

IV. OVERVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

This section introduces the proposed methodology for the initiative to establish a web-based data collection framework. Specifically, it provides a description of the primary actors, activities, and implementation barriers.

Description of Actors

The implementation of the website as a data collection tool and data repository will be conducted by two primary actors: USDA and state government employees. The likely state government actors will be individuals within each State's Department of Education, although it is not clear whether these individuals will be directors of food and nutrition programs or individuals from other departments. Additional players may include district-level school authorities (for specific data collection requests).

USDA will be responsible for:

- Conducting an initial meeting to identify the required “core” database elements, target constituents, and data collection schedules, and hosting subsequent “steering committee” meetings during the first phase of the project;
- Developing contact lists for food and nutrition program directors within each state and selecting a representative nine states to include in the first round of data collection;
- Conducting an assessment of SFA-level data currently being collected by the States;
- Collecting a sample of archived data from States;
- Identifying and conducting a review of existing databases;
- Analyzing data elements, assessing availability, and defining the core data set;
- Exploring options for using automated uploads to retrieve data from states or existing databases;
- Designing the website, including defining data security and access;
- Building computer-assisted data entry programs;
- Building tools to query, sort, and export the data;
- Designing summary tables, reports, and articles to be posted to the Web;

- Conducting training and implementing data collection for the initial nine selected states;
- Obtaining OMB clearance to increase the number of participating states; and
- Preparing to add additional states.

State-level employees (i.e., directors of food and nutrition programs within State Departments of Education) will be responsible for:

- Participating in an interview to report data currently collected at the SFA level, their structures, and their format;
- Obtaining requested archived data and sending the data to USDA for review;
- Using the web-based computer assisted data entry programs to provide requested data for data elements not subject to automatic upload.

Additional actors who may be involved include:

- Individuals from the US Department of Education (to answer questions about publicly available databases); and
- District-level school authorities to answer questions about data currently being collected and possibly to respond to Web-initiated surveys.

Neither of these two actors' roles will be costed in this report due to the uncertainty surrounding their roles.

Overview of the Activities

The proposed initiative will be conducted in several phases, implemented over a period of at least two years. Several preliminary activities need to take place prior to initiating data collection requests and producing final databases and reports. A comprehensive task list is provided in *Section V*; however, we note the preliminary activities below because of their importance in defining the final scope of this initiative. These activities, along with the remaining steps that will be taken to implement this initiative, are discussed briefly in the paragraphs that follow:

- Conduct an initial meeting with FNS, ERS, the Education Information and Advisory Committee (EIAC), and the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA) to define minimum and desired database elements and research objectives (including whether periodic downloads from federally available data are desired);
- Develop contact lists of Directors of Food Service programs within State Departments of Education and conduct an inventory of the data currently

collected, their format (e.g., how are these data received from school districts: electronically or via hard copy); and

- Conduct a review of existing databases and their contents (such as the aforementioned CCD maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics) to determine whether any essential elements of the database can be pulled in from existing, available databases.

Conduct Initial and Subsequent Steering Committee Meetings. It will be important not to simply collect data because they are available but to set the proper context by identifying how collecting these data at the local program level will enhance program research efforts. Hence the importance of an initial meeting among the initiative's target constituents. As part of the initial evaluation of what data elements should be collected, it will be important to consider whether these data are valuable to program administrators or researchers in achieving national research goals. It must be remembered that some of the data collected by local programs may serve a limited purpose related to local program administration, and may not be useful or important in conducting research on national issues. These preliminary evaluations and discussions should help in limiting the overall size of the database to the most important data elements. We also recommend identifying a steering committee to provide input and guidance during the first phase of this initiative.

Conduct Inventory of State-level Data. To explore whether nutritional program data currently collected at the SFA level can be combined with school district demographic information to facilitate comparisons of program participation between districts of comparable size and demographics, it will be important to conduct an inventory to determine the nature of the data currently collected by states on their school districts' NSLP and SBP. Included in this assessment will be the development of criteria for creating an accessible national database, the limitations on the amount of data that will be made available to persons outside the federal government, and methods by which these data could be accessed. As it is not likely that all state or local programs will collect the same or similar data, this preliminary evaluation will also serve to identify the similarities and differences in the types of data collected and any variations in the data definitions across states. Consistent data definitions for client and agency data will need to be developed. Once the inventory is complete, data elements will be analyzed to determine the extent to which they are consistent and are collected and available in electronic format. From this information, profiles of data sets can be developed to begin the process of designing the database and computer-assisted data entry programs.

Once the above activities have been completed, the rest of the initiative can proceed with the design of the website, the development of computer-assisted data entry programs to collect the required data should the data not be readily accessible in electronic form from the states, and the population of the database through queries to individual states. As part of this initiative, a preliminary set of summary tables, reports, and articles will also be designed for posting to the web.

Potential Implementation Barriers

Although we feel that the advantages of participating far outweigh the disadvantages, there are potential barriers to implementing this system. For example, there may be states that are unwilling to participate, either because of resource constraints or an unwillingness to share information in this manner. There may be difficulty in defining common data elements such that correlations and analyses are valid. Finally, although unlikely, there may be regions where access to internet systems is either restricted or non-existent.