SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Improved Reviews, Federal Guidance, and Data Collection Needed to Address Counting and Claiming Errors

What GAO Found

Although states and SFAs conduct program integrity reviews of the school meal programs, gaps in federal requirements for these reviews limit their effectiveness at identifying meal counting and claiming errors. States and SFAs are generally not required to review the School Breakfast Program, and 21 states reported through GAO’s survey that they do not review the breakfast program. However, USDA estimates that the percentage of meal counting and claiming errors is higher in the breakfast program than the lunch program. Further, some states reported that SFA reviews of the meal programs are ineffective at identifying and reducing errors, which may be due, in part, to the self-assessment design of these reviews. When state and SFA reviews identify errors, meal counting and claiming errors persist. For example, in several SFAs that GAO visited, the same errors were identified during consecutive reviews. States and SFAs identified multiple factors that hinder efforts to address these errors, such as staff turnover, inadequate training, and school policies that complicate meal service.

Federally Required Reviews of Counting and Claiming in Meal Programs

USDA has taken some actions to improve state reviews of SFAs, but it has not directly focused on oversight of meal counting and claiming. USDA recently provided new review forms and nationwide training to strengthen state reviews and also simplified the application process for state grants to conduct additional reviews of SFAs. However, USDA has not targeted its oversight efforts to identify or address meal counting and claiming errors. For example, USDA regional offices’ reviews of state administration of the school meal programs do not focus on these errors, and some regional officials could not provide information on the extent of these errors in the states they oversee. USDA also has not updated its meal counting and claiming manual since it was first issued in 1991. Further, while USDA collects annual data on findings from state reviews of SFAs, the agency has not used these data for oversight purposes or to assess risks associated with meal counting and claiming errors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture modify the requirements for state and SFA reviews and improve federal guidance and data collection. USDA agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

View GAO-09-814 or key components. For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.