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School Meals in Transition

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What Is the Issue?

School foodservice programs face ongoing tradeoffs between meal cost, student participation, and nutrition quality. Changes mandated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 strengthened nutritional standards for meals and competitive foods and set minimum levels for paid meal revenues, while new options allow more schools to offer free meals to all students at reduced administrative burden. Understanding how the changes have affected school food service programs will help policymakers develop and target assistance to food service programs facing greater challenges adjusting to the changes.

What Did the Study Find?

Recent studies show that many school districts have adjusted to new standards for school lunches; however, maintaining paid meal participation remains challenging for some districts, particularly smaller, more rural, and wealthier districts.

- In a national study of elementary school principals and foodservice managers, the majority of respondents agreed (63 percent) or strongly agreed (7 percent) that “Students generally seem to like the new school lunch,” a finding supported by several smaller studies.
- Still the participation rate for paid school lunches declined from FY 2008 through FY 2014, with steeper declines during FY 2012-2014. While the decline over FY 2012-2014 appears to be timed with the implementation of new requirements for foods and nutrients in school meals, price increases for paid meals that began in 2011 in response to new rules for paid lunch revenues as well as the slow recovery from the Great Recession could also have contributed.
- Smaller, more rural, and wealthier districts were more likely to report challenges in adjusting to the new meal standards. Smaller and more rural districts (but not wealthier districts) also reported higher meal price increases after implementation of new rules for paid lunch revenues, which could discourage paid meal participation for some families in those areas.

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While not fully understood, the overall decline in paid meal participation rates since 2008 highlights the challenge of serving healthier meals across a diverse landscape of school meal programs.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The study draws on a review of recent national and smaller studies of how changes in school lunch standards affected meal participation and plate waste. We examined national and State trends in participation rates for free, reduced-price, and paid lunches using USDA's National Data Bank for meal counts and State reports for total student enrollment and certifications for free and reduced-price meals. We used data from the Special Nutrition Program Operation Study Year 1 (SNOPS-I) to estimate the percent changes in lunch prices after the first year of the Paid Lunch Equity provision.