Meal Distribution During School Closures:
Assessing Your District's Communication Strategies to Ensure Equitable Access

Food insecurity, or lack of access to enough food to live a healthy life, increases among children during school closures, such as spring, winter, and summer breaks.[1-3] The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread school closures that made this problem worse and highlighted the need to help schools feed hungry children and families.[4,5]

The pandemic and resulting school closures meant that fast action was needed to support school meal programs across the country. A nationwide study was conducted to assess how well local jurisdictions (states, territories, and tribal nations) communicated to schools and school districts about how to:

Photo: Reggie Ross, SNS, serves as School Nutrition Consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC-DPI).
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- Implement meal programs during school closures.
- Communicate with families in their communities.
- Share information about meal pick-up locations.[6]

The study found that some jurisdictions provided comprehensive guidance about meal distribution, while others provided few details. Issues related to health equity were not addressed. For example, few jurisdictions provided guidance to help schools and districts reduce barriers for families trying to access meals or promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. It was also unclear how meal site locations were chosen, to make sure they were serving areas with the highest need.[6]

Access to School Meals Supports Health Equity

To better understand the relationship between school meals and health equity, researchers from the Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) and the national Healthy Eating Research (HER) program began with the Getting to Equity framework developed by Dr. Shiriki Kumanyika.[7] They adapted the framework for a case study of how school meals were distributed and what communication strategies were used to promote them at four large urban school districts (New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston) during the COVID-19 pandemic (figure).[5] Results of the study showed that the school districts were able to make school meals widely available and reduce stigma associated with school meal programs.

Health equity is defined as follows:

"Everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care."[8]
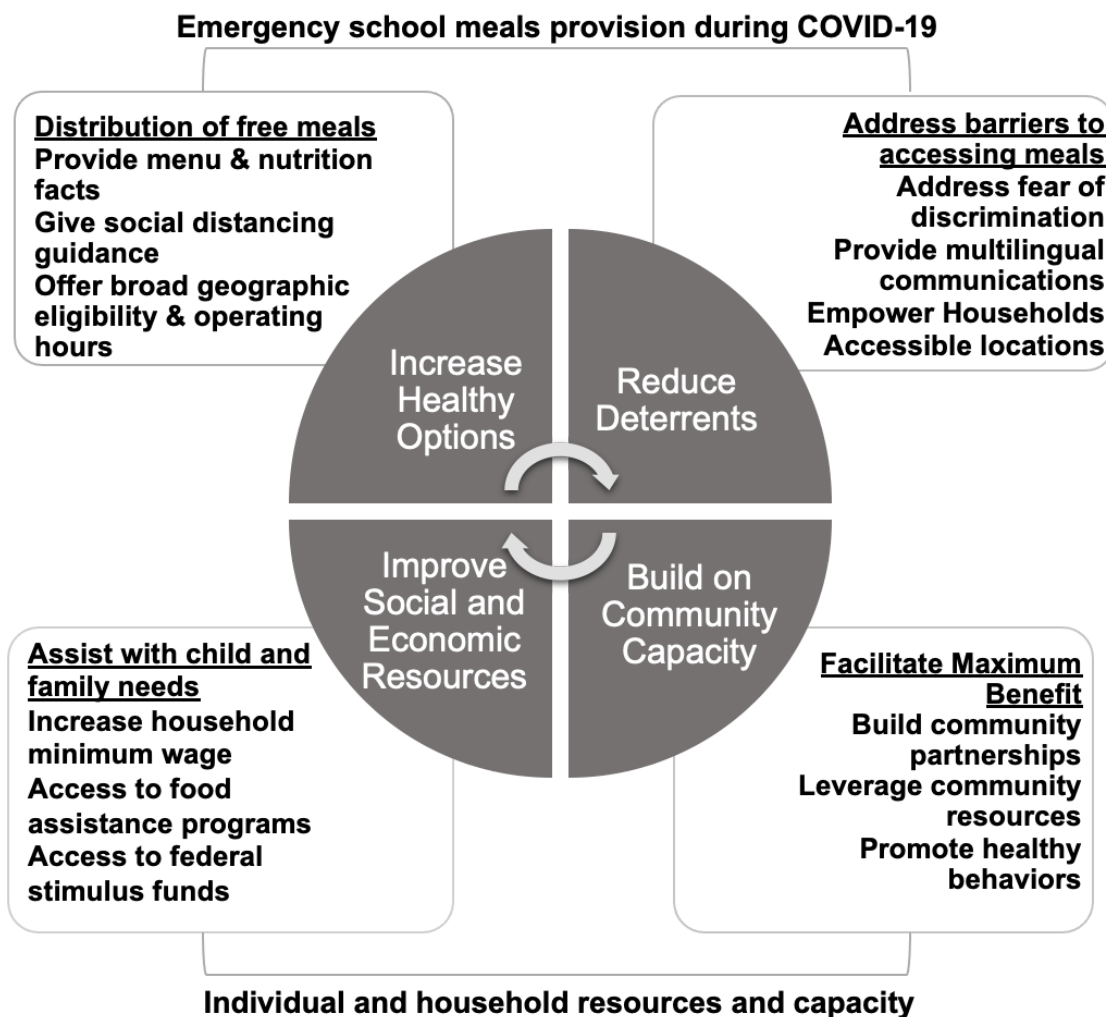
A subsequent evaluation in Maryland found that school districts that served the highest number of meals used several strategies in the "increasing healthy options" category of the adapted framework.[9] For example, they provided comprehensive menu and nutrition information, as well as communicated about where free meals were available and who was eligible for them.

These studies demonstrate that schools can use their position as a community resource to advance health equity through their policies and practices. Careful implementation can increase and promote access to federal nutrition assistance programs to students and families most at risk for food insecurity.[4,10]

New Self-Assessment Tool for Schools

As a result of these studies, researchers developed a self-assessment tool to help schools and school districts communicate with families, students, community members, and service agencies about school meal distribution during planned and unplanned school closures. This tool promotes the use of strategies that help ensure equitable access to these critical meal programs. This tool does not guarantee that health disparities will be mitigated, and it should not be used to determine funding to one school over another. **The goal is to help schools and districts improve their communication strategies and promote equity in school meal programs.**

Figure: Getting to Equity Framework Adapted for COVID-19 School Meal Provision

Emergency school meals provision during COVID-19

Distribution of free meals
Provide menu & nutrition facts
Give social distancing guidance
Offer broad geographic eligibility & operating hours

Address barriers to accessing meals
Address fear of discrimination
Provide multilingual communications
Empower Households
Accessible locations

Increase Healthy Options

Reduce Deterrents

Improve Social and Economic Resources

Build on Community Capacity

Assist with child and family needs
Increase household minimum wage
Access to food assistance programs
Access to federal stimulus funds

Facilitate Maximum Benefit
Build community partnerships
Leverage community resources
Promote healthy behaviors

Individual and household resources and capacity

Source: J Urban Health. 2020;97(6):759–775.

How to Use This Self-Assessment Tool

Step 1
Start by identifying how your school district shares information with families about how to access school meals when schools are closed. This includes both anticipated closures like summer, spring, or winter breaks and unanticipated closures like the ones caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Your communication may include emails, social media posts, or websites. You may want to print these materials or save them as a pdf as part of the assessment process. You can also include flyers sent home with students or mailed to households, and transcripts of phone or text messages sent to families.

This self-assessment is best done by a team of staff at your school or school district, including the nutrition director and members of the school wellness committee. Each member of the team should work independently and then compare answers to reach a consensus on the final responses.

List the communication materials you are reviewing (e.g., e-mail, website) and the date you retrieved them:

Communication #1:_____Date:_____
Communication #2:_____Date:_____
Communication #3:_____Date:_____

Step 2
Read the entire self-assessment tool before you start filling it out. You will see that it is organized into four themes supported by multiple components.

Look at your communication materials to see if they include language that aligns with the components. You may want to make notes on the printed version of your materials or add comments to the pdf version to help you later in the process.

Use the self-assessment tool to indicate whether your communication materials include the appropriate language. The options are "Not Mentioned," "Briefly Mentioned," or "Fully Explained."

For each communication, mark the appropriate column and note which communication medium was used. For example, if your school **menus** highlight areas of accommodation to diets based on restriction or religious beliefs, you would mark an **M** in the "Briefly Mentioned" or "Fully Described" column, depending on how much detail is provided.

Step 3
After each team member has completed Step 2 separately, compare your scores to reach consensus on the final responses. The notes you made on your materials will be useful for this step.

Step 4
Work together as a team to assess how well your school or school district promotes equitable participation in school meal programs. Identify priority areas where you can improve the equity focus of your communication. Use the following scale to rate the level of priority for change in your communication: 3 = Low priority, 2 = Medium priority, 1 = High priority.

Then, use the **Prioritization Worksheet** on page 7 to help your team organize your new communication strategies.

Self-Assessment of Communication Materials and Strategies

School or School District: _____

Completed by: _____

Getting to Equity Framework Themes	Score			Priority Scale (3, 2, 1)
	Not Mentioned	**Briefly Mentioned**	**Fully Described**	
Use the following letters to indicate which source of communication is being coded: email (E), social media (S), website (W), school menus (M), or other (O). *Example: If school **menus** highlight areas of accommodation to diets based on restriction or religious beliefs, mark an **M** in the "Briefly Mentioned" or "Fully Described" column, depending on how much detail is provided.*				
Theme 1: Distribution of School Meals				
1. Indicate that all meals are free of charge or clearly state price				
2. Describe meal eligibility criteria (e.g., meals for students younger than age 18 and those older than 18 who are in special education programs)				
3. Describe number of meals and snacks offered and meal distribution schedule				
4. Provide menu and nutrition information on all meals and snacks				
5. Specify compliance with USDA nutrition standards (Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010)				
6. Include menu items that reflect the population (e.g., culturally appropriate foods, images with diverse group of students)				

	Score			Priority Scale (3, 2, 1)
	Not Mentioned	**Briefly Mentioned**	**Fully Described**	
Theme 2: Address Barriers to Accessing School Meals				
1. Describe a variety of locations, times, and distribution modes (e.g., bus route, delivery, pick up)				
2. Address fear of discrimination (e.g., explicit language that no ID is needed, no children need to be present at pick-up location,* no one will be turned away)				
3. Provide multilingual communications (e.g., menus, social media, newsletters)				
4. Specify meal accommodations offered (e.g., for special diets or allergies)				
5. Provide health and safety guidance for serving and receiving meals (e.g., social distancing*)				
6. Include USDA nondiscrimination statement https://www.fns.usda.gov/civil-rights/usda-nondiscrimination-statement-other-fns-programs				
Theme 3: Facilitate Maximum Benefit				
1. Promote community partners helping support meal programs (e.g., packaging items, providing volunteers, meal delivery support)				
2. Promote healthy behaviors outside school settings (e.g., physical activity, stress management, eating fruits and vegetables, preparing healthy meals)				
3. Empower local residents to participate (e.g., encourage community feedback and suggestions, use encouraging or welcoming language, ask community members to spread the word and volunteer to support your efforts)				

	Score			Priority Scale (3, 2, 1)
	Not Mentioned	**Briefly Mentioned**	**Fully Described**	
Theme 4: Assist with Child and Family Needs				
1. Promote access to food assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, P-EBT, WIC), anti-hunger organizations, and food pantries				
2. Describe available assistance for children and families (e.g., support to pay for utilities, housing, Wi-Fi access, or educational materials)				
3. Provide information on support for accessing financial resources (e.g., help to navigate supplemental federal funding or assistance programs during COVID-19, such as TANF and stimulus payments)*				
* COVID-specific communication strategies. 3 = Low priority, 2 = Medium priority, 1 = High priority.				

How to Interpret Your Scores

- Identify the components where your answer was "Briefly Mentioned" or "Not Mentioned." Next, identify the components your team labeled as high priority. These are the areas where you need to focus on making improvements.

- Identify 1 to 3 priority areas that you can implement in the coming school year to promote equitable access to school meals through your communications.

Prioritization Worksheet

Priority 1	
Theme:	Component:
Existing Language:	New Language:
Where Will the Language be Updated (e.g. website):	
Person Responsible for Updating Language:	Date Complete:
Notes:	

Priority 2	
Theme:	Component:
Existing Language:	New Language:
Where Will the Language be Updated (e.g. website):	
Person Responsible for Updating Language:	Date Complete:
Notes:	

Priority 3	
Theme:	Component:
Existing Language:	New Language:
Where Will the Language be Updated (e.g. website):	
Person Responsible for Updating Language:	Date Complete:
Notes:	

Resources for Schools

The following resources can help you improve your communication strategies to promote equitable access to school meal programs during school closures.

- **USDA Resource on School Meals**: Provides answers to questions asked by school nutrition administration staff during the pandemic.

- **No Kid Hungry: Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit**: Information for LEAs on how to promote participation and equity in summer meal programs.

- **CDC Practitioners Guide for Promoting Health Equity**: Provides strategies and case study examples on how to promote health equity in school nutritional programming

- **School Meal Programs Are for All Kids: CDC Healthy Schools Partner Promotion Toolkit**: Contains background information about school meals, sample social media posts, graphics, and newsletter text to help school nutrition programs promote the availability of free school meals for all kids during the 2020-2021 school year.

- **CDC Healthy Schools: School Meals**: Provides an overview of school meal programs, benefits of participation, and key resources to promote access to and participation in these programs.

- **No Kid Hungry School Meals Marketing Toolkit**: Contains resources that are ready to use or that can be customized to communicate with families in English or Spanish.

- **Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)**: National nonprofit that supports policy and advocacy efforts to promote access to nutritional school meals.

- **The Praxis Project's School Nutrition, Food Procurement, & Equitable Community Development Brief**: Highlights how nutrition policy and procurement in K-12 schools can advance health equity and community power.

Acknowledgment

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