



# News Release

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## STUDY FINDS SCHOOLS LOCAL FOOD BUYS EQUAL OR EXCEED GOVERNMENT-BOUGHT FOODS FOR QUALITY AND ACCEPTABILITY

Food products which school districts buy from local suppliers for their lunch programs at least equal and in many cases are better than donated government-bought foods, according to a study conducted by the National Frozen Food Association. The NFFA study was made of the eight school districts nationally which were selected by USDA to test cash instead of donated government foods as an option for the National School Lunch Program. This year, the United States Department of Agriculture expects to spend about \$700 million to buy foods for school lunch programs.

School districts participating in the National Frozen Food Association Food Quality Comparison Study were: Oakland, California; St. Louis, Missouri; Williamsville, New York; Riceville, Iowa; Washington County, Florida; Dayton, Ohio; Boise, Idaho; and Jonesboro, Arkansas.

The NFFA study was conducted to augment work recently completed by Dr. Donald Erickson of Kansas State University in which food costs for producing school lunches using cash were compared with costs for meals prepared using government-bought foods. The Kansas State University Report projected potential annual -MORE-

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savings with cash of up to \$162 million in food costs.

The NFFA Food Quality Study of the test districts was done by questionnaire. School Foodservice Directors were asked about the following product groups: dairy, poultry, beef, and fruits and vegetables.

### THE RESULTS

- (1) Five school districts responding said they used formal sealed bids to buy food for their lunch program(s). One district used competitive price quotes and negotiated bids. Two others used a combination of the alternatives presented. The options given on this question were: (1) formal sealed bids; (2) competitive price quotes; (3) negotiated bids; (4) spot buying; and (5) other.
- (2) All of the districts used product specifications in buying food for their lunch program(s) either all the time or more than 75% of the time. The source of these specifications was either USDA or industry specifications.
- (3) In none of the districts were buying methods changed when they went on the cash in lieu of commodities program.
- (4) Dairy Products
  - a. In every district, the commercially bought dairy products were specified at USDA Grade A or better.
  - b. In every district the quality and acceptability of commercially bought products were either better or the same as

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those supplied by USDA. In no case was the commercial product bought less acceptable.

- c. For processed american cheese, NFFA asked the school districts to compare the quality and acceptability of commercial product to that supplied by USDA. In three districts not much difference was noted. However, in all the others, this question elicited strong responses in favor of the commercially-bought product. These responses were:

"The taste (of the commercial cheese) was more acceptable. It melts when used in grilled cheese sandwiches or macaroni and cheese. Much of the commodity cheese did not melt."

(Dayton, OH)

"Purchased white processed american which is better accepted."

(Williamsville, NY)

"Purchased cheese has good flavor, color and consistency in addition to the fact that it is sliced in one half ounce slices for good portion control. Commodity cheese has poor flavor (strong after taste), uneven color with red streaks appearing and consistency is gummy which makes slicing difficult and accurate portion control impossible." (Oak-

land, CA)

"An acceptable imitation process american cheese was purchased at a much lower price. The commodity cheese received the prior year was pink and gummy. An excellent imitation moz-

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zarella cheese was purchased. The biggest advantage in purchasing our own cheese was that it was all either sliced or grated which was a savings in labor cost." (Boise, ID)

### (5) Beef Products

- a. Seven of the eight school districts either met or exceeded the USDA specification of 22% fat content in ground beef. Three of the seven participating districts exceeded USDA requirements while one indicated extra lean was not necessary for program needs.
- b. When asked about TVP in purchased products, all the school districts responded that the only time there was TVP in the products purchased was when they specified the ingredient.

### (6) Poultry Products

- a. All the school districts indicated that their specifications for poultry products were USDA Grade A or better. Only one of the school districts bought canned boned poultry while on the cash in lieu of commodities pilot project.
- b. Generally the school districts found the flavor and acceptability of commercially bought product better than with donated product. One district said, "poultry purchased by the government is difficult to thaw and handle and causes increased labor costs."

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- c. Many of the pilot projects bought different poultry products than those which have historically been provided by the USDA through the donated commodity programs.

(7) Fruit and Vegetable Products

- a. All of the school districts specified USDA Grade B or better for fruit and vegetable products and three specified Grade A or better. One school district bought some Grade C fruit to get a light syrup pack.
- b. There was a strong preference expressed for frozen vegetables.
- c. Several school districts raised complaints about the quality of USDA vegetables. One said they doubted that USDA really bought Grade B or better.

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