

Feeding Students During COVID-19 Related School Closures

Summary of Initial Pandemic Response and Recommendations for Communication and Outreach during School Year 2020-2021

Key Findings:

- Participation in emergency school meals is still low, meaning a large proportion of students may be at risk for food insecurity. Innovative approaches are therefore needed to mitigate increased food insecurity and to help schools prevent further financial losses due to lack of participation.
- Individually and collectively, emergency declarations, school closure announcements, and child nutrition administrative agencies' websites were and will continue to be important communication channels for ensuring that children maintain access to meals during school closures and reopening.
- During the initial weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half of all United States (US) states, tribes, territories and the District of Columbia announced school closures within days of an emergency declaration and adapted quickly to provide meal service information to a variety of stakeholders and mobilize dedicated school food service staff, among others, to deliver meals while mitigating disease transmission.
- Almost all jurisdictions made their meal site locations/information public, which is invaluable to helping students and families understand local access to "Grab-n-Go" meals. However, only a small proportion of government websites examined provided user-friendly information such as interactive databases and maps.
- Guidance and technical assistance regarding best practices for schools and districts to communicate and engage students, families, and communities were limited.
- Partnerships with anti-hunger organizations were infrequently discussed on government websites in the initial stages of the pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced widespread school closures beginning mid-March 2020, impacting at least 124,000 US public and private schools serving at least 55.1 million students.¹ Schools closures disrupted a critical nutrition source for more than 30 million students who participate in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and 15 million students who participate in the School Breakfast Program (SBP). NSLP/SBP participants receive up to two-thirds of their daily nutritional needs through these programs.² Stronger nutrition standards for school meals have had a positive and significant influence on nutritional quality and in ensuring participants have access to nutritious meals and snacks that support normal growth and development.^{3,4}

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic ramifications have worsened already known inequities. Those who identify as racial/ethnic minorities and low-socioeconomic status are at a greater risk for: 1) contracting the virus and experiencing health complications and 2) facing greater financial hardship (i.e., loss of employment, rise in healthcare costs).^{5,6} These factors pose further barriers to populations that are already food insecure.^{7,8} A recent report highlights that food insecurity has doubled overall and tripled in populations with children.⁹ Despite these increases in food insecurity and heroic efforts by school food service, meal participation remains low and schools are losing a lot of money.¹⁰⁻¹³



Figure 1: Students receiving school meals through grab and go service

Purpose Statement

The aim of this study was to conduct a novel nationwide assessment of child nutrition administrative agencies' responses and communications to internal and external stakeholders regarding meal service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic related to school closures. This information is crucial in order to strengthen the current and future emergency planning during school closures.

Methodology

Due to the school closures occurring in mid-March 2020, we conducted a rapid-cycle assessment of communication and implementation practices of 50 US states and the District of Columbia (DC), 5 US territories, and the US Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Education (BIE).²¹ We sought to gather jurisdiction-level practices and communication efforts to help schools and district nutrition staff implement emergency school meal programming in the initial stages of the pandemic. Specifically, we sought input from our collaborators at Share Our Strength and the [HER NOPREN COVID-19 School Nutrition Implications Working Group](#), and internal research team to generate a comprehensive list of practices that may impact participation in emergency school meal programming. Table 1 below illustrates the practices and the scoring system developed through an iterative process to assess how jurisdictions responded in the initial weeks of school closures.



Figure 2: Grab-and-Go Meal Service in Los Angeles Unified School District

In response to the pandemic and resulting school closures, on March 18, 2020, Congress (P.L. 116-127) granted the USDA administrative flexibilities for school-based nutrition assistance programs, along with appropriations for expanded emergency nutrition assistance to eligible families impacted by school closures, known as Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT).^{14,15} Administrative agencies at the state, tribal, territorial, and the District of Columbia levels could seek waivers to: (1) provide meals during pandemic-related school closures, even if increasing costs to the federal government; (2) approve non-congregate feeding sites outside the school/care setting; (3) adjust meal nutritional content, if needed due to COVID-19-related supply chain disruptions; and (4) modify administrative requirements that cannot be met due to COVID-19; among others.¹⁶ P-EBT was either distributed as an additional benefit to SNAP participants on their existing EBT cards or via new EBT cards issued to eligible, non-SNAP households.

Child nutrition administrative agencies can and will continue to be important communication channels for ensuring that children maintain access to meals during school closures and reopening. Currently, emergency school meal participation is still significantly lower than habitual rates. This means that schools cannot claim reimbursement from the USDA for meals served and thus lose a vital source of income, which jeopardizes their financial stability.¹² To communicate clearly and in culturally and contextually appropriate manners, especially during emergencies, child nutrition administrative agencies must balance **external** (participating families and students) and **internal** (local sponsors such as Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and faith-based organizations) stakeholders' information needs. Evidence suggests providing clear and concise information to external stakeholders regarding meal site locations, among other program information, is critical in promoting school meal participation.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ This is particularly important when targeting populations with low-income and that identify as racial/ethnic minorities, whose meal participation might be negatively impacted by lack of transportation or childcare, public safety concerns including COVID-19, or the chilling effect of the Public Charge Rule, which now makes participating in the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), among other federal social assistance programs, grounds for denying a lawful path to citizenship.²⁰

Table 1: Scoring criteria for jurisdiction-level communication and documentation

| Criterion | Score | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| | 0=Low | 1=Moderate | 2=High |
| Emergency Declaration – Mentions/References School or Meal Provisions | No specific mention relating to schools | General reference to other state agencies, such as schools | Specific school mention within declaration |
| School Closure Declaration- Mentions/References Meal Provisions | No mention | General reference to essential services | School meals mentioned |
| Providing information on school meals on the main DOE/DOA “COVID information/updates” landing page | No information on school meals on the main COVID-19 landing page | School meals are mentioned on the main landing page with very limited information for families and/or schools (e.g., 1 or 2 links, out-of-date information, or only information for schools and not families) | Detailed information on school meals for both schools and families provided on the main landing page (including links to waivers, best practices, school meal sites) |
| School Meal Sites (locations/dates/hours) | None listed/difficult to find | Listed but not in an easily accessible form | Show in a Geographic Information System (GIS) map or other easily interpretable form and/or a number to text provided |
| Guidance on Communication/Outreach to Families | No guidance on how to communicate with families specifically about school meal provisions | Some verbiage about the importance of communicating with families | A dedicated section for families with clear communication (e.g., Q&As, meal site maps) |
| Emergency meal service implementation guidance | Nothing more than waivers and USDA documentation listed | Some documents listed such as Q&A | Updated Q&A document, best practices document/text, and other resources available and easy to find |
| Partnering with Anti-hunger Advocacy Organization | No mention of state partnering with anti-hunger organization or links to local organizations during school meal provisions | Provides only links to state emergency food resources (i.e., state food banks, United Way) but no mention of how they are partnered with school meal provisions | Lists partnership with antihunger groups for school meal provision or mapping |

We coded all jurisdictions’ websites and associated information from late February until the first week of May 2020 to examine practices in each of the 7 coding categories. We observed variability in the way jurisdictions implemented emergency meal service programming, and below we summarize key trends in the data.

Key Findings

Clarity on Jurisdiction Declarations and Announcements

Of all coding categories, jurisdictions scored highest in referencing emergency school meals in the school closure announcements (76% scored “high”). Many jurisdictions opted to include blanket language, such as “We will continue to serve school meals through the Seamless Summer Option (SSO)/Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) mechanisms.”

80% of emergency declarations from state/territory governors included *some* language pertaining to schools, ranging from “authorizing schools to take appropriate action” (coded as moderate) to specific steps schools should take to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (i.e., “all public schools, private schools, daycares, and ASCC, will be closed until further notice”; coded as strong).

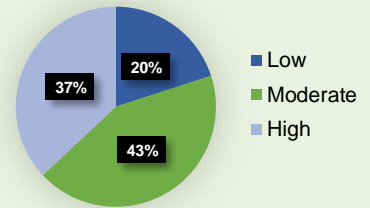
Similarly, 98% of jurisdiction COVID-19 landing pages mentioned school meals, with similar examples of strong practices to that of school closure announcements.

Language to Support Reach and Implementation

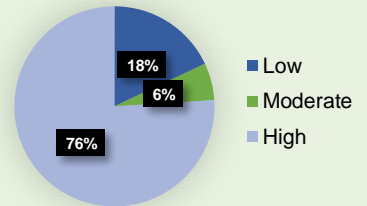
Implementation guidance was the most disparate scoring category with a split between low (27%), moderate (34%), and high (37%) scoring categories. Examples of weak/less comprehensive practices comprised brief or outdated Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents or listing waivers from USDA with no interpretation. Strong examples of guidance included detailed interpretation of each waiver and suggestions for how to implement programming, as well as posted webinars from jurisdiction leadership engaging stakeholders in programming and decision-making.

Guidance provided for communication with families was the weakest component with only 21% of jurisdictions scoring in the highest category. Most jurisdictions provided no information regarding how best to work with families, whereas weaker/moderate examples included some verbiage in the FAQ documents (“i.e., send updates to families on where to find meal sites.”). More comprehensive examples comprised guidance documents specifically for families (in multiple languages), in addition to providing social media/email templates for schools to use for communication.

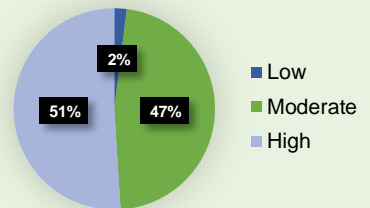
Emergency Declaration Reference



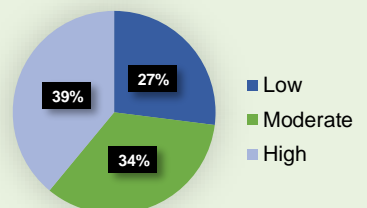
School Closure Meal Reference



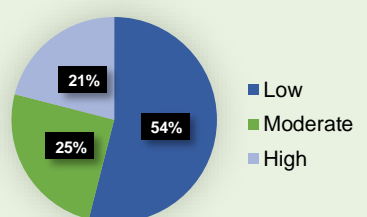
COVID Page Meal Reference



Implementation Guidance



Communication



Visibility of Meal Sites and Partnerships

Meal site information was made widely accessible in 58% of jurisdictions through interactive/searchable maps, allowing children and families to search the closest meal sites to their location. 28% of jurisdictions did not have an interactive map but stakeholders could view all meal sites through either an Excel spreadsheet (download) or a list of sites on the jurisdiction webpage.

Only 11% of jurisdictions reported partnerships with anti-hunger service providers or advocacy groups for the purpose of meal distribution and advertised this through their website. Those that did partner with organizations co-created resources accessed through an enhanced webpage, increasing usability and reach to families.

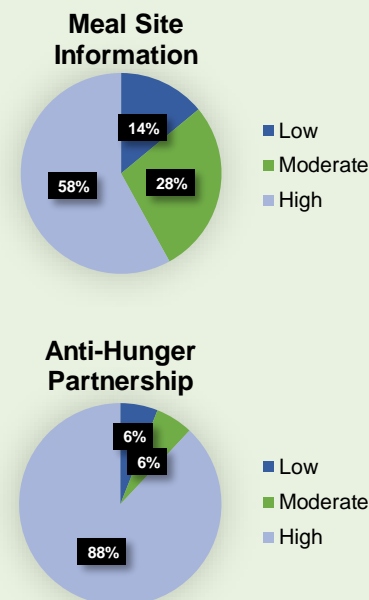


Figure 3: Examples of Comprehensive Practices:

| | |
|---|--|
| State Declaration School Reference | "If an LEA closes..., provide school meals in non-congregate settings through the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option, consistent with the requirements of the California Department of Education and US Department of Agriculture." |
| School Closure Meal Reference | "All schools should work with their local governments and county health departments to determine appropriate meal provision, childcare, or other community uses of school facilities or resources while complying with all directives regarding social distancing, hygiene, and other methods of slowing the spread of COVID-19." |
| Meal Sites | Providing a "Find a meal site near you" search option within websites to enhance usage and access to nutrition resources. |
| Communication/ Outreach | Specific section of the website titled "For parents" with translation into Spanish. Providing a separate Q&A document for parents. |
| Implementation Guidance | Updated Q&A document with date stamps to show frequent updates. Provide adaptations to USDA waivers/guidance such as "grab and go implementation" to meet unique needs in the community. |
| Anti-Hunger Partnership | A dedicated website (linked to on the main agency website) that highlights a partnership with a trusted state anti-hunger organization. The organization helped provide a meal site map, resource hotline available in multiple languages, information from advocacy organizations, and materials and guidance for outreach. |
| Education COVID Page Reference | On the main COVID-19 landing page, a link to a "child nutrition resources" website, which contained separate sections with 1) information for families, 2) guidance for schools, 3) information about Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT), 4) a Q&A document, and 5) links to recordings of recent "town hall" sessions. |

Recommendations for Communication and Outreach during School Year 2020-2021 and Beyond to Increase Meal Participation

Ensuring participation in emergency school meal programs is of paramount concern as the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures continue to place children and families at a greater risk for food insecurity. Our findings highlight areas of strength and improvement. Based on our nationwide assessment of initial responses, we recommend:



Increase Dedicated Implementation Assistance

USDA should utilize existing training and capacity-building resources and Congress should assess if additional implementation supports are needed to provide critical technical assistance on communication and outreach, including more rapid dissemination of best practices and lessons learned regarding Grab-n-Go meals and P-EBT. Adequate staffing was highlighted as a need for enhanced implementation, in addition to technical assistance (i.e., meal counts, securing vendors), and collaborating with other social services (i.e., foster care centers) to enhance reach to vulnerable students.^{12,15} Further, greater communication between state SNAP and education agencies could enhance information sharing and better support for those working on the ground to enhance meal service.



Enhance Cultural Sensitivity

States, tribes, territories, and DC should ensure their food assistance sections on their COVID-19 landing page, in addition to all other relevant government websites, provide user-friendly information for students and families such as meal site locations, COVID-19 safety mitigation procedures, and other key information regarding meal pick-up. Information for students and families should also explain P-EBT and other available federal nutrition assistance programs or other food assistance options such as local food banks. This information should be translated into the predominant languages of the student population.



Streamline Information Delivery

Child nutrition administrative agency websites should ensure information for school and district food service administrators is easy to navigate, including up-to-date information regarding USDA waivers and how they are being implemented. These websites should also provide best practices for communication and outreach to students and families, including sample letters, automated calls/hotlines, web-based information, FAQs, short videos, and social media. Initial research on P-EBT implementation highlights the need to develop clear communication plans to explain how meal/P-EBT programs work to families, sharing information publicly and replicating through multiple channels (i.e., social media) to enhance reach.^{12,15} Messages should be clear to encourage both P-EBT participation, as well as continuing to participate in emergency feeding site options at schools, childcare, and other community centers.



Collaborate with Anti-Hunger Organizations

Elected officials and administrative agencies at the state, tribal, territorial, and within DC should consider new or enhanced partnerships with anti-hunger organizations, among other key community champions and organizations, which have been shown to increase meal participation by improved communication and outreach capabilities from trusted sources. Collaborating with such organizations was found to be a best practice by the School Nutrition Association, specifically in mitigating issues of food procurement when demand is high but finances are constrained.^{12,15}



Increase Community Engagement

Include trusted community members and organizations in the development and dissemination of communication materials. Community engagement, such as the development of a community advisory board, can help districts identify high-need and difficult to reach populations, prioritize effective channels for dissemination, and learn about previously unknown needs.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to both Healthy Eating Research (HER), a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), and the US Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity-supported Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) for their support of an ad hoc joint COVID-19 School Nutrition Implications Working Group.

Funding statement: All authors are members of the HER NOPREN COVID-19 School Nutrition Implications Working Group. HER is a national program of the RWJF. NOPREN is supported by CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Cooperative Agreement no. 5U48DP00498-05. HER provided stipend support to SF as Co-Chair of the Working Group and NOPREN provided fellowship support to GMM, AH and CGD. NOPREN provided additional support to GMM to create this research brief.

Suggested citation: McLoughlin, G. M., Fleischhacker, S., Hecht, A. A., McGuirt, J., Vega, C., Read, M., Colón-Ramos, U., & Dunn, C. G. Feeding Students during COVID-19 Related School Closures: Summary of Initial Pandemic Response and Recommendations for Communication and Outreach during School Year 2020-2021. San Francisco, CA; Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network; 2020. Available at [https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046\(20\)30652-7/fulltext](https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(20)30652-7/fulltext).

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