

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR STATES, SFAs, AND SCHOOLS

- 1. What is the purpose of the study?**
- 2. When is this study taking place?**
- 3. Who is sponsoring this study?**
- 4. Who is conducting this study?**
- 5. Who will participate in this study?**
- 6. What will be the role of the participants in the study?**
- 7. Why should our State agency, SFAs, and schools participate?**
- 8. Will the information we provide be secure and private?**
- 9. Will the findings be made public?**
- 10. If I have more questions, whom do I contact for more information?**

1. What is the purpose of the APEC IV study?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts the Access, Participation, Eligibility and Certification Study (APEC) every five years to examine payments in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). APEC IV is the fourth version of the study. The data collected will be used to:

- o Generate an updated national estimate of the amount of improper payments (over and under payments made by the federal government) in the NSLP and SBP;
- o Explore the student household, school, and SFA characteristics that may contribute to or mitigate errors in meal claims and payments; and
- o Understand more about various data collection methods (e.g., comparing survey data collected in person versus over the phone).

The findings will help FNS provide guidance to school districts and schools on how to enhance program administration and target benefits effectively as well as help Congress make informed decisions about future improvements to the NSLP and SBP.

2. When is the study taking place?

Data collection will occur in SY 2023-2024, with some preliminary activities taking place prior to the start of the school year.

3. Who is sponsoring this study?

The APEC IV study is sponsored by USDA FNS.

4. Who is conducting this study?

USDA FNS contracted with Westat, an independent research organization, to conduct APEC IV. Westat is among the nation's leading research organizations, with over 50 years of experience conducting research for government agencies. Westat's work is behind many of the federal government statistics you hear in the news. For more information about Westat, go to www.westat.com.

5. Who participates in this study?

All participants are randomly selected. They include State Child Nutrition agencies in <NUMBER> States, over <NUMBER> school food authorities (SFAs), <NUMBER> schools and over <NUMBER> households.

6. What is the role of the participants in the study?

State Child Nutrition Agencies

- States agencies are asked to assist in notifying their SFAs about the study and encourage their participation.
- State agencies are asked to provide the electronic meal claim data submitted to USDA for a specified month in SY 2023-2024.

SFAs and schools

- SFAs are asked to provide electronic data files with information about students who applied for free or reduced priced meals or were directly certified for free meals in SY 2022-23 and SY 2023-24.
- SFAs and schools are asked to provide the household applications or documentation of direct certification for a list of randomly selected students. Additionally, they are asked to provide administrative data on the eligibility status of the selected students for free, reduced price, or paid school meals.
- SFAs are also asked to provide meal claims data for a specified month during SY 2023-2024.
- The study team visits schools to conduct observations of students' meals. The data collectors observe the items students take and whether the cashier marks the meal as reimbursable. No personally identifying information about either students or school staff is collected. There are no classroom visits (other than to observe meals served in classrooms), teacher interviews, or student assessments/interviews.
- In preparation for the school visits, relevant SFA and school staff are asked to participate in a pre-visit telephone interview to discuss the purpose of the visit, data security and confidentiality measures, and scheduling.
- SFA directors are asked to complete a 30-minute web survey about the SFA's policies, procedures (e.g., training), and characteristics.
- If an SFA declines to participate, none of its schools will be asked to participate. If an SFA agrees to participate, its schools can still decline to participate.

Parents/Guardians (Households)

- Parents/guardians of selected students are asked to participate in a virtual survey (via Zoom) about their experiences with the school meal

programs. The survey is expected to take between 30-45 minutes to complete. Note that the household survey component of APEC IV is called the National School Meals Study (NSMS).

- Respondents receive \$40 for completing the survey and an additional \$20 for providing income documentation (exact amounts pending Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval).
- A small number of the households that participate in the survey will be asked to complete the same survey a second time in person and will receive up to an additional \$60 for completing it. The goal of the second survey is to understand whether households provide the same or different information virtually as they do in person. The information will help us determine how best to conduct future household surveys.

7. Why should our State agency, SFAs, and schools participate?

Participation of selected SFAs and schools is required under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act as amended through Public Law 111-296, enacted December 13, 2010. FNS relies upon the APEC study series to meet federal requirements related to improper payments.

Individual staff, however, may decline to participate. That said, SFA and school staff are "the voice" of districts and schools across the country, and their participation is critical to the study's success. This study will help Congress make informed decisions when they consider changes to the school breakfast and lunch programs.

The study will not affect meal reimbursements received by participating SFAs and schools or school meal program benefits received by students or households. This is a research study and is not an audit or monitoring visit.

8. Will the information we provide be secure and private?

All information gathered is for research purposes only and is kept private. Additionally, all responses will be grouped with those of other participants, and no individual schools, SFAS, or students will be identified in public documents or data files.

We assign unique IDs to link data between States, SFAs, and schools, and these links will be provided to FNS in a restricted-use data file (i.e., not for public use). Finally, all public data from this project will go through disclosure analysis, wherein information is further aggregated or masked to ensure that individual entities will not be identifiable.

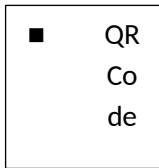
9. Will the findings be made public?

A final report on the research findings will be produced in 2026. The report will not name individual schools, SFAs, or students; all findings will be reported as the combined results from across the country or in a State.

10. If I have more questions, who do I contact for more information?

For more information about the study, contact the APEC IV Study Team at <STUDY TOLL FREE NUMBER> or email us at <STUDY EMAIL>. We are available Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm Eastern Time.

Please also visit the study website at <URL> for more information.



- This information is being collected to provide the Food and Nutrition Service with key information on the annual error rates and improper payments for the school meal programs. This is a voluntary collection and FNS will use the information to examine school meal error rates and inform future APEC studies. This collection requests personally identifiable information under the Privacy Act of 1974. 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 0584-0530. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 0.0835 hours (5 minutes) per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and