

**Appendix 7: THE INTRODUCTORY LETTER SENT TO RECRUITED SCHOOL**

Mr/Ms XXXXXX  
XXXXXXX  
XXXXXX  
XXXXX

April XX, 2009

Dear Mr/Ms XXXX

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the 2009/10 School Food Purchase Study that we are conducting for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In a few days one of our staff members will call you to review the information we will be asking for and the procedure for assembling it.

The overall purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth profile of food procurement by school systems participating in the National School Lunch Program. Your participation in the study will contribute greatly to its success.

Please review the introductory information below. It is designed to familiarize you with key elements of the study and the part you will play in it.

The attached information will provide you with basic background information about this study, it's purpose, objectives and what will be involved. Your specific role is described along with options for providing your data, and the process of receiving your administrative allowance to help you offset any costs you incur. We will be glad to answer any questions you may have when we call you, and we will provide a toll free number and e-mail address specifically for you to use at any time.

A summary of the final study results will be sent to you once it has been completed. Thanks again for your help. We look forward to working with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Young". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a horizontal line extending from the bottom of the name.

Nick Young, Project Director

## **Study background**

The school lunch and breakfast programs (NSLP & SBP) supplied roughly 6.7 billion meals in 2007. Food purchases of this magnitude have income and employment effects throughout the food system, beginning at the farm and extending throughout food processing and distribution. Not only do schools represent a large component of the nation's overall demand for food, but the USDA donated element of the NSLP provides supplementary support to America's farmers through USDA's purchase of commodities that are in temporary surplus.

School food programs are also important for the role they play in ensuring that children from low-income families have access to nutritious meals. Nearly 60 percent of all school lunches and over 80 percent of all school breakfasts are served free to children from low-income families.

It has been over a decade since the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted a national study of school food purchases for the school year 1996/1997. Much has changed over this period. Given these many changes, there is a need for updated information on what foods schools are buying, how much they are paying, and what buying practices they are following. It is for these purposes that the US Congress required the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to undertake this important study.<sup>1</sup>

## **Study objectives**

The School Food Purchase Study will develop an in-depth profile of the market basket of foods acquired and of the procurement practices followed by school systems participating in the NSLP and SBP. More specifically, the study will:

- Develop national estimates of the volume and dollar value of over 1,000 food items acquired (commercially and through USDA donations) by public school systems in School Year 2009/2010.
- Examine changes in the composition and value of foods acquired by schools since data were last collected in School Year 1996/97.
- Determine current school food purchase practices and the relationship of these practices to food costs and to school system characteristics.
- Examine how schools have changed their practices in buying foods over the past decade and the implications of these changes.
- Analyze the role now being played by a la carte foods.
- Analyze the nutritional profile of the mix of foods now being acquired.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 4307 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246), (H.R. 2419). This legislation directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to carry out a nationally representative survey of the foods purchased by school food authorities during the most recent school year for which data are available.

## **How results will be used**

The results of this study will make several important contributions to improved understanding of school food service and to the identification of actions that might be taken to further strengthen the program in the future. Among these contributions, results of the study will:

- Document the demand for food resulting from school food programs and the importance of these programs to the national agricultural economy as well as to individual commodities and producing regions.
- Document the progress achieved to date in purchasing more nutritious foods. Study results will also provide nationally-representative cost information that can be used to cost out different menu options.
- Identify food procurement practices that school districts use to achieve lower prices and to promote more cost-effective procurement.
- Assess the relative importance of USDA donated foods for school feeding programs and examine changes in the composition of donated foods over time.
- Identify changes in the extent to which foods acquired by schools are prepared or processed and the role of a la carte menu items.
- Provide commercial food processors and distributors with an up-to-date profile of the school food market and how school districts buy their food.

## **Your role in the study**

Your school district is one of a sample of 425 that has been selected to participate in this study. Through your participation, you will be making an important contribution to improved understanding of the operation of school feeding programs throughout the nation. The information you provide will be combined with that collected from other school districts taking part in the study and will become the basis for national estimates of food use by school feeding programs.

As a participant in the study you will be asked to assist us in the following three ways:

- I) Assemble and send to us for each of the three months of your participation in the study:
  - a. Records of ALL purchased foods and beverages received for your school feeding program.
  - b. Records of ALL USDA donated foods and those processed products manufactured using donated foods.

These records are to be submitted by the 15th of the month following the month to which they apply. (For example, data for the month of July - for those school districts participating during July, August and September - should be submitted by August 15.)

- 2) Review for accuracy a computer printed list that we will prepare summarizing your food purchase and USDA donation records for the three month period for which you provided invoices or purchase records. We will prepare this listing and send it to you approximately 45 days after the end of your three month period.

In reviewing this list we will ask you to:

- a. Scan the list for possible errors or omissions.
  - b. Identify any processed foods on the list that contain USDA donated foods as ingredients.
  - c. Identify those foods that are most prominently used in your a la carte offerings.
- 3) Complete a survey that asks general questions about your school feeding program and procurement practices. This survey will be mailed to you near the end of your three month data collection period. Based on our pretest of the survey, we estimate it will take about one and one-quarter hours to complete.

### **Schedule of participation**

The key dates relating to your participation in the study are outlined below.

Quarter	Food acquisition records for the month of:	Records to be submitted by:	Procurement practices survey submitted by:	Review of summary listing completed by:
I. Summer	July, 2009 August, 2009 September, 2009	August 15, 2009 September 15, 2009 October 15, 2009	October 15, 2009	November 30, 2009

### **Options for providing data**

Sending us your food purchase data is one of the biggest responsibilities you will have as you participate in this study. Our staff is dedicated to making this requirement as easy on you as possible. When we call you in the next few days, we will ask questions like:

- What is the best way for us to receive details of your purchases?
- How many vendors do you typically purchase from?
- Will your major vendors be able to provide a monthly summary of the items you purchase (with quantities, case size and prices)? If you need a sample letter to send to your vendor, we can supply one.
- Would it be easier for you to send us a printout of your purchases or a copy of your invoices, or would you prefer to tally some of your purchases yourself?

If you'd like to give some thought to this before we call - GREAT!

## **Administrative allowance**

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. We know that pulling together this much information requires effort on your part. We know, too, that your effort is not without cost (staff time, copying expenses, postage). To help defray the costs associated with your participation in the study USDA has authorized payment of an administrative allowance.

How is your administrative allowance calculated?

- Your check will be between \$100 to \$400 based on the number of reimbursable lunches served in October 2008 as reported to us by your State Child Nutrition Director. This money is yours to use for your program in any way that you wish.

When will you receive your administrative allowance?

- Your administrative allowance will be mailed to you after we have called to discuss this material. Please be prepared to tell us how to make out the check and the correct address to use. You may use these funds however you wish within your school system. They need not be applied directly to your food service program if you prefer.

## **Study hot line**

If at any time you have questions or concerns about this study or your participation please call any of the study team listed below.

We work on east coast time, so please leave us a message if we don't answer personally and we will return your call.

We can be reached at either of the two following numbers:

1-800-204-9718

Ann Krome

Or 1-866 461 4378

Nick Young, Extension 111

Thomas Earley, Extension 113

Salli Diakova, Extension 112

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Again, we thank you for agreeing to participate in this important USDA study. We will do everything in our power to make your participation easy and enjoyable.

We will be calling you in the next few days.