

Appendix D2. SFA Procurement Practices In-Depth Interview Guide

Study of SFA Procurement Practices

In-Depth Interview Guide

Interviewer Preparation

1. Review procurement model characteristics.
2. Review SFA sample characteristics including use of an FSMC and/or cooperative purchasing arrangement, size, percent free/reduced-price lunches, and geographic region.
3. Review web survey responses, including Child Nutrition programs operated, participation in Farm to School initiatives or other local procurement efforts, and individuals involved in the procurement process.
4. Tailor protocol to reflect procurement model and other SFA characteristics, and to incorporate web survey responses.

Introduction

Thank you for participating in the “Study of School Food Authority (SFA) Procurement Practices,” which we are conducting on behalf of the Food and Nutrition Service (referred to as FNS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (referred to as USDA). As you may recall, FNS has commissioned this study to describe and assess SFA practices related to procuring goods (specifically food) and services for five Child Nutrition programs: The National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program. The study will also examine how SFAs make decisions that lead to these procurement practices. Study findings will describe similarities and differences in how SFAs procure goods (specifically food) and services and help USDA-FNS understand key issues and experiences of SFAs.

This in-depth interview will last approximately 90 minutes and builds on the responses your SFA provided in the web-based survey. For all questions, please answer based on procurement in your SFA during the 2017-2018 school year. Please answer as openly and honestly as possible. Individual names will not be used in any reports. Your participation will not affect your employment or your SFA’s participation in any Child Nutrition programs.

If respondent(s) previously agreed to a recording:

When we scheduled our interview, you indicated that I have your permission to make an audio recording of the interview to fill in gaps in our notes. The recording will be kept in a secure location and destroyed after the study is over. Can you confirm that I have your permission to record the interview?

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0584-XXXX. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 90 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information.

If respondent(s) previously indicated that they do not want to be recorded:

When our interview was scheduled, you indicated that you do not want this interview to be recorded. Is that correct? [If respondent confirms that they do not want to be recorded]: That's fine. My colleague [name] is here with me to take notes. [Note taker says hello and then mutes their phone]

If respondent(s) previously agreed to a recording but now decline to be recorded:

If you don't want the interview to be recorded that's fine. We will have to reschedule so that we can add a note taker. What are a few times within the next week or so that would work for you to do the interview? [Open outlook calendar and re-schedule interview, and include a note taker.] I am sending out an invitation for the interview on [date, time]. A note taker will join us on the call. Thanks.

I. Procurement Structure

1. To start, please describe the overall process for procurement in your SFA.

If SFA uses an FSMC or cooperative purchasing arrangement [survey questions II.1 and II.11]:

2. According to the survey, you use a(n) **[FSMC/cooperative purchasing arrangement]**. Is that correct?
3. Do you use the **[FSMC/cooperative purchasing arrangement]** in combination with independent procurement?
4. Please describe how the **[FSMC/cooperative purchasing arrangement]** functions. *[Probe: What aspect(s) of procurement is/are handled by your FSMC?]*

If SFA does not use an FSMC or cooperative purchasing arrangement:

5. Why does your SFA choose not to use a(n) **[FSMC/cooperative purchasing arrangement]**? *[Probe: are there barriers preventing you from using one? If you do not use a cooperative purchasing arrangement, is it because there are none available in your area?]*

All respondents:

6. Who is involved in the procurement process in your SFA? What is each person's job title?
7. What aspects of procurement is each person responsible for? Who is responsible for making decisions at each stage of the procurement process, including assessing products needed, drafting specifications, advertising solicitations, awarding contracts, managing contracts, and recordkeeping?
8. What is the staffing structure in your SFA and who provides oversight for each staff member involved in the procurement process?
9. What is the process for making procurement-related decisions? *[Interviewer: Probe based on responses to **survey questions IV.1-IV.4**]*
10. What data or other information does your SFA use when making procurement decisions? *[Probe: For example, does your SFA use meal participation, point-of-sale, or other types of data to help develop big-picture priorities or guiding principles around procurement?]*

II. Procurement Approach

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about how your SFA handles different aspects of procurement.

- 1.** Based on your survey responses, I see that you participate in the **[list programs based on survey question I.1]**. Is that correct? I see that you procure products for these programs **[together/separately; based on survey question II.10]**. Is that correct?
2. Why does your SFA choose to procure products for programs **[together/separately]**?

3. Please describe how you procure goods or services together. *[Probe: Did you make the decision to procure goods (specifically food) or services together in this way or was the decision made by someone in this role before you?]*
4. Based on the survey, I see that your SFA **[does/does not]** specifically purchase local products **[based on survey question II.19]**. Is that correct?
5. How does purchasing local products fit in with your SFA's overall procurement goals?
6. Can you describe any barriers to purchasing local products?

If SFA does not purchase local products:

7. Please provide any reasons why your SFA doesn't specifically purchase local products.
8. Does your SFA have any interest in learning how or starting to purchase local products?

All respondents:

9. According to the Buy American provision, domestic goods (specifically food) or agricultural commodities and products should be purchased when possible. Does your SFA document exceptions to the Buy American provision, and if yes, how? *[Probe: How would your SFA document an instance where non-domestic foods needed to be purchased? For SFAs that use FSMC(s): How do you ensure that the FSMC(s) you work with document these exceptions? Who is responsible for this?]*
10. Does this differ between contract types? If so, how?
11. What internal recordkeeping systems does your SFA use to make procurement decisions? *[Probe: Examples of recordkeeping systems include daily participation numbers or competitive food sales. How do you keep records for small purchases or micro-purchases? For SFAs that use FSMC(s): How do you work with your FSMC(s) on recordkeeping? What types of activities or systems is each party responsible for?]*
12. Does this differ between contract types? If so, how?
13. How does your SFA identify and track allowable program costs?

If SFA uses an FSMC:

14. Is there a difference in how your SFA tracks allowable program costs between FSMC and independent vendor contracts?

All respondents:

15. What is the process for correcting an accounting error, when one is identified? *[Probe based on answers to survey question IV.8.]*
16. Does this differ between contract types? If so, how?

III. Solicitation Process

This section of the interview is about your choice of procurement solicitation methods and the process for developing solicitation documents.

1. Based on your survey responses, I understand that you use the following procurement solicitation methods **[list methods from survey question I.2]**. Is that correct?

Interviewer: Cycle through questions 2-4 for each solicitation method.

2. What process does your SFA use to create **[solicitation type]**?
3. How are regulations taken into consideration as your SFA develops **[solicitation type]**? *[Probe: How are federal regulations taken into consideration? How are State and local regulations taken into consideration?]*
4. Are templates available for your use? If not, would you like them to be? Do you use a template when creating **[solicitation type]**? If so, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using a template?
5. Does your SFA analyze prices or costs before publishing a **[solicitation type]**? Why or why not?
6. How is this analysis conducted?
7. Based on your survey responses, I see that your SFA specifies the following types of preferences for your contracts **[list preferences indicated in survey question I.8]**. Is this correct?
8. Can you describe the process your SFA uses to determine what kinds of preferences to include for its food contracts? *[Probe: Does this process change based on the Child Nutrition Program, like SFSP versus NSLP?]*
9. Under what circumstances does your SFA indicate these preferences for your contracts? When don't you use them? *[Probe: Is this decision related to the type of contract you are using or to the type of goods (specifically food) or services you are looking to purchase? Why do you specify preferences in these instances?]*

If web survey indicated that respondent's SFA specifies geographic preference [survey questions I.8 and III.8]:

10. Your survey response indicates that your SFA specifies geographic preference for your contracts. How is this being done?

IV. Contract Types

Now I'm going to ask you about the different types of contracts your SFA uses and how they are created.

1. Based on your survey responses, it looks like you use **[list contract types from survey question I.4]**. Is that correct?

Interviewer: Cycle through questions 2-4 for each contract type.

2. What are the benefits of using a **[contract type]**?
3. What are the challenges associated with **[contract type]**?
4. What resources does your SFA use when writing **[contract type]**? *[Probe: Does your SFA use a template for (contract type)? Where is the resource or template from or how was it developed? Is it from a local, State, or federal source?]*

Interviewer: List contract types SFA reported not using, based on web survey. Ask Q5 for each contract type not used, excluding contract types prohibited by the State.

5. Why does your SFA choose *not* to use **[contract type, based on survey question I.4]**? *[Probe: What challenges are associated with (contract type not used)? Do you not use this type of contract because it is prohibited by the State?]*
6. Based on your survey responses, I see that you **[use/do not use]** forward contracts **[based on survey question I.5]**. Is that correct?

If respondent uses forward contracts:

7. Under what circumstances does your SFA use a forward contract? *[Probe: Why does your SFA use a forward contract in this/these situation(s)? Are forward contracts used for particular items? If so, what items?]*

All respondents:

8. How does your SFA monitor contractor performance after a contract has been awarded? *[Probe: How is performance monitored for independent contracts and FSMC contracts? What are the differences in how they are monitored?]*

V. Working with FSMCs

The next section in this interview is about working with Food Service Management Companies, or FSMCs.

1. Why did you decide to procure through an FSMC? When your SFA began contracting with the FSMC(s), to what degree was the FSMC involved in the process? *[Probe: Who facilitates the process for each contract? Do facilitator roles vary by contract?]*

2. What is the process for establishing a contract with the FSMC(s)? *[Probe: What elements of the process vary across contracts? What elements are the same? What about the process works well? What could be improved?]*
3. If your SFA also does independent in-house procurement, how does the process for establishing contracts differ when working with the FSMC(s) versus independent procurement?
4. How do you ensure the FSMC credits the nonprofit food service account for the value of the USDA Foods received?

For SFAs that use cost reimbursable contracts with one or more FSMCs

5. How do you ensure the FSMC credits the nonprofit food service account for the value of discounts, rebates, and credits for commercially purchased foods purchased for use in your food service operation?
6. In general, what are the benefits of working with the FSMC(s)?
7. How does your SFA measure these benefits? *[Probe: Does your SFA use observation as a measurement tool? If so, how?]*
8. Thinking back to when you first started working with the FSMC(s), did the benefits your SFA initially hoped for in contracting with them come to fruition? If so, please describe how you have observed these benefits in practice.
9. What are the challenges of working with the FSMC(s)?
10. Are there things your SFA would like to change about how the FSMC(s) operate?
11. How would you describe your SFA's overall level of satisfaction with the FSMC(s)?
12. What is the process for improving FSMC performance, if necessary?

VI. Cooperative Purchasing

The next section in this interview is about cooperative purchasing arrangements.

Interviewer: If the SFA participates in multiple organizations, cycle through the questions in this section for each organization.

1. What type of group purchasing entity/entities does your SFA participate in?
2. How does this group purchasing entity work? *[Probe: Who are the partners in the group purchasing entity? What role does each partner play? Does your group comprise solely SFAs (cooperative), an agent for an SFA or cooperative, or is it a group with non-SFA members (third-party entities)? How many SFAs are in the group? Is the group local, regional, or national?]*

3. How is the procurement process conducted for the group purchasing entity? *[Probe: What role does your SFA play? What role do other SFAs play? Who is responsible for things such as communicating with vendors, scheduling deliveries, and making payments?]*
4. What is the fee structure associated with the group purchasing entity? *[Probe: was there a membership fee required for joining the organization?]*
5. Why did your SFA decide to participate in this group purchasing entity? **If respondent was not involved in the initial decision, ask:** Why did your SFA decide to continue participating in the group purchasing entity this school year?
6. Did your SFA seek out the arrangement or was your SFA approached by another party, such as another SFA or a third-party entity representative? *[Probe: Who approached you? Can you describe this initial contact?]*
7. When you joined the group purchasing entity, what benefits and challenges did your SFA expect?
8. Do the benefits and challenges you have experienced match those you initially expected?
9. Have there been any unexpected challenges or benefits?
10. Are there any benefits from this group purchasing entity that your SFA is measuring? *[Probe: Have there been any measurable financial benefits? How are you measuring these benefits?]*

VII. SFA Training and Resources

Next, I have a few questions for you about procurement-related training and technical assistance needs in your SFA and what resources are available to staff.

1. Based on the web survey, the following resources and training opportunities are available from your State, FNS, or local education agency **[list resources and training from questions V.2, V.6, and V.8]**. Is this correct?
2. What technical assistance is available from the State Agency? *[Probe: By technical assistance, we are referring to targeted support around different aspects of procurement or a question you may have.]*
3. What training or technical assistance needs are not being met through State opportunities?
4. Are there any resources your SFA does not have that would be helpful? *[Probe: Such as documents describing best practices, access to staff with expertise on certain topics?]*
5. What could be done to improve resources and trainings from the State Agency?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about SFA resources and training opportunities.

6. What resources does your SFA offer to help build in-house capacity and expertise around procurement?
7. What training opportunities does your SFA offer to help build in-house capacity and expertise around procurement?

8. Are there any templates or other resources your SFA uses, from any source, that you think are particularly effective for helping manage the procurement process?

VIII. SFA Challenges and Best Practices

The last part of this interview is about procurement challenges and best practices. To begin, I will ask you about challenges your SFA encounters with federal, State, and local procurement standards.

Interviewer: For questions 1 and 2, solicit answers that address standards and supporting guidance at the federal, State, and local levels. Probe as necessary to identify the particular federal, State, and/or local standards that are creating challenges for the SFA.

1. What challenges, if any, does your SFA encounter in interpreting procurement standards?
2. Does your experience in interpreting procurement standards vary according to federal, State, and local standards? *[Probe: Are there standards or guidance that are hard to understand or you believe aren't applicable to your SFA? Why? Is supporting guidance available to help you implement the standards? What is the source? Is it helpful?]*
3. What challenges does your SFA experience when applying procurement standards to your procurement process?
4. Do the challenges you experience in applying procurement standards vary according to federal, State, and local standards? *[Probe: What standards or guidance are difficult for your SFA to put into practice or comply with? Why? Is supporting guidance available to help you implement the standards? What is the source? Is it helpful?]*

If respondent's SFA procures goods and services together:

5. Does consolidating procurement across Child Nutrition Programs affect your ability to comply with procurement regulations? How? *[Probe: does it improve your ability to comply with regulations? Does it make it more difficult?]*

All respondents:

6. What aspects of the procurement process are easy for your SFA? What makes these processes easy?
7. What aspects of the procurement process are especially complex or burdensome for your SFA? Why are these processes complex or burdensome?
8. Do these complexities affect your SFA's ability to procure local foods? How?
9. Do these complexities affect your SFA's ability to try a different procurement arrangement? How? *[Probe: For example, group purchasing or contracting with an FSMC.]*
10. How could these complexities be streamlined or simplified?

The final questions in this interview are about best practices.

Interviewer: For each topic where the SFA indicated having best practices in the web survey [question V.9], ask respondent to describe the best practice. For all topics, ask whether the respondent would like to have best practices, or additional best practices.

Topic list:

- Templates or standard contract language for contracts with FSMCs
- Templates or standard contract language for contracts with processors (including, but not limited to, USDA Foods processors)
- Templates or standard contract language for contracts with broadline distributors
- Including the Buy American provision in contract solicitations
- Including the Buy American provision in contracts
- Maximum durations in procurement contracts
- Publicly announcing/advertising IFBs
- Publicly announcing/advertising RFPs
- Direct solicitation from contractors for the IFBs
- Direct solicitation from contractors for RFPs
- Small purchase procedures
- Product specifications
- Local bonding requirements (federal bonding requirements apply to construction and SFSP contracts only)
- Procurement of local products
- Managing procurement process timeframes
- Other

11. Please describe your SFA's best practice around **[topic]**.

12. Does your SFA desire **[best practices/additional best practices]** on this topic?

Thank you very much for your time in answering these questions. On behalf of the Study Team, we appreciate your participation in this interview and helping us better understand procurement for Child Nutrition programs. As we review your responses, we may reach out to you with short follow-up questions to make sure we have an accurate understanding of how your SFA conducts procurement. Thank you again, and have a great day.