



The National School Lunch and Programs: Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification Study (APEC-II)

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About the Study

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) play a critical role in America's strategy to ensure that children have access to nutritious meals. These programs, which provide free and reduced-price meals for students from low-income families, must balance competing objectives: (1) ensuring that children and families who receive benefits are eligible; (2) maintaining ease of access for those who are eligible; and (3) keeping the costs and burden of determining eligibility reasonable both for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and families. Meeting the first objective can sometimes increase administrative costs and make it more difficult for eligible children to participate. Simplifying access or streamlining procedures, however, can sometimes result in more benefits going to people who do not qualify, increasing costs of the program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, has contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and its research partners Westat, Inc. and Decision Information Resources, to conduct the APEC-II Study (also known as the National School Meals Study) for SY 2012-2013. The study is authorized by the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002, and participation by selected states, districts, and schools is required under Section 305 of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

The study will include nationally representative samples of school districts, schools, and students within sampled schools. It is designed to provide information about children's access, participation, eligibility, and certification in the NSLP and SBP to help Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture improve the programs and ensure that intended recipients have access to them. The study will look at families certified for free and reduced-price meals and those whose applications were denied. It will estimate amounts and sources of erroneous reimbursements due to certification errors (administrative error versus household misreporting) and meal counting and claiming errors. The findings will help the Food and Nutrition Service provide guidance to school districts and schools on how to enhance program administration and target benefits effectively.

Participating in the Study

Mathematica is selecting a nationally representative sample of 175 school districts nationwide and about 3 to 6 schools per district. School district offices and schools will be requested to provide us with a minimal amount of data and assistance. During SY 2012-2013, SFAs and schools will be asked to:

- **Complete an SFA survey.** The survey will collect information about the district's participation in school nutrition programs.
- **Help field interviewers collect data on meal counting and claiming activities.** Field interviewers will visit each sampled school once to collect information on meal counts for a target week and month. SFAs will be asked to provide information on meal counts submitted by sampled schools and the claims SFAs submit to their state agency for reimbursement. Field staff will also observe a random sample of breakfast and lunch cashier transactions. Field staff will be specially trained to ensure they observe breakfast and lunch transactions without being intrusive to school food service personnel or students.



- **Provide access to sampled students' applications and other data.** SFAs and/or schools, as appropriate, will be asked to provide field interviewers with access to applicant information, including directly certified students. This information will be used to select representative samples of students certified for free or reduced-price meals and denied applicants. After selecting the student samples, we will abstract information from sampled students' applications or direct certification documents. We will send a letter to sampled households asking to interview parents on their participation in the school food program during SY 2012-2013. In addition, with consent from parents, we will ask SFAs for the sampled students' meal participation records and for information on any changes during the school year in certification status or enrollment.

Information from Other Sources

Information on district characteristics. At the end of SY 2012-2013 Mathematica will contact each State Child Nutrition Agency to request the following information for each sampled district in the state: the number of reimbursable lunches and breakfasts claimed, and number of schools and enrolled students by Provision 2 and 3 status and Community Eligibility Option. This information will be used to enhance models that FNS uses to produce annual estimates of certification errors and amounts of erroneous payments in the NSLP and SBP to meet federal reporting requirements to Congress.

Protecting Privacy

All information gathered from school districts, schools, and households is for research purposes only and is private to the full extent allowed by law. Your responses will be grouped with those of other participants, and no individual schools, districts, or students will be identified. We will inform parents of the study and our privacy procedures, and obtain parental consent for including their child's school records in the study. We are not conducting audits or monitoring visits. Participation in the study will not affect meal benefits received by participating students or household, nor alter meal reimbursements made to participating districts or schools.

Disseminating the Findings

A final report on the research findings will be produced in Fall 2014.

About the APEC-II Research Team

Mathematica, Westat, and Decision Information Resources are among the nation's leading research organizations. Each firm has over 25 years of experience conducting research for government agencies and studying child nutrition programs.

For More Information

For more information about the study, please contact:

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