

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105697](#), a report to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The USDA Foods in Schools program is an important source of nutritious, domestic food for school meals. Through the program, school food authorities select from over 200 products that USDA offers to purchase on their behalf—an annual value of about \$1.6 billion. The program relies on a network of public and private stakeholders to operate effectively.

GAO was asked to review implementation of the USDA Foods in Schools program. This report examines (1) spending for the program in recent years and (2) any challenges states and school food authorities faced in operating the program, as well as USDA’s assistance in addressing challenges.

GAO analyzed data on USDA Foods in Schools purchases from school years 2014-15 through 2020-21. GAO surveyed all states that operate the program, and interviewed officials from a non-generalizable sample of four states and eight school food authorities. GAO selected states based on use of USDA Foods in Schools entitlement, geographic diversity, and other reasons. GAO selected school food authorities for a range of locales. GAO also interviewed USDA officials and reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and documents.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to USDA, including to develop a mechanism to routinely and systematically identify and address challenges, and to establish guidelines for timely communication with states. USDA agreed with all three recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105697](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

June 2023

# SCHOOL MEALS

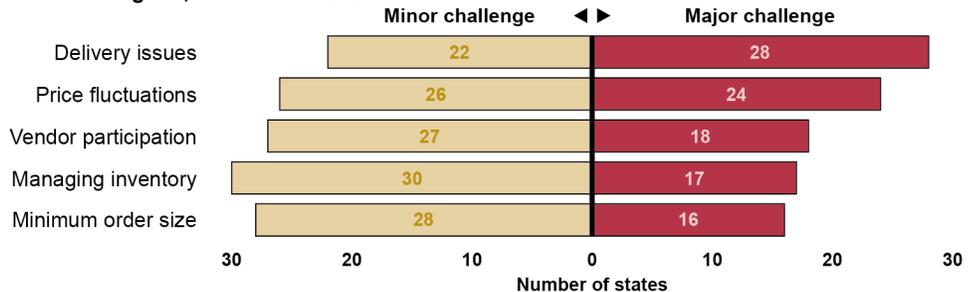
## USDA Should Address Challenges in Its “Foods in Schools” Program

### What GAO Found

Local school food authorities primarily used the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foods in Schools program to obtain beef, poultry, and fresh produce, according to GAO’s analysis of the most recent Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) data available. From school years 2014-15 through 2020-21, beef and poultry accounted for nearly 40 percent of all USDA Foods in Schools purchases, an average of more than \$625 million per year. Over that same period, fresh produce purchases through the program nearly tripled. Selected states and school food authorities GAO interviewed described several factors that affected which foods school food authorities obtained through the program, including cost, convenience, and the staff resources available to manage inventory.

States reported major challenges in operating the USDA Foods in Schools program in school year 2021-22, according to GAO’s survey. For example, 28 states reported major challenges with delivery issues, including cancelations, delays, and receiving less than their full order. States reported that this challenge generally existed prior to the pandemic, but worsened during it. Officials from school food authorities GAO interviewed said they had to adjust quickly to address delivery issues, such as by making last-minute menu substitutions or serving the same meal multiple days in a row. Though USDA has begun to identify and address some operational challenges on an ad hoc basis, it does not do so routinely or systematically. Without a mechanism to identify and address challenges, USDA may miss opportunities to respond to risks and achieve the program’s main objective—providing domestic foods for nutritious meals.

**Challenges States Reported in Operating the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foods in Schools Program, School Year 2021-22**



Source: GAO analysis of state survey results. | [GAO-23-105697](#)  
 Note: For more details, see figure 7 in [GAO-23-105697](#).

More than half of states reported satisfaction with FNS’s assistance on the USDA Foods in Schools program, according to GAO’s survey. However, 21 states identified opportunities for additional assistance, including more timely communication. Specifically, nine states reported delayed or lacking communication from FNS, especially regarding USDA Foods orders. FNS staff said they do not have guidelines for communication with states, but respond as soon as possible. By establishing such guidelines, FNS could track its efforts to provide timely responses and better assist states in operating the program.