

## **Produce Safety in Schools Workshop Group Charge**

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this meeting is to discuss fresh produce in the context of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and identify risks that may accrue to students by an increase in the consumption of fresh produce purchased from both large producers and small, local producers. In addition, the Committee will consider risks that might be introduced by handling and preparation practices of school foodservice employees, and through traditional and novel delivery systems that take fresh produce into classrooms, or out-of-doors. This workshop will result in a clearer indication of where risks exist, what can be done to mitigate those risks, and what research and educational efforts would further assure the safety of these very nutritious foods for students.

### **Background**

The NSLP is a very large program that serves 9 million breakfasts and 31 million lunches every day. With numbers as large as those, food safety problems can, and do, occur, but at a surprisingly low rate. In 2003 the GAO reported that 3 percent of foodborne outbreaks reported nationwide occurred in schools. An evaluation of CDC data done by FNS also has shown a very low rate of illness reported in the NSLP.

Currently, there is an emphasis on increasing the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables served to school students in an effort to improve their nutritional status and help combat the obesity problem in youth. The 2008 Farm Bill authorized \$200 million to be spent on produce going to schools, with a minimum of \$50 million to be spent on fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition, up to \$150 million a year in funding was provided through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which provides fresh produce to be served as snacks outside of meals.

In support of this emphasis, a recent IOM study advocates a minimum of 1 cup of fruit at breakfast and  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 cup of vegetables plus  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 cup of fruit at lunch served to students as a means of improving the nutritional content of meals served in school. USDA is also working to increase the amount of fresh produce it provides to schools as USDA Foods. In addition to the fresh produce provided through the DoD Fresh program, the Agricultural Marketing Service is increasing its offerings of fresh produce with some fresh-cut products, starting with pre-cut apple slices and carrot sticks.

The intent of providing more fresh produce to students to improve their nutrient intake and overall health should not be compromised by any risk of increased foodborne illness. The purpose of this discussion is to identify where risks might exist and what steps can be taken to mitigate those risks, from growing, harvesting, sorting, packing, finishing, transporting, and then handling, preparing, and delivering by school food service.

## **Work Group Charge**

The group will hear from speakers who will provide information on the level of increased funding for fresh produce in schools, what products are procured and from what sources, what the risks of certain foods might be, how fresh produce is grown, processed and distributed, and how it is handled in school food service operations.

The participants will break into two groups. One group will address a series of questions regarding the potential risk from produce procured from large commercial suppliers. The other group will discuss the potential risk from produce procured from small, local suppliers, especially in “farm-to-school” operations. Both groups will identify mitigation options for the risks identified. In addition, the two groups will identify research and educational approaches needed that will ultimately serve to improve the confidence that school food service operators and personnel have in fresh produce and enhance their knowledge of safe food handling and delivery methods.

Both groups will address the following questions:

1. What are the most significant food safety risks to schools related to produce procured this way?
2. What best practices should be used to minimize risk when purchasing fresh produce from these sources?
3. What are the key practices to follow during the receiving process for fresh produce procured this way?
4. What are the key practices to follow during storing, preparing, holding, and serving fresh produce?
5. What “best practices” should be used to minimize the risk when purchasing fresh-cut or ready-to-eat produce?
6. How can school food service managers minimize risk from in-coming fresh produce?
7. What, if any, novel delivery systems (outside of the cafeteria) to students do you use, or are aware of?
8. What training is needed by school food service employees? For school food service managers and directors?
9. What educational materials would be useful to train school food service employees?
10. What research is needed to learn more about any risks and mitigation strategies needed to assist schools?
11. Are there educational materials or training that you use currently that you would recommend?

By the close of the meeting, the Work Group will have identified the most pressing issues facing school food service operations regarding fresh produce and what can be done in terms of future research needed and educational programs and materials that can be developed.