SCHOOL MEALS

USDA Could Improve Verification Process for Program Access

What GAO Found

In May 2014, GAO reported that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had taken several steps to implement or enhance controls to identify and prevent ineligible beneficiaries from receiving school-meals benefits. For example:

- USDA worked with Congress to develop legislation to automatically enroll students who receive Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits for free school meals; this program has a more-detailed certification process than the school-meals program.
- Starting in the 2013–2014 school year, USDA increased the frequency with which state agencies complete administrative reviews of school districts from every 5 years to every 3 years. As part of this process, state agencies review applications to determine whether eligibility determinations were correctly made.

In its May 2014 report, GAO identified opportunities to strengthen oversight of the school-meals programs while ensuring legitimate access, such as the following:

- If feasible, computer matching income data from external sources with participant information could help identify households whose income exceeds eligibility thresholds. As of May 2014, school districts verified a sample of approved applications deemed “error-prone”—statutorily defined as those with reported income within $1,200 of the annual eligibility guidelines—to determine whether the household is receiving the correct level of benefits (referred to as standard verification in this testimony). In a nongeneralizable review of 25 approved applications from civilian federal households, GAO found that 9 of 19 households that self-reported household income and size information were ineligible and only 2 could have been subject to standard verification.
- Verifying a sample of categorically eligible applications could help identify ineligible households. GAO reported that school-meal applicants who indicate categorical eligibility (that is, participating in certain public-assistance programs or meeting an approved designation, such as foster children) were eligible for free meals and were generally not subject to standard verification. In a nongeneralizable review of 25 approved applications, 6 households indicated categorical eligibility, but GAO found 2 were ineligible.

Results of GAO’s Analysis of a Nongeneralizable Sample of 25 Approved Household Applications from the 2010–2011 School Year

View GAO-15-634T. For more information, contact Jessica Lucas-Judy at (202) 512-6722 or lucasjudyj@gao.gov.