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# Procuring Good Food at School: From Contracts to Lunch Trays

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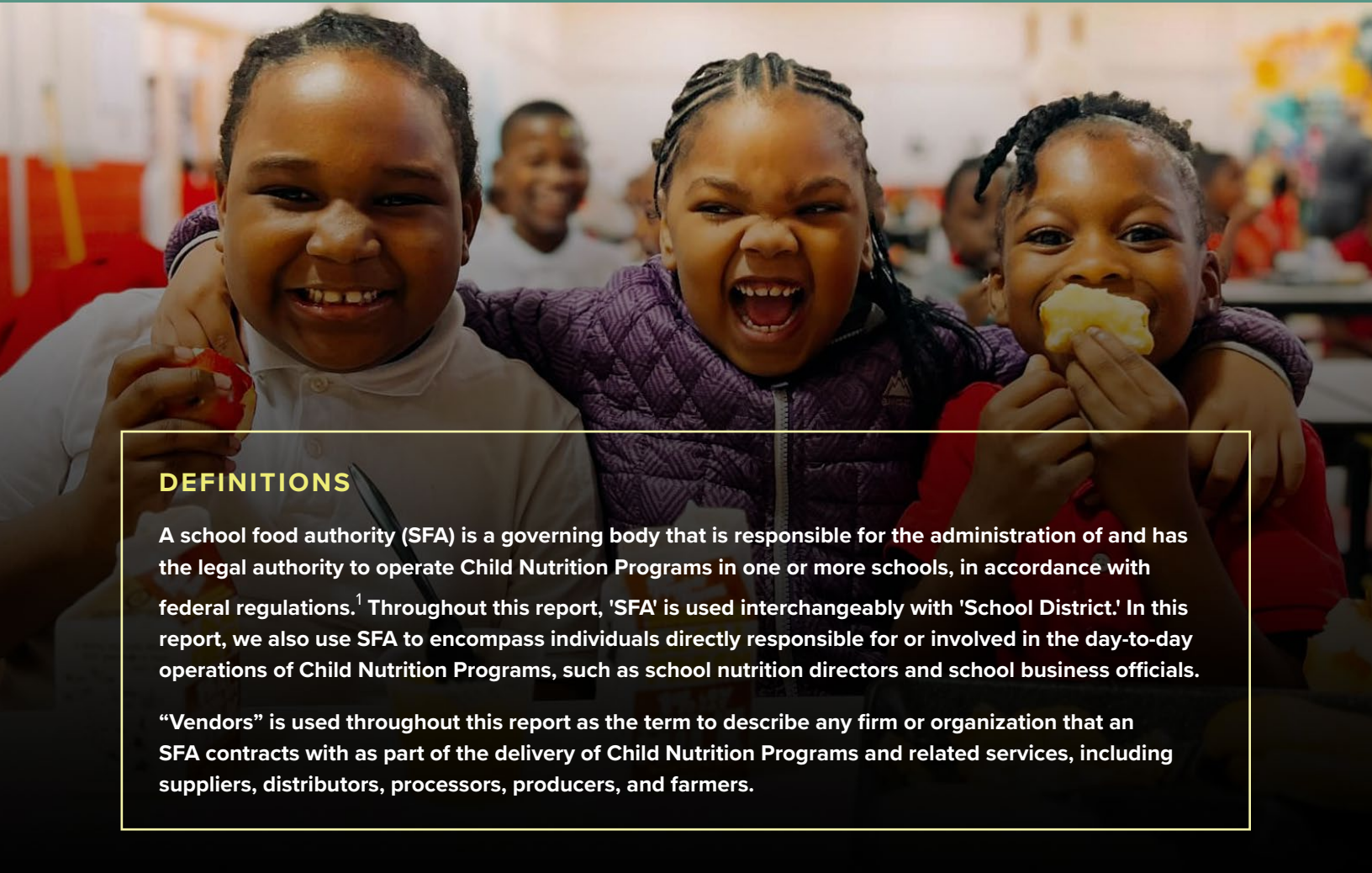
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## DEFINITIONS

A school food authority (SFA) is a governing body that is responsible for the administration of and has the legal authority to operate Child Nutrition Programs in one or more schools, in accordance with federal regulations.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, 'SFA' is used interchangeably with 'School District.' In this report, we also use SFA to encompass individuals directly responsible for or involved in the day-to-day operations of Child Nutrition Programs, such as school nutrition directors and school business officials.

“Vendors” is used throughout this report as the term to describe any firm or organization that an SFA contracts with as part of the delivery of Child Nutrition Programs and related services, including suppliers, distributors, processors, producers, and farmers.

## I. Introduction & Study Background

School food authorities (SFAs) play a critical role in feeding children across the United States: They are responsible for the procurement of food, supplies, equipment, and related services associated with the provision of federally funded Child Nutrition Programs. Each month, SFAs provide lunch to around 30 million students, serving 4.8 billion meals in fiscal year 2024.<sup>2</sup> To accomplish this task, school nutrition directors must comply with federal regulations and work closely with their school business officials to follow state and local procurement rules. Yet, as SFAs administer and execute these programs, they face significant barriers. For instance, a business manager from a rural school district shared that burdensome requirements and regulations “make it hard to do a great job, to provide good tasting and quality food to our students when so much time is spent on regulatory-type tasks.”

Additionally, capacity challenges impair school nutrition staff’s ability to stay compliant and serve meals to students. One nutrition director from an urban school said, “[Because] we do not have a person dedicated for [food procurement] and we are so busy with all of the details associated with updating our procurement and managing this, we have little time to support the day-to-day work in the kitchens, which means our service to students is compromised.” There are systemic and market forces at play that make school food service difficult and stressful. Increased food and labor costs, staff shortages, and ongoing supply chain disruptions are just a few of the challenges that have created financial instability and made procurement a highly burdensome and complex task for school nutrition staff across the United States.

In 2023 and 2024, the Urban School Food Alliance (USFA) held brainstorming sessions and focus groups comprised of hundreds of SFAs, state agencies, and food industry representatives to identify, revise, and produce lists of common school food procurement challenges and training topics that could help build the capacity of SFAs to address these barriers. These findings put the gears in motion for USFA to explore whether a national sample of SFAs would have similar or different procurement challenges and training needs.

To further understand these challenges, USFA sought research support from the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, which issued a survey in January 2025, and Partners for Public Good,<sup>3</sup> which analyzed survey results and produced this report. This survey, targeted at school business officials and school nutrition directors, aimed to identify the top school food procurement challenges that SFAs face and better understand their procurement training needs. Researchers focused on training needs specifically because stakeholders named a lack of procurement training as a top challenge in USFA's earlier research. In this context, training can communicate the most up-to-date rules and regulations; demystify the procurement process; and help Child Nutrition Program staff develop key professional skills.

Through the survey, the study team sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the top food procurement challenges that SFAs face?
- How are procurement challenges impacting school nutrition program operations?
- How do these challenges affect the sourcing and delivery of healthy, high-quality foods?
- How are the challenges impacting the student population at-large?
- What training do SFAs need to address procurement challenges?
- What training methods do SFAs prefer?
- Are there differences in procurement challenges or training needs across school district size, urbanicity, or respondent role?

This survey is one element of the investigative phase of the cooperative agreement between USFA and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), entitled [Procurement Practices in School Meals: Making Real Change Work for Healthier Meals](#). The cooperative agreement focuses on redesigning the school food procurement process and promoting new school food business models. The survey findings will guide development of procurement training and instructional resources and serve as a foundation for improving processes and testing innovative approaches to address procurement challenges.



## II. Survey Methodology

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### → Survey Outreach

The survey's target audience was those administering federal Child Nutrition Programs locally, including school nutrition directors and school business officials, who could provide insight into food procurement challenges and procurement training needs. To reach as many of the 18,451 SFAs in the United States and its territories as possible, the study team contacted all the state agencies that oversee federal nutrition programs for each of the U.S. states and territories.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Texas Department of Agriculture oversees federal nutrition programs in that state, while in New York the programs are under the State Education Department.

The study team asked state agency directors from all US states and territories to share the survey with SFAs in their state, from a contact list of state agency leads previously created by USFA. In addition, the study team emailed 44 active state affiliates of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) and asked them to forward the survey link to their members. The study team provided both groups with language that explained who was administering the survey, its purpose, and respondent eligibility to promote the survey through various communication channels (e.g., email, newsletters). All communications were approved and cleared for distribution by USDA Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS); see Pre-Survey Email to State Agencies in [Appendix A](#). Separately, USFA sent survey emails directly to members of their cooperative agreement's State Agency Subcommittee, and also shared the survey with their [Advisory Procurement Work Group](#) during their in-person annual gathering in February 2025.

The survey outreach and dissemination plan also included reminders throughout the survey's four-week duration. The study team sent reminders to any state agency contact who did not confirm their plan to advertise the survey. These reminders included a first reminder one week after initial outreach, a second reminder two weeks after the first, and a third reminder one week before the survey closed. Thirty-five state agencies responded favorably to the initial email request and subsequent reminders, with 33 opting to share the survey on their own. Two state agencies shared lists of SFAs, and the study team sent the survey directly to the contacts on those lists.

### → Survey Design

The study team and USFA collaborated to design the survey questions. Some survey questions were developed from themes that emerged from USFA's focus groups, brainstorming sessions, and input from their State Agency Subcommittee and the Advisory Procurement Workgroup, which includes a diverse cross-section of members from the school food procurement supply chain. The survey was reviewed and approved for distribution by USDA FNS (OMB Control Number 0584-0611). The survey was open from

January 23 to February 26, 2025.

Qualtrics hosted the survey, which was completely anonymous and voluntary. The survey contained a mix of 24 ranking, 5-point Likert scale, free-response, single-select, and multi-select questions. All questions were optional. The survey consisted of three sections and took roughly 10 minutes to complete; see [Appendix B](#) for the full list of survey questions:

1. Problem Diagnosis – Four questions on the top procurement challenges, ranking commonly known challenges, and explaining how these challenges impact their work.
2. Training Needs – 12 questions on priority training topics, training formats, length of training, and training delivery source.
3. Demographics – Eight questions on location of employment, urbanicity, school district size, and years of child nutrition experience.

At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to enter a prize drawing. The prize was a trip to a USFA-sponsored school nutrition training at the Culinary Institute of America, funded through an outside USFA grant. The winner of the prize was chosen at random after the survey closed and contacted via email to confirm their prize acceptance.



### → Evaluation of Results

The initial survey goal was 350 responses from across the seven USDA FNS regions, averaging 50 responses per FNS region. At the time the survey closed, a total of 2,653 unique individuals had opened the survey link and landed on the welcome page, surpassing initial response estimates. However, this number included many blank and incomplete responses. After verifying eligibility based on location and excluding empty responses, the final count of survey responses was 1,606.<sup>5</sup> Given that multiple people from one SFA could answer the survey (e.g., a school business official and a school nutrition director from the same district), the final response number is not a count of distinct SFAs.

To test for statistical significance of differences in answers between subgroups, the study team used the chi-square test.<sup>6</sup> In addition, text-based responses were individually reviewed and assigned categories for easy grouping and analysis of hundreds of responses. The number of categories depended on the specific free-response question. For example, there were a total of 40 categories assigned to qualitative data for the question on top procurement challenges, while there were only six categories created from qualitative data about other training providers. For some text-based questions, the contents of the answers were multi-faceted, so more than one qualitative tag

was assigned to a response. For more detail on each of the text-based responses, see [Appendix C](#).

### → Survey Population

While respondents represented all seven FNS regions, not all US states are represented because some state agencies did not share the survey with SFAs in their state. The Midwest and Western regions each made up almost 25% of respondents, while the Mountain Plains and Northeast had the least number of respondents with a combined 9% of respondents. The states with the highest number of responses were

Table 1. Survey Participation by Region and State

		COUNT	PERCENT
<b>REGION</b>	<b>MID-ATLANTIC</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>14.8%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	District of Columbia	1	0.1%
	Maryland	3	0.2%
	New Jersey	8	0.6%
	Pennsylvania	141	10.5%
	Puerto Rico	1	0.1%
	Virginia	45	3.3%
<b>REGION</b>	<b>MOUNTAIN PLAINS</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Colorado	64	4.8%
	North Dakota	1	0.1%
<b>REGION</b>	<b>MIDWEST</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>23.6%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Illinois	85	6.3%
	Indiana	12	0.9%
	Iowa	22	1.6%
	Michigan	121	9.0%
	Minnesota	18	1.3%
	Ohio	34	2.5%
	Wisconsin	25	1.9%
<b>REGION</b>	<b>WESTERN</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>23.0%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Alaska	3	0.2%
	California	199	14.8%
	Hawaii	3	0.2%
	Idaho	26	1.9%
	Nevada	8	0.6%
	Washington	71	5.3%
	Wisconsin	25	1.9%

		<b>COUNT</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>REGION</b>	<b>SOUTHEAST</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>10.8%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Alabama	1	0.1%
	Florida	4	0.3%
	Georgia	78	5.8%
	Kentucky	17	1.3%
	Mississippi	1	0.1%
	North Carolina	8	0.6%
	Tennessee	36	2.7%

<b>REGION</b>	<b>SOUTHWEST</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>19.4%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Arizona	35	2.6%
	Arkansas	1	0.1%
	Texas	214	15.9%
	Utah	11	0.8%

<b>REGION</b>	<b>NORTHEAST</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>3.6%</b>
<b>STATE</b>	Connecticut	4	0.3%
	Maine	7	0.5%
	Massachusetts	6	0.4%
	New Hampshire	7	0.5%
	New York	25	1.9%

Survey participants were asked to share their job title or role as a free-text response. Overwhelmingly, 85% of respondents belong to the nutrition and food service job category, which includes titles such as Food Service Director, School Nutrition Director, Cafeteria Manager, and Head Cook. School business roles, such as Finance Director, Operations Manager, and Buyer made up 13% of respondents. Administration roles include Principal and Superintendent. For an expanded list of roles, see [Appendix C: Table of Results, Table 11](#).

To determine the size of school districts, we asked respondents to place themselves within one of four categories: 1,000 students or less; 1,001-5,000 students; 5,001-20,000 students; or more than 20,000 students. Almost 75% of respondents came from school districts with fewer than 5,000 students, and more than half of respondents identified their school districts as rural. For reference on how the distribution of SFA sizes in our sample compared to the national profile of SFAs, the study team reviewed the USDA School Food Authority Survey III on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation report published by FNS in December 2024 and found that districts with less than 5,000 students make up almost 90% of all school districts in the US.<sup>7</sup>

Table 2. Respondent District Size and Type

USDA DEFINITION	TOTAL POPULATION	SURVEY POPULATION
<1,000 Students	59.6% (10,740)	35.4% (502)
<1,000 – 4,999 students	29.7% (5,363)	39.2% (556)
5,000 – 24,999 students	9.1% (1,642)	17.3% (246) *
25,000 + students	1.6% (284)	8.2% (116) **
Rural	52.5% (9,466)	54.7% (777)
Suburban	26.2% (4,721)	29.4% (418)
Urban	21.3% (3,866)	15.8% (225)

\* 5,001 to 20,000 students

\*\* more than 20,000 students

Lastly, we collected data from our respondents about years of experience working in the school nutrition space, as challenges and training needs experienced by school nutrition professionals and school business officials may vary depending on their tenure in the field. The survey asked respondents to select a range for the number of years they have been in their current role and the number of total years of experience in work related to Child Nutrition Programs. More than half (52%) of respondents have been in their current role longer than five years, and 57% of all respondents have more than 10 years of experience in child nutrition. These numbers could indicate that individuals tend to enter and make long-lasting careers in the child nutrition industry. However, staff shortages and turnover continue to be a challenge across SFAs, which could indicate that there are varying levels of support and resources provided to new employees versus career professionals.



### III. Findings

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#### → Challenges in School Food Procurement

##### Top Challenges

When asked the top challenge faced in school food procurement as a free-response question, the top four categories of answers were:

- High prices and budget constraints (26%),
- Supply chain and availability issues (17%),
- Administrative and regulatory burden (14%), and
- Insufficient vendors and bids (10%).

Other relevant concerns included not meeting delivery minimums or timing (sometimes due to having insufficient warehousing space to store deliveries); having limited purchasing options available for necessary items; a challenging purchasing process; receiving poor quality foods from vendors; and needed items being out-of-stock. Respondents from small and rural districts frequently named challenges related to supply chain and availability, insufficient vendors and bids, and delivery issues (See Figure 1. Challenges Named by Respondents).

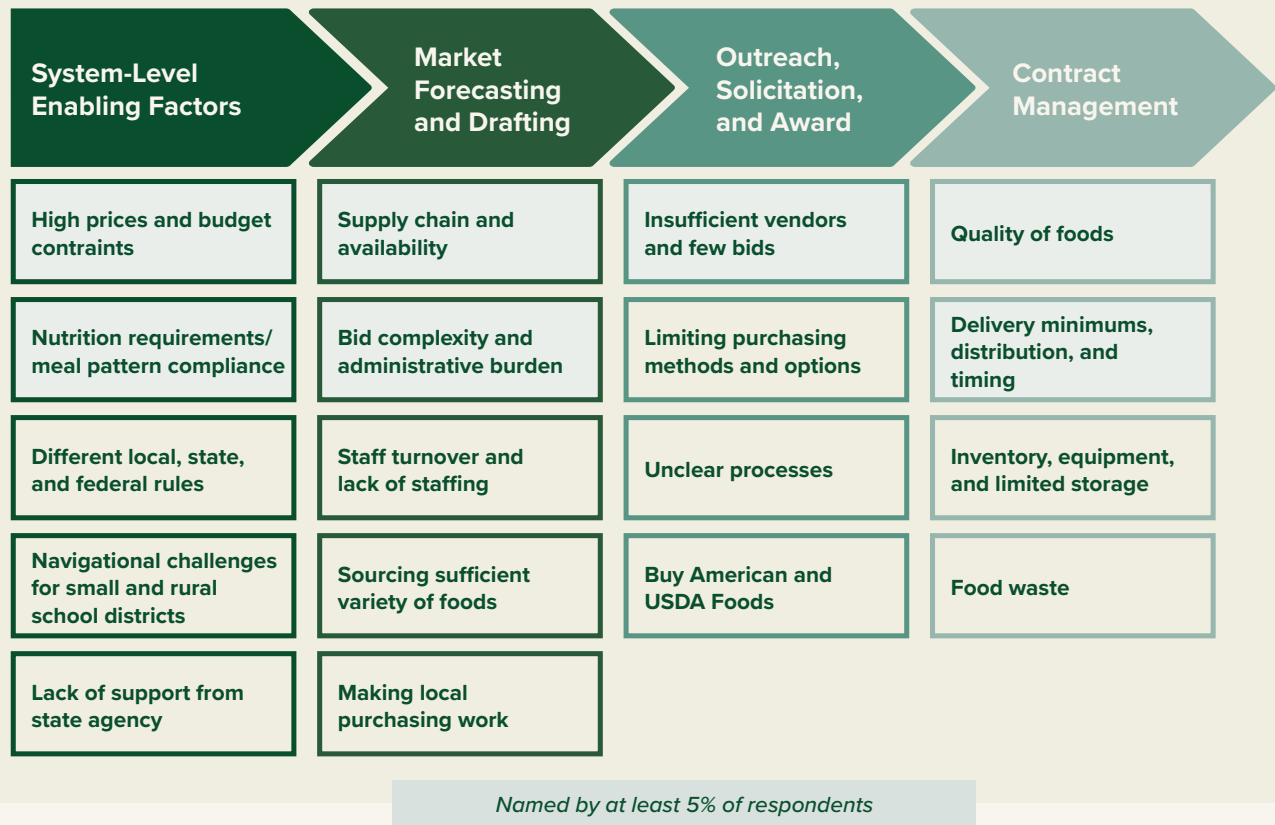
A school business official from the Mountain Plains region shared, “With the continuing increase in food costs, our entitlement funds and reimbursement are not enough to balance our entire plate cost.”

A school nutrition director from the Southwest region shared a sense of overwhelm (emphasis theirs), “[W]e are a small district and *all* aspects of procurement are put on my plate which is already overflowing. It takes up so much time...But making sure every little statement or paragraph being included is *way* too much. I just want to be able to do my job and feed our students and not have to put so much emphasis on purchasing.”

Finally, a kitchen manager from the Western region shared their experience with supply chain and vendor challenges for rural districts: “We only receive one order per week. If the supplier can’t receive their order from the valley because the roads are closed, we have to wait another week which affects our menu.”

While the survey focused on specific challenges within school food procurement operations, it’s striking that so many respondents named external pressures, such as volatile prices and supply chain instability. This finding mirrors USDA’s prior research on supply chain challenges,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that before being able to discuss advanced procurement reform ideas, SFAs face more critical needs – not having sufficient budget to purchase food for their students and the unavailability of key items.

Figure 1. Challenges Named by Respondents Across the Procurement Lifecycle



## → Impact of Challenges

### Top Challenges

When asked to elaborate, respondents found these challenges to have a significant impact on day-to-day operations. Nearly a third of respondents shared that high prices and budget constraints have resulted in many of their programs running into deficit. A finance and operations director from the Southeast region shared, “We have limited options so we pay more and can offer less to our students. Our food and nutrition department has a deficit each year resulting in costs which must come from our local budget.”

Respondents shared that tight budgets, including as a result of higher food prices, are impacting school nutrition operations, including staffing. A kitchen manager from the Midwest shared, “We are over budget for our program and [thus] spend less on staff pay...” In the Atlantic region, a school nutrition director wrote, “Higher food costs can lead to having to make other budget cuts like labor.” Staff shortages limit the ability to prepare healthier, more complex recipes, as one respondent from the Western region shared, “Many schools are experiencing shortages of kitchen staff and food service workers. This can make it difficult to prepare meals from scratch...with fresh ingredients that require more labor. It can also lead to increased reliance on pre-packaged or processed foods.”

School nutrition staff are also unable to attend trainings, whether virtual or in-person, when there's no other staff to cover their work. A respondent from the Mid-Atlantic region wrote, “[Choosing cheaper products] is still not enough savings to pay staff industry standards for scratch cooking to help with less processed menu items.” And another respondent from the Northeast region shared, “We have outsourced our food service operations to a FSMC [Food Service Management Company] because we do not have the staff to support all of the procurement requirements ourselves that we need to do to remain in compliance.”

To alleviate some of the administrative and regulatory burden, as well as bidding and obtaining quotes, some respondents have turned to cooperative purchasing groups (co-ops) and group purchasing organizations (GPOs) (See Figure 2. Cooperatives, GPOs, and FSMCs). While respondents acknowledged that these approaches do save them time and paperwork, they find the food options from buying groups and co-ops limited and difficult to change—sometimes taking up to a year for order changes to take effect. One respondent from the Western region shared they received “[p]roducts that are lesser quality from [food distributor], since they are the only place we can get procurement without having to go out for bid.”

Figure 2. Cooperatives, GPOs, and FSMCs

<p><b>Cooperative Purchasing Groups (Co-ops):</b></p>	<p><b>Group Purchasing Organizations (GPOs):</b></p>	<p><b>Food Service Management Companies (FSMCs):</b></p>
<p>a collection of school districts that, by agreement, aggregate their procurement to increase their buying power and reduce their costs. They may be administered by a third party or member district.</p>	<p>third party entities, usually for-profit, that contract with manufacturers to procure a range of goods at negotiated prices for participating clients, including schools. A GPO may charge an annual fee or per unit fee.</p>	<p>for-profit or non-profit entities that provides a range of contracted meal services, ranging from management services, to staffing, to meals.</p>

Additionally, school nutrition staff reported that they are always looking for ways to reduce costs, including cutting staff hours, combining multiple roles into one job, making less food, offering lower quality food, and delaying procurement of new equipment or repair of aging equipment.

Last-minute order changes due to supply chain disruptions and food availability require schools to make decisions abruptly, while they are already limited by staff shortages and budget constraints. As schools try to operate in this environment, they shared that their number one goal is to serve meals to students, but that they often run the risk of falling out of compliance—missing a form, not using the micro-purchase option correctly, etc.—while acting quickly to respond to order changes and substitutions. These conditions require nimbleness, flexibility, and sound judgment from school nutrition staff to respond to unforeseen shortages or substitutions and find an alternative solution swiftly so that school food operations are not disrupted and meals are available to students.

Trying to stay compliant, understanding regulations, dealing with last-minute changes, and staying within budget causes significant stress for school nutrition staff. Ninety-five respondents specifically named a stressful work environment as the biggest impact of procurement challenges. A school nutrition director from the Mid-Atlantic region said, “Rising food costs and supply chain disruptions make it difficult to plan consistent menus...it adds stress as [staff] work to adjust on-the-fly and maintain quality meals. [F]inding the time to manage procurement effectively while juggling other priorities often feels overwhelming.” The stress also comes from potentially being out-of-compliance, even though they did everything in their power to follow the rules. As one school nutrition director from the Southwest region put it, “It is just added stress to the person requesting the quotes and/or bids to be able to be compliant with the regulations and guidelines and not be the source of the fine or review finding.” As staff spend their time solving urgent crises, performing administrative functions, and responding to emergent issues, they feel unable to accomplish their central goal: providing nutritious meals to students.



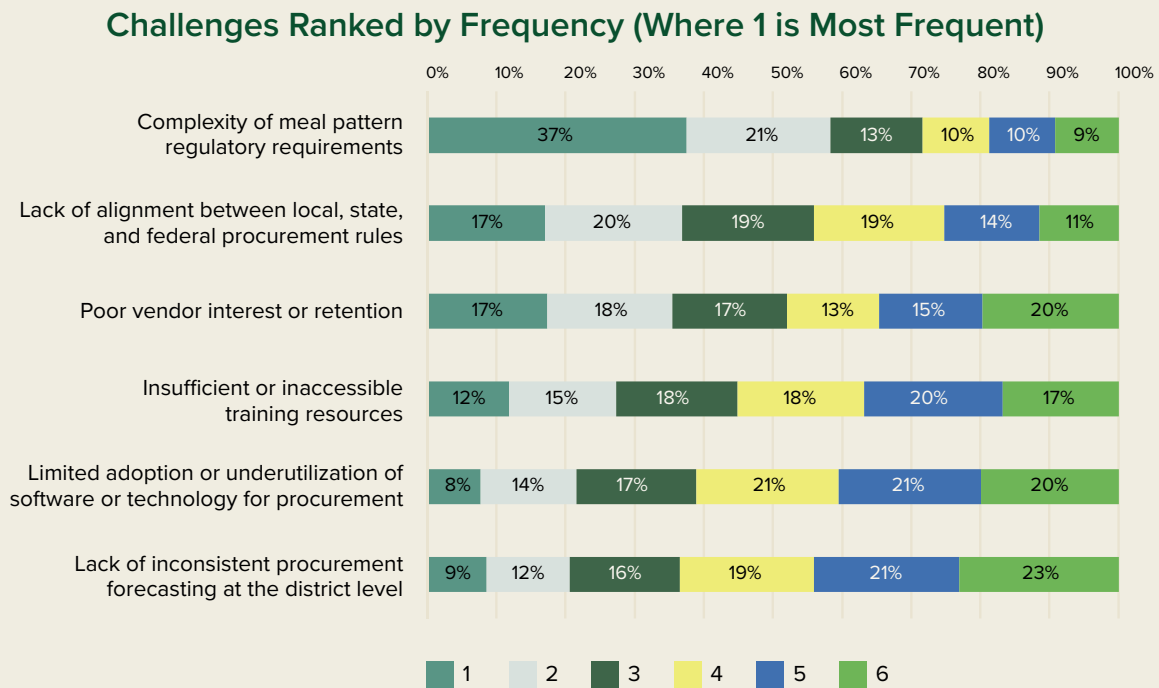
While workloads increase, staff do not feel that they receive additional support, resources, or capacity. This sometimes lowers morale, negatively impacting program operations. In turn, meal options for students are impacted when staff are not performing their best, have limited time to focus on food preparation, and are confined by tight budgets and supply chain disruptions. The impacts on students include fewer or less appealing lunch options, which can lead to students wasting food or refusing to eat altogether. A principal from the Mid-Atlantic region shared, “As a result [of limited varieties because of supply chain issues], a number of students will opt to not eat lunch. This has a negative effect in the classroom as hungry children are not able to focus, are more likely to act out, or shut down completely.” It also lowers the expected revenue for that school’s food budget, reinforcing this cycle of problems. Procurement challenges, from supply chain issues to overwhelmingly restrictive rules, form a ripple effect with downstream effects that impact food service staff and the students they serve.

Finally, respondents from smaller, more rural areas reported unique challenges, including not having appropriate storage facilities and deliveries arriving late or not at all. Respondents shared that they resort to using other schools’ equipment; must be on-site during the night or weekends to receive deliveries; order more than is needed to meet delivery minimums; and sometimes drive several miles to multiple grocery stores when vendors cannot deliver an order.

## → Challenges Ranked by Frequency

Respondents ranked the frequency of six pre-identified challenges from 1 to 6, with 1 being their most frequently encountered challenge. Overwhelmingly, respondents named complexity of meal pattern regulatory requirements as the most frequently faced challenge, with 58% of respondents naming this as either the first- or second-ranked most frequent challenge. Lack of alignment between local, state, and federal procurement rules and poor vendor interest and retention were more distant second choices, with 37% and 36%, respectively.

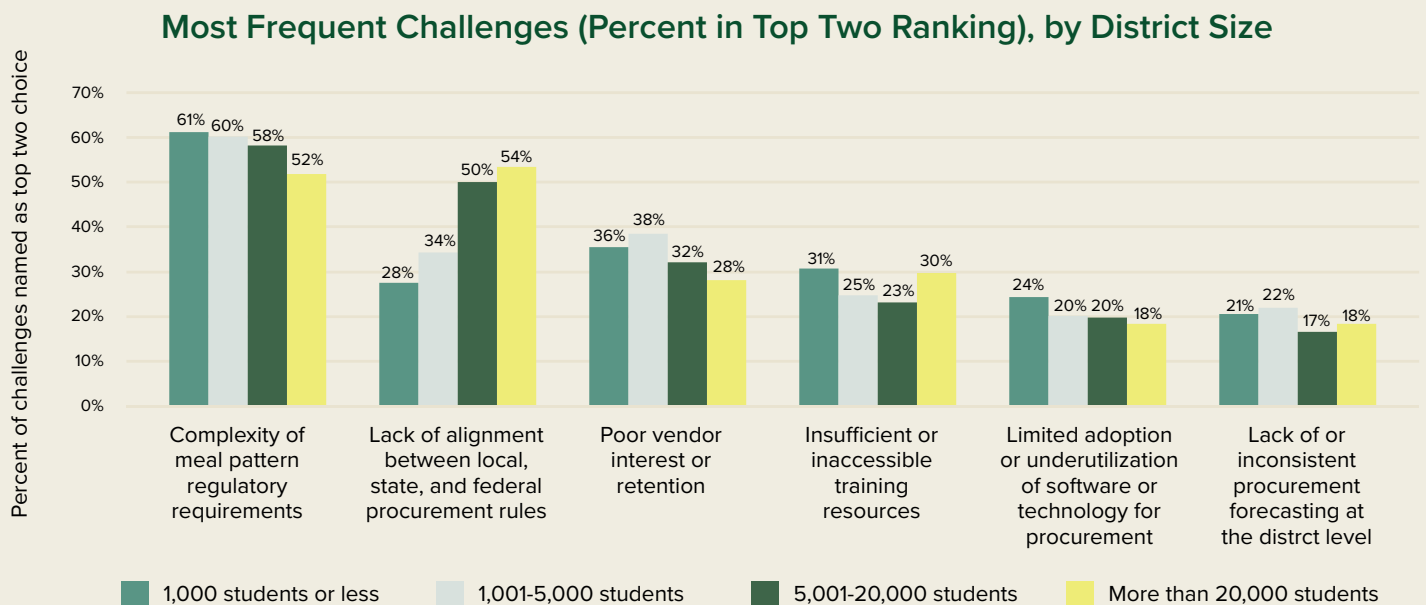
Figure 3. Challenges Ranked by Frequency



However, when disaggregating the ranking by district size, there was a stark difference across size groups for the second highest ranked challenge. Interestingly, 54% of SFAs with over 20,000 students named lack of rules alignment between local, state, and federal procurement rules as one of their top two most frequent challenges, while just 28% of SFAs with under 1,000 students said the same.<sup>9</sup> The smaller school districts who responded to the survey see poor vendor interest or retention and insufficient training resources as challenges that occur more frequently than lack of alignment of procurement rules. (See Figure 4. Top Challenges by District Size)



Figure 4. Top Challenges by District Size



Other respondent types indicated different challenges. School Business Officials were more likely (46%) to rank lack of rules alignment as one of their top two most frequent challenges than nutrition staff (35%). And rural SFAs (63%) and SFAs under 5,000 students (61%) struggled more with the complexity of meal pattern regulatory requirements than urban or large SFAs (51% and 52% respectively).

Although all SFAs must follow applicable procurement rules, it's possible that larger SFAs consider rules alignment a greater challenge because of both the greater complexity of purchasing food for more students and schools, and because they have sufficient staff to focus on meeting these requirements. Larger SFAs are also more likely to be doing more formal procurement, as more of their purchases will be over that threshold and thus have more rules to follow. As a contrast, small SFAs, who are more likely to have nutrition staff who juggle multiple roles, may be most frustrated by any perceived barriers to serving meals to students, like meeting meal pattern regulatory requirements.

Respondents were asked to provide additional challenges that may not have been included in the ranked list. Answers included: bid writing, Buy American rules, and emergency procurement during natural disasters. Many respondents named a limited pool of interested vendors as another challenge, whether due to remoteness of the area or lack of vendor interest in participating in bids. Limited participation from vendors in procurement is a major concern, as it can keep schools from obtaining high-quality foods; limit the ability to compare prices; and reduce the variety of food products available. This survey revealed that limited vendor competition is a major challenge for rural schools, as might be expected, but that suburban and urban school districts are also increasingly facing the problem of insufficient vendor competition and interest.

Overall, supply chain disruptions and high prices are greatly impacting what schools can and cannot procure, the timing of procurements and deliveries, daily cafeteria operations, staff well-being, and school nutrition programs' bottom lines.

## → Additional Challenges

The survey included a free-response question: "Are there any other school food procurement challenges you have faced in the last year that were not captured in the above list?" A total of 792 respondents completed this question, and those responses were grouped into 30 categories, see [Appendix C: Table of Results, Table 9](#). The top four answer categories were:

- No other challenges (51%)
- High-cost food products (11%)
- Food availability (8%)
- Complex regulatory requirements (8%)

### **High-Cost Food Products**

High-cost food products were named as the top procurement challenge and a top additional challenge for respondents, highlighting the weight of economic trends on Child Nutrition Program operations and their staff. A respondent from a rural school in the Midwest region wrote, "The cost of foods has tripled over the last three to four years." And while small and rural districts saw the impacts of cost compounded—high food prices lead to high shipping, delivery, and storage fees—districts of all sizes and urbanicity named this challenge. Respondents mentioned costs being a key determinant when deciding to incorporate more local foods, farm products, and scratch cooking into their operations. Rising costs also mean that some purchases that were previously below the formal procurement threshold are now above the threshold, requiring the use of formal Requests for Proposal (RFPs) or Invitations for Bid (IFBs). A respondent from an urban school district in the Southwest region wrote, "Rising costs have created a larger demand for RFPs, which demands more time. \$50,000 is not the same it was in 2018."

### **Food Availability**

Supply chain and availability came in as the second top procurement challenge, and the second additional challenge, reiterating the relationship between the most pressing challenges faced by school business officials and school nutrition staff. As one respondent from a suburban school district in the Midwest region put it, "Out-of-stock items require substitution, and usually those substitute items come at a higher cost." A school nutrition director from a rural district in the Southeast region shared that "[o]n any given week we will have as many as a dozen substitutions." Item shortages affect pricing, and the surge in prices affects the availability of less-expensive options. This can lead to lower-quality products, which makes meeting nutritional and meal-pattern requirements even more challenging. A business manager from the Western region explained this connection: "Schools have struggled to obtain certain food items due to shortages, production delays, and transportation problems. This makes menu planning difficult and can lead to substitutions that may not meet nutritional guidelines...food prices make budgeting unpredictable and can force schools to...reduce the quality of ingredients."

### Complex Regulatory Requirements

Respondents stated that regulatory requirements, including both federal and state, do not adjust to the size of school districts or their urbanicity, especially considering the limited numbers of vendors available and interested in participating in a competitive bidding process. This is also true as it relates to low purchasing thresholds that no longer represent the local economic landscape and unintentionally hinder local purchasing. Some school districts, and even states, maintain low micro and small purchase thresholds. Survey respondents shared that locally sourced items tend to cost more, and thus local food orders may exceed the informal purchasing thresholds requiring a formal bid process. Respondents also shared that given formal procurements are time consuming and burdensome for SFAs and local vendors, some SFAs are opting to use co-ops or buying groups to lessen the administrative burden. However, respondents are also finding that in some cases co-ops and buying groups have limited or no options for local foods. A nutrition director from the Midwest shared that it is a challenge to find “competitors for local products [because] they go over the micro purchasing threshold.” Moreover, a nutrition director from the Western region shared that a formal bidding process “scares small, local vendors.” Meanwhile, a respondent from the Southeast shared, “having a locally set micro-purchase threshold of \$2,500.00 is crippling.” Additionally, complex processes and requirements deter potential vendors and suppliers—especially those who are small, local, or untraditional—from responding to bids or proposals. In reference to how vendors perceive some state and local requirements, a respondent from the Southwest region stated, “The requirement for a \$1,000,000 insurance policy alone deters small farmers.” Respondents shared an overall sense of frustration, confusion, and exhaustion trying to keep up with and make sense of policies that are constantly changing. In addition to having policies that are more tailored to their size and geographical constraints, respondents also want better training and resources to navigate complex regulations. As these challenges continue unaddressed, respondents noted that they are more prone to make mistakes, skip steps, or entirely ignore requirements that do not apply to their situations. Some respondents expressed having to “cut corners to make food service easier and cheaper” for their schools.



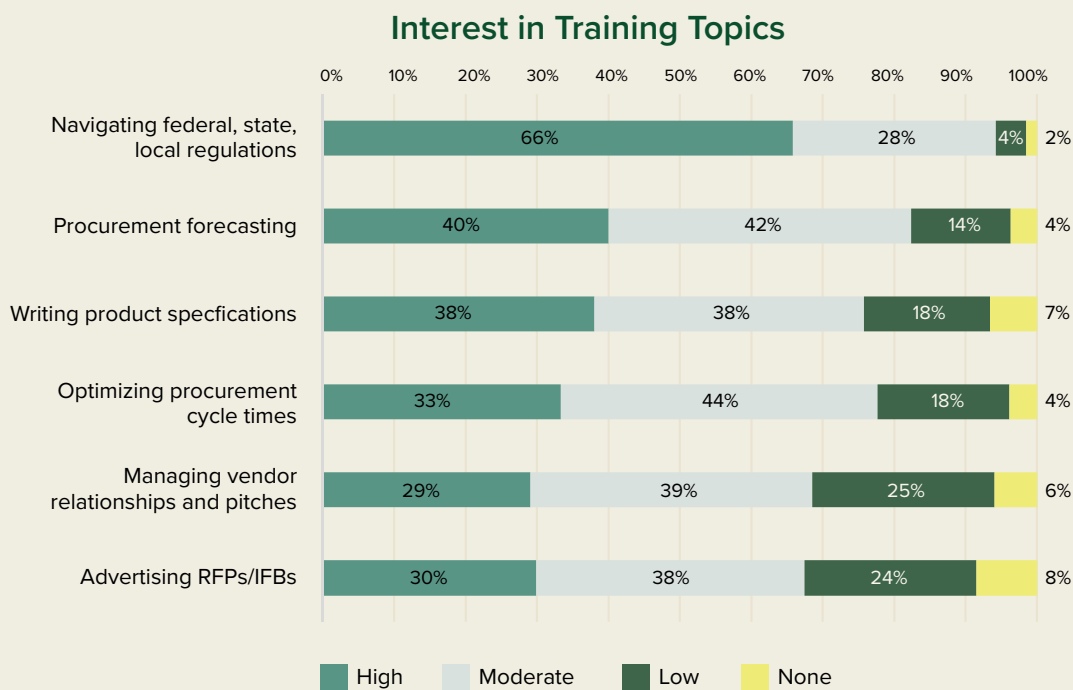
## → Top School Food Procurement Topics of Interest and Training Preferences

### Desired Training Topics

School food procurement training varies, and there is not a nationwide standard. Through a series of questions about training topics and format preferences, we aimed to better understand what types of training could help address the procurement challenges named.

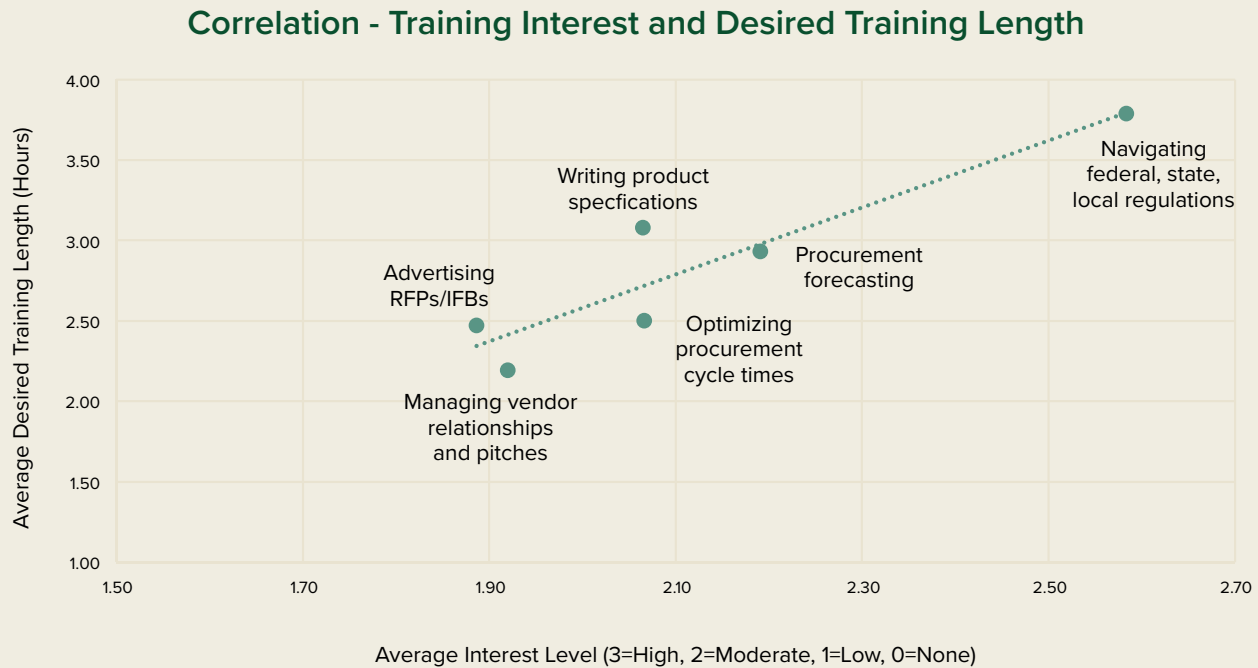
Respondents were asked to rank a list of six common school food procurement training topics, rating their interest as high, medium, low, or none. The topics were based on USFA's conversations with over 250 individuals from the school food service ecosystem and a 2021 report, *Study of School Food Authority (SFA) Procurement Practices*.<sup>10</sup> Respondents were the most interested in training on navigating federal, state, and local regulations (66% stating high interest). Forty percent of respondents were highly interested in procurement forecasting, followed by writing product specifications (38%). Respondents were least interested in more administrative and outreach focused tasks, including optimizing procurement cycle times, managing vendor relationships and pitches, and advertising solicitations.

Figure 5. Interest in Training Topics



Participants were also asked their preferred training session length for each topic, and their responses directly correlated to their interests: the greater the interest respondents had in a topic, the more time they thought should be allocated to the training topic. Overall, participants preferred relatively short trainings, giving the greatest preference to trainings between 1 and 2 hours (42%).

Figure 6. Correlation Between Training Interest and Desired Training Length



Large SFAs (>20,000 students) and school business officials had the greatest interest in training on navigating regulations, and small SFAs (<1,000 students) and administrators the least. Large SFAs were more interested in optimizing procurement cycle times than smaller SFAs.

Fittingly, respondents who named lack of alignment between local, state, and federal procurement rules as their top challenge were 12% more likely to name navigating state, federal, and local regulations as their most preferred training topic.

### → Elements of Successful Trainings

Respondents were asked which training elements were most important to them (such as instructors and tools), their desired training format, and who should deliver training. Respondents preferred concrete tools and resources, with 57% ranking this as their first or second choice, followed by the dedicated capacity, expertise, and skillset of instructors (42%), to other training elements, such as the chance to work on an applied project, the credibility of the organization, and the opportunity to connect with peers.

Nearly half (49%) of respondents preferred live trainings and 26% preferred virtual trainings. Only 11% preferred online self-study courses, 9% pre-recorded content, and 6% static documents or workbooks.

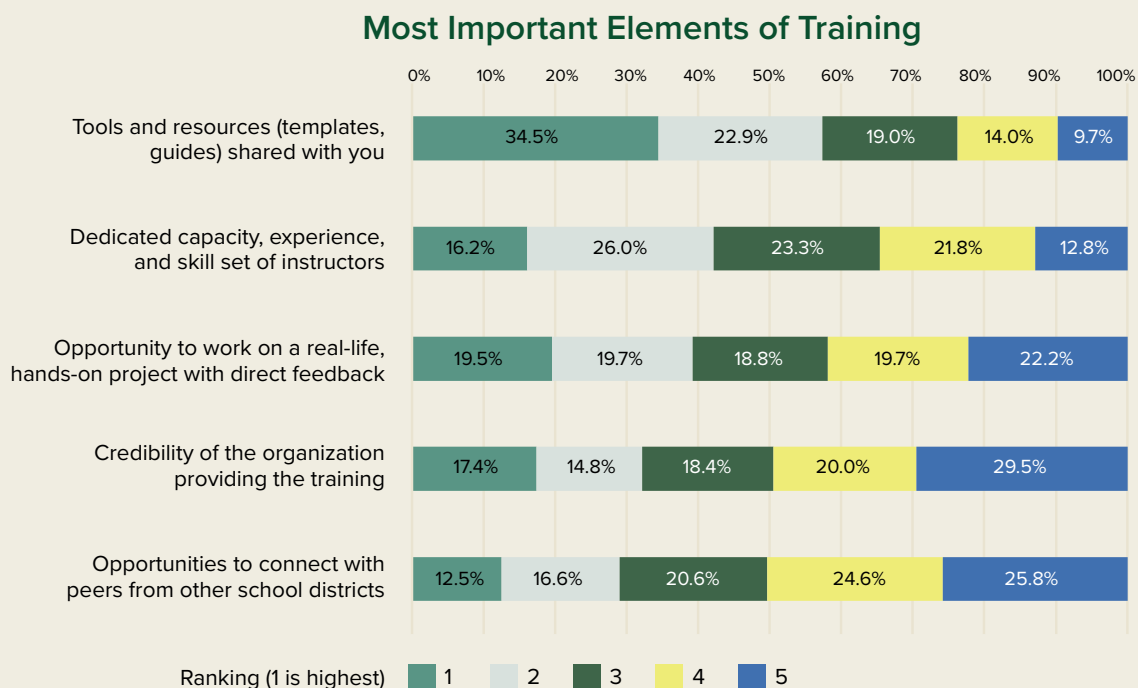
Two thirds of respondents (67%) felt state agencies were best poised to deliver school food procurement training, with 12% preferring a federal agency, and 11% the school district itself. Just 5% (combined) felt universities or nonprofits were the best training facilitators.

Staff from urban school districts found instructor skill set more important (48%) than rural districts (38%), but valued connecting with peer districts less (23% to 32%). Nutrition staff preferred real-life projects (41%) compared to school business staff (26%), while business staff preferred concrete tools at a greater level than overall (64%).

Staff from school districts with more than 20,000 students preferred live trainings over other types of trainings (67%) compared to just 39% of respondents from school districts with under 1,000 students. More respondents from urban school districts preferred virtual trainings (32%) than rural school districts (23%). And though 9% of respondents overall wanted pre-recorded videos, 14% of small SFAs did.

This dynamic suggests that the smallest SFAs may find themselves strapped for time to attend trainings or may find it too hard to travel to in-person trainings, preferring self-study and virtual options. Additionally, coupling this with the budget constraints, many may not be able to attend if they are the only person running their school’s nutrition program. Tight budgets also have an impact on the technology and tools available for staff to receive training. One respondent from a small school district shared that they are unable to attend virtual trainings during work hours because “my work computer doesn’t have any speakers, so I have to do my training from my home computer.” Meanwhile, larger school districts might have more staff on-site and proximity to more in-person training options.

Figure 7. Most Important Elements of Training





When it came to the question of who would provide the most valuable school food procurement training, respondents overwhelmingly chose their state agency (67%). While respondents shared that they would like more alignment between local, state, and federal regulations and more support from their state agencies, they still see the latter as the key source for guidance and accurate information on school food procurement rules and regulations. State agencies should consider this perception when building their web pages, creating training resources, and even when conducting site visits or administrative reviews.

Other responses mentioned aligning the training provider to the training topic, tailoring training for smaller/rural districts, and local training that takes into consideration different local procurement policies. Respondents would also like trainers who have worked in school food nutrition and procurement, or in a successful school district. They prefer industry representatives to provide vendor-related training, such as ServSafe training.<sup>11</sup>

### → Barriers to Training

Most participants (80%) attend trainings during work hours, with 11% saying they always or sometimes pay out of pocket. Only half of districts (52%) consistently provided funds for trainings, though 14% of respondents were unsure if funds were offered.

Small and rural SFAs were more likely to face funding or timing challenges, with 18% of respondents from SFAs with fewer than 1,000 students attending trainings outside of regular hours (compared to 0% of survey respondents from SFAs with over 20,000 students). This finding corresponds with their responses to challenges. Small and rural SFAs noted they cannot attend trainings during work hours because of staff shortages, distance, and lack of technology support, especially for those working in the cafeterias.

A quarter of respondents found barriers to accessing training, with 55% of those who experienced barriers naming that trainings did not fit their schedule and another 36% not knowing where to find trainings.

Other barriers include the state agency not offering any training, state agencies not offering training frequently throughout the year, trainers without sufficient expertise, a lack of district support for staff to attend training, and irrelevant topics. This latter one was mentioned by more experienced respondents who found that the training did not provide them with new information, or the information did not align with their work.

## IV. Recommendations



### → No One-size-fits-all Approach

After reviewing the list of ranked challenges and preferred training topics and formats across school district size and urbanicity, there are clear differences in perspectives, experiences, and needs. Small and rural school districts operate within a set of unique circumstances like proximity to vendors, including grocery stores, distributors, and producers. These districts may also have limited facilities, tight budgets, and fewer staff. The person administering the school nutrition program prioritizes getting food to students, which can mean hauling gallons of milk from the grocery store in their personal vehicle instead of conducting market research or documenting small

purchases accurately. This individual would benefit from additional capacity, a storage facility, or even a delivery truck, to alleviate same-day shopping and multiple shopping trips. Beyond additional equipment and funds to lessen the logistical load, school nutrition staff need training that can adjust to their packed schedule and options for on-site, in-person training opportunities at potentially remote locations.

The survey demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of respondents see their state agency as the best source for guidance, training, and information on school food procurement. Many state agencies provide a suite of resources and training uniquely tailored to school nutrition staff, including on the topic of procurement. However, some survey responses also indicated that school nutrition staff seek further help and assistance from their state agencies. For example, given that state agencies conduct audits and reviews, it would benefit a small or rural district to receive tactical, hands-on support from their state agency on how to make improvements, which some state agencies do not see as their responsibility or charge. Instead, some districts are given just a checklist of failures and no additional guidance on how to correct them. A nutrition director from the Southwest shared that when requesting guidance on unique purchasing situations their state agency simply denies the request “without guidance on how to make it work within the guidelines.” Similarly, a nutrition director from the Midwest wrote, “[the state agency] provides little resources beyond USDA language and absolutely NO online or in person training for School Nutrition directors on [procurement].” To help smaller and rural districts do more with less and conduct successful operations, state agencies can coordinate with regional or local service centers, or education boards, and align training so that it is tailored to the needs of that region.

In addition to customized training, the state should consider tapping professionals who operate school food procurements as subject-matter experts to deliver training. This training should be in-person or via recorded webinars, and it should facilitate peer-to-peer learning across roles or across districts, especially for those smaller and rural districts where time and distance are major barriers to training.

State agencies should implement these considerations for urban and suburban districts as well, especially in expanding their vendor pool and gaining greater access to local farms and vendors. Larger school districts struggle to find local vendors that can meet their order quantities and meal pattern requirements, but state agencies can help by expanding training on forecasting, planning, and assessing purchasing thresholds to allow for more purchasing flexibility and alignment with federal rules.

Beyond customizing training to the size and urbanicity of school districts, respondents also expressed a need for state and local policies that allow for more purchasing flexibility and options while still reflecting their local economic and workforce trends. Adjusting purchasing thresholds is an obvious policy topic for consideration, where exemptions or waivers could be tested for purchases with Child Nutrition Program funds. These policy reforms could be limited to specific locales to address issues such as limited vendor pools, remote locations, and a lack of storage facilities or scratch-cooking kitchens. Other policy areas to consider through a more regional or local lens include meal-pattern substitutions, required documentation, USDA Foods delivery times, and use of commodities and allocations.

### → Serving Students Within a Budget

Respondents shared how high prices and low student participation impact school nutrition program budgets. One school nutrition director from the Mountain Plains region shared that “inconsistent food availability...can affect meal participation rates and the overall success of the school nutrition program.” There are multiple ways to address funding shortages, including increasing funding, reducing waste, and growing revenue. As schools attempt to do more with less funds, school nutrition staff are trying to increase the revenue to provide students with a variety of meals and encourage consistent program participation. A school nutrition director from the Southeast region mentioned that their program “increased adult and student meal prices to offset for high expenses and lack of federal funding.”

Providing students with consistent meals they enjoy has numerous benefits and is a core stated goal of many SFAs. Better quality and more appealing food options are more likely to be eaten, reducing waste, and more likely to be purchased, increasing revenue. It is important to note that increasing student participation alone is not a solution for the challenges SFAs face, and further, that it will be difficult to increase student participation in the absence of other structural changes. One school nutrition director from a rural school district expressed that “[s]tudents, I believe, want some different choices and it is not as easy to provide with the rules and challenges we face in the school cafeteria department.”

## V. Conclusion

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With the publication of this report, we hope that SFA representatives can validate their own experiences, learn from the stories and opinions of their peers across the US, and consider creative approaches as they engage in discussions locally. Similarly, we recognize the vast amount of work performed by many state agencies to support and educate their SFAs on rules and regulations, and hope that this report shines a light on additional needs and challenges of SFAs and ignites discussions on the recommendations presented to better support Child Nutrition Programs at the local level.

Furthermore, the findings of this survey, along with the content of the report, will act as the foundation for the next phase of the cooperative agreement between the USDA and USFA. As part of future research, Partners for Public Good and USFA will explore directly solving some of the top procurement challenges identified in this report with a select group of school districts; provide technical assistance to test recommendations described in this report; and measure their effectiveness on said challenges. This model of in-the-field research with school districts will allow for direct observation of challenges, their impact, and the efficacy of solutions, while the length of the project (12-18 months) will allow for sustainability and evaluation of implementation and adoptability.

## VI. Appendices

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### → Appendix A: Pre-Survey Email to State Agencies

**Subject Line:** Your Support Needed: School Food Procurement Needs Assessment

OMB Control Number 0584-0611

Expiration Date 11/30/2025

Dear State Agency Representative,

As part of a [cooperative agreement](#) with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Urban School Food Alliance and the Government Performance Lab (GPL) at the Harvard Kennedy School are conducting a survey of **school business officials and those directly responsible for school food purchasing** at the district level in all U.S. states and territories to better understand challenges they face related to school food procurement.

This survey has been reviewed by USFA's State Agency Cooperative Agreement Subcommittee and the School Food Authorities Cooperative Agreement Subcommittee and approved by USDA. The results of this survey will help improve procurement practices nationwide and guide the creation of future tools, training, and rule changes. We would deeply appreciate your support in spreading the word and encouraging your school districts to participate.

**Here is our ask:**

- Share the survey link with school nutrition directors, authorized representatives, and others who hold responsibility for food purchasing at the district level in your state/territory.
  - The Government Performance Lab (GPL) will share sample language for you to share the survey directly
  - OR**
  - The Government Performance Lab can send the survey communications directly to your list of contacts on your behalf
  - The Government Performance Lab can also assist with promoting the survey by joining state school nutrition director calls, sharing a marketing kit, or engaging in other relevant virtual events

If you can commit to sharing this survey, or enlisting the support of the GPL, when it goes live, **please let us know by responding to this email by January 24**. With your support, we can bring in new voices and build stronger solutions.

If you have any questions, please contact **Pamela Portocarrero**.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to hearing from you.

Dr. Katie Wilson and Pamela Portocarrero

This information is being collected to assist the Food and Nutrition Service in guiding future rulemaking for regulations impacting school food procurement (the process by which school districts purchase food, equipment, supplies, and services all related to Child Nutrition Programs). This is a voluntary collection and FNS will use the information to understand current school food procurement challenges and needs of school nutrition directors and school business officials. The collection does not request personally identifiable information. 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 0584-0611. The time to read and respond to this communication is 1 minute. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 1320 Braddock Place, 5th Floor, Alexandria, VA 22314. ATTN: PRA (0584-0611).

## Language for state agencies to promote survey

**Subject:** We need your ideas to improve school food procurement!

OMB Control Number 0584-0611

Expiration Date 11/30/2025

[State agency] is proud to support a survey, run by the Urban School Food Alliance (USFA), as part of a cooperative agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to gather feedback on challenges and training opportunities around school food procurement (the process by which school districts purchase food, equipment, supplies, and services all related to Child Nutrition Programs).

### Why participate?

We need your voice to improve school food procurement practices nationwide. In taking this survey, you'll help shape future tools, training, and rule changes. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes and all results are anonymous. As a thank you for your time, at the conclusion of the survey, you will have the option to enter a drawing to attend a future USFA school food culinary training at the Culinary Institute of America.

### Who should participate?

This survey is for school business officials and those directly responsible for school food purchasing at the district level in all U.S. states and territories.

**Take the survey here!** The survey will close on **Wednesday, February 26**.

USFA's research collaborator, the Government Performance Lab at the Harvard Kennedy School, is conducting the survey. For any questions, please reach out to Pamela Portocarrero.

**OMB BURDEN STATEMENT:** This information is being collected to assist the Food and Nutrition Service in guiding future rulemaking for regulations impacting school food procurement (the process by which school districts purchase food, equipment, supplies, and services all related to child nutrition programs). This is a voluntary collection and FNS will use the information to understand current school food procurement challenges and needs of school food directors and school business officials. This collection does not request any 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 0584-0611. The time to read the email communication is 1 minute; and the time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 10 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 1320 Braddock Place, 5th Floor, Alexandria, VA 22306 ATTN: PRA (0584-0611). Do not return the completed form to this address.

## → Appendix B: Survey Questions

## School Food Procurement Needs Assessment

OMB number OMB CONTROL NO.: 0584-0611

EXPIRATION DATE: 11/30/2025

Q1.2 The Urban School Food Alliance (USFA), as part of a cooperative agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), seeks your feedback on challenges and training opportunities around school food procurement (the process by which school districts purchase food, equipment, supplies, and services all related to Child Nutrition Programs). This survey is for **school business officials and those directly responsible for school food purchasing at the district level** in all U.S. states and territories. **We need your voice** to improve school food procurement practices nationwide. In taking this survey, you'll help shape future tools, training, and rule changes. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes. All results are anonymous. As a thank you for your time, at the conclusion of the survey, you will have the option to enter a drawing to attend a future USFA culinary training at the Culinary Institute of America. USFA's research collaborator, the Government Performance Lab at the Harvard Kennedy School, is conducting the survey. For any questions, please reach out to Pamela Portocarrero at [pamela\\_portocarrero@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:pamela_portocarrero@hks.harvard.edu).

Q1.3 OMB Burden Statement: This information is being collected to assist the Food and Nutrition Service in guiding future rulemaking for regulations impacting school food procurement (the process by which school districts purchase food, equipment, supplies, and services all related to Child Nutrition Programs). This is a voluntary collection and FNS will use the information to understand current school food procurement challenges and needs of school food directors and school business officials. This collection does not request any 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 0584-0611. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 10 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 1320 Braddock Place, 5th Floor, Alexandria, VA 22306 ATTN: PRA (0584-0611). Do not return the completed form to this address.

Q2.1 What is the **top challenge** you currently face related to **school food procurement**?

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Q2.2 What is the impact of this challenge on you, your colleagues, or your students?

---

Q2.3 Some common school food procurement challenges faced by individuals in roles like yours are listed below. Which of these **challenges** do you encounter **most often**?

Please rank the following challenges, where **1** represents "**encounter most often**" and **6** represents "**encounter the least.**" (Click and drag)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of alignment between local, state, and federal procurement rules
- \_\_\_\_\_ Poor vendor interest or retention
- \_\_\_\_\_ Limited adoption or underutilization of software or technology for procurement
- \_\_\_\_\_ Insufficient or inaccessible training resources
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of or inconsistent procurement forecasting at the district level
- \_\_\_\_\_ Complexity of meal pattern regulatory requirements

Q2.4 Are there any other **school food procurement challenges** you have faced **in the last year** that were not captured in the above list?

---

Q3.1 Thinking back to all the **school food procurement training** you have received, which **topics** have been the most helpful/useful? (you may name up to 3)

o Training topic 1 \_\_\_\_\_

o Training topic 2 \_\_\_\_\_

o Training topic 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Q3.2 When considering attending a **training course** on school food procurement, which elements are **most important** to you?

Please rank the following training elements in order of importance, where **1** represents "**most important**" and **5** represents "**least important.**" (Click and drag)

\_\_\_\_\_ Dedicated capacity, experience, and skill set of instructors

\_\_\_\_\_ Tools and resources (templates, guides) shared with you

\_\_\_\_\_ Opportunities to connect with peers from other school districts

\_\_\_\_\_ Credibility of the organization providing the training

\_\_\_\_\_ Opportunity to work on a real-life, hands-on project with direct feedback

Q3.3 Please rate **your level of interest** in the following school food procurement training topics:

	High (1)	Moderate (2)	Low (3)	None (4)
Navigating federal, state, local regulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing product specifications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Advertising RFPs/IFBs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Optimizing procurement cycle times	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managing vendor relationships and pitches	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Procurement forecasting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q3.4 If you were to attend a **training course** on the following topics, what do you think is the appropriate **length of time** for the training to be useful?

	Less than 1 hour	1-2 hours	Half a day	Full day	Multi-day	N/A or unsure
Navigating federal, state, local regulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing product specifications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Advertising RFPs/IFBs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Optimizing procurement cycle times	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managing vendor relationships and pitches	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Procurement forecasting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q3.5 Which of the following **formats** do you **prefer most** for school food procurement trainings?

- In-person, group-setting with a live instructor(s)
- Virtual, group-setting (e.g., Zoom) with a live instructor(s)
- Pre-recorded videos with no live instructor(s)
- Online written or interactive training materials (self-study)
- Printed training materials (self-study)

Q3.6 Why did you choose this format?

---

Q3.7 Who would you expect to provide the **most valuable** school food procurement training?

- School district
- State agency
- Federal agency
- Non-profit in this sector
- University/Extension office
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Q3.8 Does your school district/state currently **provide funds** for staff to attend **school food procurement** trainings?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No
- Unsure

Q3.9 When attending **school food procurement trainings** (virtually or in-person), do you pay for these out of your own pocket?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No
- N/A

Q3.10 When do you attend **school food procurement trainings**?

- During regular work hours
- Outside of regular work hours
- N/A

Q3.11 Are there **barriers** keeping you from accessing **school food procurement** trainings/resources?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

Display this question: If Q3.11 = Yes

Q3.12 What's keeping you from accessing **school food procurement** trainings/resources? Select all that apply.

- I don't know where to find trainings.
- They don't fit my schedule/ I don't have time for training.
- The topics offered are not relevant to my work.
- Trainings are hard to understand/digest.
- Trainings are not in a format of my preference.
- I don't want to or am unable to pay for them.
- Other: specify \_\_\_\_\_

Q4.1 What is your job title/role? *(do not include the name of your school district or geographic location)*

---

Q4.2 How many years have you been in your **current role**?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- More than 10 years

Q4.3 How many years of experience do you have in **child nutrition** programs?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- More than 10 years

Q4.4 In which state/territory do you **work**?

- |                                                                       |                                     |                                      |                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Alabama                                         | <input type="radio"/> Hawaii        | <input type="radio"/> Montana        | <input type="radio"/> South Carolina                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Alaska                                          | <input type="radio"/> Idaho         | <input type="radio"/> Nebraska       | <input type="radio"/> South Dakota                          |
| <input type="radio"/> American Samoa                                  | <input type="radio"/> Illinois      | <input type="radio"/> Nevada         | <input type="radio"/> Tennessee                             |
| <input type="radio"/> Arizona                                         | <input type="radio"/> Indiana       | <input type="radio"/> New Hampshire  | <input type="radio"/> Texas                                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Arkansas                                        | <input type="radio"/> Iowa          | <input type="radio"/> New Jersey     | <input type="radio"/> Utah                                  |
| <input type="radio"/> California                                      | <input type="radio"/> Kansas        | <input type="radio"/> New Mexico     | <input type="radio"/> Vermont                               |
| <input type="radio"/> Colorado                                        | <input type="radio"/> Kentucky      | <input type="radio"/> New York       | <input type="radio"/> Virgin Islands                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Commonwealth of the<br>Northern Mariana Islands | <input type="radio"/> Louisiana     | <input type="radio"/> North Carolina | <input type="radio"/> Virginia                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Connecticut                                     | <input type="radio"/> Maine         | <input type="radio"/> North Dakota   | <input type="radio"/> Washington                            |
| <input type="radio"/> Delaware                                        | <input type="radio"/> Maryland      | <input type="radio"/> Ohio           | <input type="radio"/> West Virginia                         |
| <input type="radio"/> District of Columbia                            | <input type="radio"/> Massachusetts | <input type="radio"/> Oklahoma       | <input type="radio"/> Wisconsin                             |
| <input type="radio"/> Florida                                         | <input type="radio"/> Michigan      | <input type="radio"/> Oregon         | <input type="radio"/> Wyoming                               |
| <input type="radio"/> Georgia                                         | <input type="radio"/> Minnesota     | <input type="radio"/> Pennsylvania   | <input type="radio"/> I do not work in the<br>United States |
| <input type="radio"/> Guam                                            | <input type="radio"/> Mississippi   | <input type="radio"/> Puerto Rico    |                                                             |
|                                                                       | <input type="radio"/> Missouri      | <input type="radio"/> Rhode Island   |                                                             |

Q4.5 Is your school district in a rural, suburban, or urban area?

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

Q4.6 What is the size of your school district?

- 1,000 students or less
- 1,001 – 5,000 students
- 5,001 – 20,000 students
- more than 20,000 students

Q4.7 Who manages the **school food procurement** process in your school district?

- Purchasing/Procurement department
- School nutrition department
- Other school administrator: specify \_\_\_\_\_

Q4.8 Is your school district part of, or does your school district work with, a cooperative purchasing group, group purchasing organization, or food service management company? Select all that apply

- Cooperative purchasing group (COOP)
- Group purchasing organization (GPO)
- Food service management company (FSMC)
- None of the above
- Unsure

## → Appendix C: Table of Results

## Multiple Choice

Table 3. Procurement Challenges Faced By Survey Respondents

	n	%
<i>Ranking of Top Procurement Challenges (Percentage of Respondents Selecting Challenge as Either First or Second Choice), n=1510</i>		
Complexity of meal pattern regulatory requirements	880	58.3%
Lack of alignment between local, state, and federal procurement rules	556	36.8%
Poor vendor interest or retention	536	35.5%
Insufficient or inaccessible training resources	412	27.3%
Limited adoption or underutilization of software or technology for procurement	325	21.5%
Lack of or inconsistent procurement forecasting at the district level	311	20.6%

Table 4. Food Procurement Training Needs

	n	%
<i>Most Important Training Elements (Percentage Top Two Answer), n=1393</i>		
Tools and resources (templates, guides) shared with you	799	57.4%
Dedicated capacity, experience, and skill set of instructors	587	42.1%
Opportunity to work on a real-life, hands-on project with direct feedback	547	39.3%
Credibility of the organization providing the training	448	32.2%
Opportunities to connect with peers from other school districts	405	29.1%

*Level of Interest in School Food Procurement Training Topics (% Choosing "High"), n=1427*

Navigating federal, state, local regulations	939	65.8%
Procurement forecasting	572	40.2%
Writing product specifications	539	37.8%
Optimizing procurement cycle times	468	33.2%
Managing vendor relationships and pitches	411	29.0%
Advertising RFPs/IFBs	425	30.0%

*Percent Who Prefer Training Courses Under Two Hours, n=1414*

Navigating federal, state, local regulations	764	54.0%
Procurement forecasting	889	63.0%
Writing product specifications	842	59.7%
Optimizing procurement cycle times	990	70.7%
Managing vendor relationships and pitches	1076	76.5%
Advertising RFPs/IFBs	978	69.5%

Table 4. Food Procurement Training Needs (cont.)

	n	%
<i>Average Preferred Length (All Topics), n=1414</i>		
Less than 1 hour	331	23.4%
1-2 hours	595	42.1%
Half a day	264	18.7%
Full day	96	6.8%
Multi-day	22	1.6%
N/A or unsure	103	7.3%
<i>Most Preferred Format for School Food Procurement Trainings (Selected Choice), n=1419</i>		
In-person, group-setting with a live instructor(s)	693	48.8%
Virtual, group-setting (e.g., Zoom) with a live instructor(s)	363	25.6%
Online written or interactive training materials (self-study)	161	11.3%
Pre-recorded videos with no live instructor(s)	122	8.6%
Printed training materials (self-study)	80	5.6%
<i>Agency Most Valued to Provide School Food Procurement Training, n=1415</i>		
State agency	946	66.9%
Federal agency	171	12.1%
School district	156	11.0%
Other	70	4.9%
Non-profit in this sector	48	3.4%
University/Extension office	24	1.7%

Table 5. Barriers to Training Access

	n	%
<i>Does your school district/state currently provide funds for staff to attend school food procurement trainings? n=1420</i>		
Yes	746	52.5%
No	187	13.2%
Unsure	198	13.9%
Sometimes	289	20.4%
<i>When attending school food procurement trainings (virtually or in-person), do you pay for these out of your own pocket? n=1422</i>		
Yes	54	3.8%
Sometimes	102	7.2%
N/A	152	10.7%
No	1114	78.3%
<i>When do you attend school food procurement trainings? n=1417</i>		
During regular work hours	1128	79.6%
Outside of regular work hours	127	9.0%
N/A	162	11.4%

Table 5. Barriers to Training Access (cont.)

	n	%
<i>Are there barriers keeping you from accessing school food procurement trainings/resources? n=1419</i>		
Yes	374	26.4%
No	893	62.9%
N/A	152	10.7%

<i>What's keeping you from accessing school food procurement trainings/resources? (multi-select), n=374</i>		
They don't fit my schedule/ I don't have time for training.	232	62.0%
I don't know where to find trainings.	142	38.0%
Other	127	34.0%
Trainings are hard to understand/digest.	91	24.3%
The topics offered are not relevant to my work.	64	17.1%
Trainings are not in a format of my preference.	49	13.1%
I don't want to or am unable to pay for them.	48	12.8%

Table 6. Identifying Questions

	n	%
<i>What is your job title/role? n=1333 *</i>		
Nutrition	1129	84.7%
School Business	167	12.5%
Administration (General)	16	1.2%
Other	21	1.6%

<i>How many years have you been in your current role? n=1420</i>		
Less than 1 year	117	8.2%
1 - 5 years	566	39.9%
6 - 10 years	252	17.7%
More than 10 years	485	34.2%

<i>How many years of experience do you have in child nutrition programs? n=1418</i>		
Less than 1 year	49	3.5%
1 - 5 years	326	23.0%
6 - 10 years	239	16.9%
More than 10 years	804	56.7%

<i>Is your school district in a rural, suburban, or urban area? n=1420</i>		
Rural	777	54.7%
Suburban	418	29.4%
Urban	225	15.8%

\* Roles were free response and manually tagged into the categories above. For details on the categorization used, see Table 11. Classification of Respondent Roles.

Table 6. Identifying Questions (cont.)

	n	%
<i>What is the size of your school district? n=1420</i>		
1,000 students or less	502	35.4%
1,001 – 5,000 students	556	39.2%
5,001 – 20,000 students	246	17.3%
More than 20,000 students	116	8.2%
<i>USDA FNS Region, n=1346 **</i>		
Mid-Atlantic	199	14.8%
Midwest	317	23.6%
Mountain Plains	65	4.8%
Northeast	49	3.6%
Southeast	145	10.8%
Southwest	261	19.4%
Western	310	23.0%
<i>Who manages the school food procurement process in your school district? n=1416</i>		
School nutrition department	1011	71.4%
Other school administrator: specify	243	17.2%
Purchasing/Procurement department	162	11.4%
<i>Is your school district part of, or does your school district work with, a cooperative purchasing group, group purchasing organization, or food service management company? Select all that apply, n=1418</i>		
Cooperative purchasing group (COOP)	750	52.9%
Group purchasing organization (GPO)	191	13.5%
Food service management company (FSMC)	227	16.0%
None of the above	301	21.2%
Unsure	84	5.9%

\*\* Participants selected their state (See Table 1. Survey Participation by Region and State). USDA FNS region was automatically assigned based on USDA FNS definitions.

## Free Response – Categorized Responses

Responses in this section were free response. The most common themes in comments are reported below.

Table 7. Top School Food Procurement Challenges

	COUNT	PERCENT
<i>What is the top challenge you currently face related to school food procurement?</i>		
High prices / Budget constraints	421	26%
Supply chain / Availability	264	17%
Administrative / Regulatory burden	222	14%
Insufficient vendors / Few bids	167	10%
Nutrition requirements / Meal pattern compliance	87	5%
N/A	80	5%
Quality of foods	76	5%
Delivery minimums and timing	62	4%
Limiting purchasing options	58	4%
Other (Challenges mentioned fewer than 10 times)	53	3%
Unclear processes	43	3%
Making local purchasing work	39	2%
Rural geography	38	2%
Timing (Not having enough time)	37	2%
Different local / State / Federal rules	35	2%
Variety of foods	34	2%
Navigational challenges for small school districts	32	2%
Insufficient inventory / Stock	30	2%
Staff turnover / Understaffed	30	2%
Lack of training	29	2%
Buy American	22	1%
Equipment	16	1%
Lack of support from state agency	14	1%
Limited storage	12	1%
Food waste	11	1%

Table 8. Impact of Challenge

	COUNT	PERCENT
<i>What is the impact of this challenge on you, your colleagues, or your students?</i>		
Additional costs, time	478	31%
Limited pricing and food options	311	20%
Disruption of menu and kitchen operations	289	19%
Limited student food options/Preferences	308	20%
N/A or No impact	80	5%
Stressful work environment	95	6%
Poor quality of food	90	6%
Waste of resources	52	3%
Confusion for SFAs and vendors	53	3%
Ability to stay compliant	36	2%
Food and equipment delays	33	2%
Logistical coordination	19	1%
Poor quality of equipment	12	1%

Table 9. Additional Challenges Faced

	COUNT	PERCENT
<i>Are there any other school food procurement challenges you have faced in the last year that were not captured in the above list?</i>		
None	405	51%
High-cost food products	90	11%
Food availability	67	8%
Other (Challenges mentioned fewer than 10 times)	58	7%
Complex regulatory requirements	45	6%
Delivery/Storage	23	3%
Lack of funds	18	2%
Procurement takes too much time	17	2%
Access to local products	15	2%
Staff retention/Hiring	12	2%
Poor quality of food	11	1%
Limited vendor pool	11	1%
Buy American	10	1%
Unique rural challenges	10	1%

Table 10. Most Helpful/Useful Past Training Topics

	COUNT	PERCENT
<i>Thinking back to all the school food procurement training you have received, which topics have been the most helpful/useful? (you may name up to 3)</i>		
Purchasing methods	346	39%
Procurement basics	171	19%
Meal pattern	130	15%
Federal, state, and local regulations	92	10%
USDA foods	91	10%
Local and values-based purchasing	87	10%
Budgeting / Limits / Allowable costs	72	8%
Forecasting	57	6%
Compliance	55	6%
Cooperatives / GPOs / Collaborative procurement	49	6%
Buy American	46	5%
Contracts	46	5%
Audits	43	5%
Inventory and Ordering	41	5%
National School Lunch Program	35	4%
None	34	4%
Resource documents	34	4%
Administration	32	4%
Food Safety	30	3%
Farm to School	28	3%
Nutrition	27	3%
Vendor management	22	2%
Other USDA programs	22	2%
Food buying guide	20	2%
Market research	17	2%
All trainings were helpful	14	2%
Equipment	14	2%
Refresher course	13	1%
Hands-on training	13	1%
Scratch cooking	12	1%
FSMCs	11	1%

Table 11. Classification of Respondent Roles

CATEGORY	JOB TITLE
<i>Administration (General)</i>	Principal
	Superintendent
<i>Nutrition</i>	Administrative Assistant
	Administrator
	Cafeteria staff
	Coordinator
	Director
	Food Services Manager
	Manager
	Nutrition Buyer
	Nutrition Director
	<i>School Business</i>
Bookkeeper	
Business Manager	
Business Official	
Buyer	
Director of Purchasing	
Director of Student Services	
Facilities & Operations	
Finance & Operations	
Procurement	
<i>Other</i>	Agroecology & Sustainability Supervisor
	Unknown

## Endnotes

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- 1 National Archives, "Code of Federal Regulations," [www.ecfr.gov](http://www.ecfr.gov), accessed May 8, 2025, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/part-210/section-210.2>.
- 2 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "National School Lunch Program - Child Nutrition Tables," [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov), accessed July 17, 2025, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.
- 3 Partners for Public Good is a newly formed nonprofit led by former staff of the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab. The team who conducted the survey transitioned into this new organization as of March 1, 2025, so there was continuity in the research and staffing across the project.
- 4 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "School Food Authority Survey III on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation," [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov), accessed March 2025, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/schoolmeals/sfa-survey3-scd>.
- 5 One respondent marked that they worked outside the US, one respondent identified themselves as a childcare center, which was outside the eligible population for the survey, and there were a total of 1045 blank responses. These survey responses were excluded from the final tally.
- 6 The chi-square test is a statistical procedure used to determine the difference between observed and expected data. It helps determine whether a difference between two categorical variables (for example, a school district's size and the top procurement challenge faced) is due to chance or a relationship between the two variables.
- 7 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "School Food Authority Survey III on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation," [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov), accessed March 2025, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/schoolmeals/sfa-survey3-scd>.
- 8 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "School Food Authority Survey III on Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation," [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov), accessed March 2025, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/schoolmeals/sfa-survey3-scd>.
- 9 Statistical significance of ranking top challenges by district size,  $p < .001$
- 10 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, "Study of School Food Authorities (SFA) Procurement Practices," [fns-prod.azureedge.us](http://fns-prod.azureedge.us), accessed March 2025, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SFA-Procurement.pdf>
- 11 2 CFR 200.319(b) states: To ensure objective contractor performance and eliminate unfair competitive advantage, contractors that develop or draft specifications, requirements, statements of work, or invitations for bids must be excluded from competing on those procurements.

## Disclaimer

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