

III. INITIATIVE SUMMARY

Structure and Content

This initiative seeks to address current data access limitations for NSLP/SBP by using the Internet to host surveys and computer-assisted data entry programs to collect SFA data in a uniform way. Data can be collected, cleaned, and posted back to a central website location quickly, enabling more timely use of the data by interested (and authorized) USDA agency and program staff, and state- and school district-level authorities. The ability to obtain expedited data will allow USDA to better deal with current policy and program issues and may also broaden the types of research it conducts.

The website will be designed to allow directors of food service programs within State Departments of Education and other State-level officials to submit and obtain SFA-level food and nutrition program data. Not only would state-level authorities have access to the database, but also individuals at the federal level and potentially public users would have access to the data. The website will be developed to allow states to report the relevant data via electronic upload where possible or via a computer assisted data entry program. Researchers and state level officials (i.e., the target constituents) could access the data by querying the system or downloading any of the summary-level reports posted to the website. The website will serve both those who are “browsing” or seeking particular information and those who may be looking for a dataset to download for research purposes.

The potential exists for the national database to include both current information about the school food service programs in each SFA, as well as demographic information about the SFAs themselves. One of the distinct advantages of using the web-based approach to creating the national database is that relevant data regarding some of the demographic characteristics of the food service programs can be captured through the use of standardized request forms (i.e., computer-assisted data entry forms). These forms would yield standardized demographic summaries for each SFA, which can provide some consistency in conducting data analysis by demographic variables. This type of data provides a “value added” to the database and provides an opportunity for researchers and program administrators to conduct comparisons using standardized demographic variables. As part of the development of these forms (Task 9), standardized definitions would be developed and provided to users, to attempt to collect standardized data during the data collection process. However, as with any data collection activity, there is still some probability that states or localities may interpret definitions differently during the reporting or data entry process. To the extent that this initiative will provide useful data to the states, we hope that there will be an incentive to report better quality data.

Exhibit 1 displays a “mock” summary-level report that is geared to a broad audience and is designed to allow the reader to click on various links within the report to access data files or related tables. These types of reports can be automatically generated, depending on the types of tables or text required.

Importance for Research and Administrative Purposes

A national database that contains data at the SFA level could be used by researchers and program administrators to compare and analyze data across both state and local geographic areas. These data could be used to answer some basic questions about participation trends in local school district programs. Some examples of the types of research questions that this initiative could address include:

- To what extent do SFAs of similar size and demographic characteristics succeed in enrolling low-income clients into the free and reduced-price school meals programs?
- What are the characteristics of SFAs that serve a high percentage of students in their school meals programs?
- How does enrollment in the free and reduced-price school meals programs compare with enrollment in other food assistance programs within specific geographic areas?
- What trends in NSLP/SBP participation occur over time? How do these trends vary by type of SFA?

During the key informant interviews conducted for this project, representatives from NSLP/SBP noted that it would be valuable to compare program participation trends across local school districts with similar demographics and characteristics, but not located within the same state. An example that was noted was the ability to compare the number of free and reduced price meals served and the rates of school lunch and school breakfast participation between large school districts located in inner cities across various states.


The number of school meals served, broken out by free, reduced price, and paid, will be available at an aggregated level for each school district. This will allow researchers to examine the extent to which school districts of similar size and demographics are serving these client groups as well as the proportion of children enrolled in local schools who eat meals funded by the NSL and SB programs. These outcomes can then be examined in relation to school district policies, procedures, or outreach methods. The ability to examine program outcomes from other state and local

Exhibit 1. Example of a “Mock” Report with Embedded Web Links

Digest

Summary of USDA Food Assistance and Nutrition Program Data

Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2001



A New Database: Information At Your Fingertips

The ability to examine program outcomes from other state and local programs around the country will help local school districts identify and contact other programs to discuss why some are more successful than others. Because data from local school districts can be identified by a specific geographic unit (e.g. counties), these data can be compared with data from other food assistance programs serving the same geographic areas.

This type of comparison allows program administrators and researchers to examine the extent to which programs are reaching those in need of services. ■

Back to the Basics
In this report

[What is the National School Lunch Program? The National School Breakfast Program?](#)

[How does the NSL Program work?](#)

[What are the nutritional requirements for school lunches?](#)

[How do children qualify for free and reduced-price meals?](#)
(click here for more...)

Participation Trends - How They Compare

Examine data from local school districts


Current Focus: **Maryland**

Here is a sample chart of the number of free, reduced price, and paid meals served, and the rates of school lunch and school breakfast participation in large school districts located in Maryland.

[Table 1a](#) provides details on the top ten school districts in this state.

Next month's focus: **Florida's panhandle**

*“Eat Smart.
Play Hard.”*



United States Department of Agriculture

Food and Nutrition Service

Child Nutrition Division

3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, VA 22302

Food Authority Survey

Examine the issues that many School Food Authorities say concern them today.

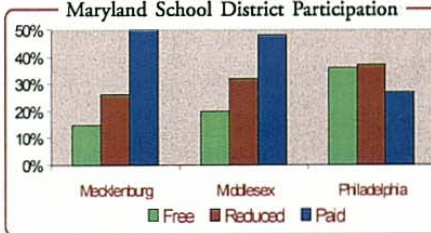
Administrative issues rated as "concerns" by School Food Authorities		
Issue	Responses	Rank
Issue 1	XXX	X
Issue 2	XX	XX
Issue 3	XXX	X
Issue 4	XXX	X
Issue 5	XXXX	XX

Appendix A provides definitions of each issue.

Demographic Data Now Available On-line

Now you can run comparative queries using the NSL/NSB Demographic Detailer. This database allows you to compare ten primary variables.

Compare



District	Free	Reduced	Paid
Mecklenburg	~15%	~25%	~50%
Middlesex	~20%	~30%	~45%
Philadelphia	~35%	~35%	~25%

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programs around the country will help local school districts identify and contact other programs to discuss why some programs are more successful than others.

Researchers could merge the aggregated file with individual records to examine correlations between broad trends in the NSLP/SBP at the local level and individual participant characteristics. In addition, data could be merged with Census data to examine trends in program participation based upon community demographics and income levels of school district residents.

Because data from local school districts can be identified by a specific geographic unit (e.g., counties), these data can be compared with data from other food assistance programs serving the same geographic areas. This type of comparison would allow program administrators and researchers to examine the extent to which programs are reaching those in need of services.