



# FAQs from the SFA Informational Webinar for the 2024–2025 National School Foods Study

## Study participation

**QUESTION:** Is it a requirement that SFAs or local educational agencies (LEAs) participate, or is participation on a voluntary basis?

**ANSWER:** Participation by selected State agencies, SFAs, and schools is required under Section 28 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act.

**QUESTION:** My SFA participated in a study like this one in 2019-2020. Is this the same study?

**ANSWER:** The 2024–2025 National School Foods Study combines three previous school nutrition-focused efforts—one of which is the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study II (SNMCS-II). SNMCS-II was in the field in 2019-2020 but was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2024–2025 National School Foods Study is a reboot of SNMCS-II with two other components added in—the School Food Purchase Study and a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Evaluation.

**QUESTION:** How are SFAs and school districts selected for the study?

**ANSWER:** An SFA's selection to the study is based on a scientifically selected, nationally representative sample of SFAs and schools across the country. Your SFA's participation in the study is important as it represents not only your SFA, but also SFAs like yours. Data collection activities will be limited to only what is necessary, and your SFA will only participate in a subset of the data collection activities. Your study recruiter can discuss what participation will look like for your district and answer any questions you might have.

Other school nutrition studies have similar research question, and therefore, the same SFAs might get selected for the same studies even though sampling is random. The study team is cognizant that your SFAs may be participating in multiple school nutrition studies and appreciates your support of this study.

**QUESTION:** Our district has a food service management company. Are they required to participate with the study?

**ANSWER:** If your district has a food service management company that houses the data needed for the study, the study team will ask for their participation. The study team recognizes that food service management companies are all different, and some may not be as willing to participate as others. The team will be asking for SFA's help in determining the best way to approach their participation. The study recruiters will discuss this with you during the initial call.



**QUESTION: Are all the schools selected to participate required to do so? What if there are unique circumstances that would make the school not a good fit for participation?**

**ANSWER:** Participation by selected schools is required under Section 28 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. If any of the schools selected to participate in the study have closed or have special circumstances or considerations, you will be able to discuss them with your study recruiter.

**QUESTION: Will you post the list of selected SFAs and schools?**

**ANSWER:** No, we will not be posting the list publicly.

**QUESTION: What if multiple buildings within a school are selected? Will these buildings all participate in the same part of the study?**

**ANSWER:** The study selects schools to participate in various data collection activities. If a school has multiple buildings, please discuss this with your study recruiter.

**QUESTION: What incentives is the study offering to participants?**

**ANSWER:** SFAs, schools, parents, and students will receive incentives for participating in various data collection activities. The amount varies by activity. Your study recruiter will discuss the incentives with you in more detail.

**QUESTION: How would an SFA go about volunteering to participate in this study?**

**ANSWER:** SFAs cannot volunteer since the study is using a scientifically selected, nationally representative sample of SFAs and schools across the country.

**QUESTION: Will you share a letter or other materials with our superintendent and principal to introduce the study? How about the board of education?**

**ANSWER:** Superintendents who have schools participating in school-level data collection were mailed the same introductory letter that the study team sent SFA directors. The study recruiters will confirm with the SFA directors during their initial call whether they should email another copy of the letter to superintendents. If the SFA director recommends that the recruiter reach out to the superintendent (or other district representative such as a board of education or research review board contact) directly via phone call or email, the recruiter will reach out accordingly. Once necessary parties have been informed at the district level, the study team will notify the principals of sampled schools of their selection to the study via email.

## **Scheduling and timeline**

**QUESTION: What is the general timeline for the study?**

**ANSWER:** In fall of 2024, SFAs will be contacted by their study recruiter. Once an SFA is officially recruited into the study, depending on which data collection activities the SFA is assigned to, the activities could start as early as the end of October.



If your SFA is selected for on-site data collection, the visits will be scheduled between January and May 2025. Your study recruiter will work with you to determine when the on-site activities should occur within your schools. Once determined, the study team will start reaching out to schools about 10 weeks before their on-site visit week.

Some SFAs will continue their participation in the study in fall 2025. Your study recruiter will ensure you understand the timeline for the data collection activities.

**QUESTION: When will we learn what portions of the study our SFA will be participating in?**

**ANSWER:** To reduce the burden on SFAs, not every SFA will be participating in every data collection activity. Every SFA will receive an introductory letter from the study by email and through the post office in early September. In September, study recruiters will start contacting each SFA. During this initial call, your recruiter will go over all the data collection activities in which your SFA will be involved in. They will also answer questions that you might have about the study activities for your SFA.

**QUESTION: Will you be coordinating the dates for site visits with SFAs to help avoid scheduling conflicts?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, the study team wants to be flexible with SFAs. Before reaching out to your SFA, the study team asked your State agency if there were any dates or events that we should consider when scheduling site visits. The study team has that information if your State agency responded, and most did. The study recruiter will also discuss scheduling the site visits during your initial call with them. If there are dates that are important to avoid, such as dates when your SFA has an audit or school is closed, your recruiter will make a note of this and work with you to schedule dates that work for you.

## **Meal cost data collection**

**QUESTION: Will the study look at indirect costs charged?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, the study will be looking at indirect costs. The study team will be building the estimates of meal cost through various interviews that they are conducting at the school food authority (SFA)- and school-levels. From those interviews, the study team will estimate food costs, labor costs, other direct costs, and indirect costs.

**QUESTION: Will meal accommodation costs be reviewed? There are allergies and modified diet requests, which are increasing food costs among some districts.**

**ANSWER:** The study will collect information about whether SFAs have formal written policies describing how to accommodate students with food allergies, other disabilities, or both. Comparing costs between SFAs with and without these policies could potentially be explored with the data.

**QUESTION: Will interviews in Puerto Rico be conducted in Spanish or English?**

**ANSWER:** For Puerto Rico, the surveys are available in Spanish and the assigned recruiters and data collectors are fluent in Spanish.



## Student and parent data collection

**QUESTION: What will data collection activities look like for students? Will they be age or grade appropriate in terms of understanding and language?**

**ANSWER:** The study materials do alter the language and approach for younger students. For students, data collection activities include a student interview and dietary recall. The study's data collection procedures differ for elementary school students compared to middle and high school students; this is to help younger students answer questions that may be more difficult for them at their age. For example, elementary school students are interviewed right after lunch about what they had to eat that day since waking up through lunch. Then, the study team will call the parent to assist their child with reporting what they ate for the remainder of the day. For middle school and high school students, the interview is a bit longer. They are also interviewed after lunch, but these students are asked to recall everything they ate the day before without their parent's help.

**QUESTION: If the study cannot recruit the desired number of students, what are the next steps? If the study does not hear back from selected students, what do they do?**

**ANSWER:** The study team will invite more students to participate in the study than needed to account for the fact that not all students will participate. We will also work with principals to identify a school liaison at each school to help the study with student recruitment. The liaison can be a counselor, teachers, office administrators, etc. The liaison will be the primary point of contact for the study team to plan and conduct on-site data collection with students, provide student rosters and facilitate the distribution of study materials to selected students and their parents. To thank them for their time, liaisons are eligible to receive a gift card as an incentive, pending district policies. Your study recruiter will discuss this role with you.

**QUESTION: Who are the school liaisons or how are they selected?**

**ANSWER:** We will also work with principals to identify a school liaison at each school to help the study with student recruitment. The school liaison can be a counselor, teachers, office administrators, etc.

**QUESTION: Will there be parent consent for student participation, and will it be active or passive?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, the study team does obtain parent consent. The study's default approach is to use the passive consent process, whereby consent forms are sent home, and parents sign and return the forms only if they wish to opt out of the study. If they do not return a signed form, we assume they give their consent to participate. However, if a district requires active consent, whereby parents complete and return consent forms to opt into the study, the study team will accommodate active consent procedures with the district.

**QUESTION: Will the study interview students from every grade?**

**ANSWER:** No, the study will select a sample of students to participate in the data collection and aim to complete data collection with up to 14 students in a given school. Students in grades 1 to 12 can be sampled.



**QUESTION: Can SFAs consider different ways to increase student responses, such as using time in a health class for study activities?**

**ANSWER:** One challenge to incorporating data collection activities into a specific class is that not every student from the class will have been selected to participate in the study. However, part of the study team's conversations with the school liaisons (who are selected to help coordinate this piece) will be thinking through what the right space is, time of day, location, etc. that will have fewest distractions or work best for a particular school. The study team welcomes ideas to increase student participation in the study.

**QUESTION: Will the interviews be conducted in only English?**

**ANSWER:** Student and parent interviews will be conducted in English or Spanish. For any students whose preferred language is something other than English or Spanish, the study team will ask the school liaison to arrange for an interpreter to aid in translation during the interview.

**QUESTION: How will the study team facilitate incentivizing parents to participate? It may be difficult to reach parents over the phone.**

**ANSWER:** The study team will consult with school liaisons to make sure parents are aware of the study. The team will obtain contact information for parents that the school has on file in hopes that it includes multiple ways of communicating with parents. The team will also work with the school liaisons and ask them to speak to students and parents directly since they will be familiar with them already.

**QUESTION: Who will be contacting parents and students regarding their participation?**

**ANSWER:** If schools in your SFA are participating in student-level data collection, the study team will send informational packets to households of sampled students. The study team will work with the school liaison or SFA director to gather contact information and discuss outreach to parents. Leading up to data collection, the study team may contact households to encourage participation and complete consent forms, and again to complete data collection activities (namely, to assist with dietary recall for sampled elementary school students and to complete the parent interview). The SFA director and school liaison are not required to contact households directly, but if doing so encourages parent participation, the study team welcomes this support. If allowed by schools and in alignment with procedures agreed upon with the school liaison, data collectors may contact parents while on-site to remind parents about the study.

**QUESTION: Do you have parent communication that we send prior?**

**ANSWER:** Yes, for sampled students, we will share informational packets to each selected household and includes: an invitation to the study, consent form, and a study brochure tailored to parents with answers to frequently asked questions. Materials also include a toll-free telephone number that parents can call to obtain further information. The study team will work with each schools' liaison to understand the best way to communicate with parents, either by directly mailing informational packets to households or by sending informational packets to the school liaison to distribute to students to take home.



## Respondent privacy and confidentiality

### QUESTION: What safeguards are in place to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality?

**ANSWER:** All information gathered from SFAs, schools, and households is for research purposes only. It will be kept private to the full extent allowed by law. When reporting findings, we will group responses with those of other study participants. Individual schools, parents, and students will not be identified outside of the study team. The data files provided to FNS will exclude the names and any individually identifiable information of persons that participate in the study and will exclude any school names. We will inform selected parents of the study and of our privacy practices. Any selected parent or student can choose not to participate in the study. Your study recruiter can further discuss the study's approach to protecting privacy and confidentiality.

## Other topics

### QUESTION: Is there a recording of the informational webinar for SFAs held on September 9, 2024, available to watch?

**ANSWER:** Yes, the recording of the webinar is available on the study website:

- Link to website: [2024-2025 National School Foods Study \(mathematica.org\)](https://mathematica.org/2024-2025-national-school-foods-study)
- Direct link to recording: [The 2024 2025 National School Foods Study – Informational Webinar for School Food Authorities \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

Webinar registrants were also emailed the link to the recording.

### QUESTION: Will each SFA have access to the study results once complete?

**ANSWER:** Yes, once the study is complete, the findings will be available on FNS's website. The findings will be presented at an aggregated level—across all SFAs, schools, and students. FNS is considering different options for study dissemination materials. If you have thoughts on how you would like to see the results or where you would like them advertised, please contact the FNS project officer, Ashley Chaifetz at [ashley.chaifetz@usda.gov](mailto:ashley.chaifetz@usda.gov).

### QUESTION: Who should I contact if I have more questions?

**ANSWER:** If you have additional questions, please contact the FNS project officer or email the study team:

- Ashley Chaifetz, Project officer, USDA Food and Nutrition Services: [ashley.chaifetz@usda.gov](mailto:ashley.chaifetz@usda.gov)
- Study team: [Schoolmeals@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:Schoolmeals@mathematica-mpr.com)