training, food procurement, menu planning and nutritional analysis, meal counting and claiming procedures, availability of non-USDA meal alternatives, SFA financials, and State policies and administration of NSLP and SBP.

## For More Information

L. May *et al.* (2013). Special Nutrition Program Operations Study, State and SFA Policies and Practices for School Meal Programs: SY 2011-12. Prepared by Westat. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Project Officer: John Endahl. Available online at: [www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis](http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).