

COVID-19 School Reopening: Supporting School Meals and Students' Health in School Year 2020-2021

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The recommendations included in this report are those of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Center for Ecoliteracy and does not necessarily reflect the views of outside reviewers. This brief is intended for educational and informative purposes.

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The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals founded in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1917, by a visionary group of women dedicated to helping the government conserve food and improve the public's health and nutrition during World War I. Today, the Academy represents more than 100,000 credentialed practitioners — registered dietitian nutritionists, dietetic technicians, registered, and other dietetics and nutrition professionals holding undergraduate and advanced degrees in nutrition and dietetics, and students — and is committed to improving the nation's health and advancing the profession of dietetics through research, education and advocacy. Visit the Academy at eatrightPRO.org.

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The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to cultivating education for sustainable living. We recognize that students need to experience and understand how nature sustains life and how to live accordingly. We encourage schools to teach and model sustainable practices. The Center leads systems change initiatives, publishes original books and resources, facilitates conferences and professional development and provides strategic consulting. We work at multiple levels of scale, with local, regional, state and national programs.

One initiative, [California Food for California Kids®](#) supports systems change by improving children's health, education and the state's economy while teaching students where food comes from and how it reaches the table.

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Skyrocketing unemployment rates due to the COVID-19 pandemic have left many more families wondering how they will make ends meet, including providing healthful meals to their children. This is particularly concerning for the communities of color who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are more likely to experience food insecurity. These unprecedented levels of economic hardship will likely result in increased enrollment in school-based federal nutrition assistance programs. New evidence from a COVID-19 Impact Survey found that food insecurity doubled overall in April and tripled among households with children.¹ With increasing unemployment and the predicted growth of food-insecure children reaching up to 18 million nationally, the nutritional benefits of school meals must remain accessible to all children.²

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) school-based federal nutrition assistance programs (e.g., the National School Lunch (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Programs (SBP)) play a critical role in reducing food insecurity in American households.³ Each school day, nearly 30 million students participate in federally funded school nutrition programs, and more than 20 million qualify for free or reduced priced meals.⁴ Children's eligibility to participate in child nutrition programs and their overall food security status are primarily determined by household income. School meals have been shown to decrease the prevalence of food insecurity and reduce the likelihood of a child becoming ill.³ School meals have also been linked to increased student attendance and improved academic performance, as well as decreased absenteeism, visits to school nurses, and disciplinary actions.⁵

Beyond reducing food insecurity, NSLP participation is associated with a healthier overall eating patterns and higher fruit and whole-grain intake than lunch brought from home.⁶ A recent study suggests that since the implementation of updated nutrition standards in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, there has been a significant decrease in obesity risk for children living in poverty.⁷ Given that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted individuals with underlying health conditions, it is essential to provide children with healthful foods and beverages that reduce their risk of obesity.

Education and public health agencies are actively issuing new guidance to inform local decision-making on reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year. In a recent scan of US states and territories, at least 34 states have already recommended that school districts consider a blended learning schedule to reopen safely.⁸ In blended learning environments, students learn in part through online delivery of class material and in part through in-person instruction supervised by an educator.⁹ Blended instructional schedules offer the benefit of minimizing the number of students on campus at any one time while also offering families an elective virtual option. School districts are considering a multitude of blended learning models for the 2020-2021 school year, including offering in-person instruction on certain days, specific weeks, or during morning and afternoon shifts, supplemented with online instruction at other designated days or times.

School district nutrition programs have clearly demonstrated their capacity to serve students safely during this pandemic. Foodservice operators in 33 states and territories began serving meals within just 72 hours of being notified of school closures in March 2020.¹⁰ These programs are well positioned to continue to provide appealing, nutritious meals in accessible and efficient ways as the various reopening models emerge.

As we consider different scenarios for reopening schools during this pandemic and economic recovery, federal, tribal, state and local governments must position school nutrition programs to operate safely and sustainably, supporting children's health and serving the increased need during this critical time. Over the next several weeks, school nutrition professionals will finalize operational solutions to match their districts' COVID-19 learning environments for the 2020-2021 school year. For the first time, most school nutrition professionals will be offering on-site and off-site meals *simultaneously* to ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in school-based federal nutrition assistance programs.

It is the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that access to enough food for an active, healthy life is a basic human need and fundamental right. Children and adolescents should have access to an adequate supply of healthful and safe foods that promote optimal physical, cognitive and social growth and development. Academy members know firsthand the negative implications of food insecurity and the important role school meals play in providing nutritious school meals for all children — regardless of family income. This issue brief makes the following recommendations to help ensure school nutrition programs remain a critical ingredient to addressing food insecurity among American families.

Provide flexibility to school nutrition programs needed to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic

The USDA has provided local communities the flexibility necessary to serve their students' needs since the beginning of the pandemic and has extended some key waivers that support reopening in the fall and operating through the 2020-2021 school year. As program directors finalize plans, many will be faced with navigating service within non-traditional, blended learning environments. As of July 2020, current waiver authority allows for the continuation of non-congregate meals and flexibility in meal service times, which will be critical to providing meals in blended learning environments. The extension of waivers for parent pick up ensures eligible students participating in distance learning have easier access to school meals.

Additional flexibilities are still needed to equitably provide services to students particularly allowing for the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) to be available for schools and their community partners. Extending all of the current child nutrition meal waivers, including area eligibility for SFSP/SSO, would allow schools and partners to adapt to different meal service environments more smoothly and without the overt identification of students living in households below the federal poverty level. These will also be important tools if schools are required to serve meals during a second wave of COVID-19 campus shutdowns. Additionally, extending the Nationwide Afterschool Activity Waiver ensures schools offering supper programs to eligible students can do so, even where enrichment activities have been cancelled. Alternatively, providing universal free meals during the duration of the pandemic

would greatly offset many of the logistical burdens anticipated by school nutrition professionals as schools reopen for next year.

Provide emergency relief funds to address financial loss during unanticipated closures

Due to COVID-19, school districts will be investing significantly more resources toward safe reopening with the backdrop of drastically reduced funding. In particular, school nutrition programs will be entering the 2020-2021 school year with budget deficits from emergency meal service during the unanticipated spring 2020 school closures. Losses in traditional revenue, fixed labor costs and increased expenditures for equipment, packaging, personal protective gear and food have resulted in unprecedented financial burden for most child nutrition departments across the nation. Congress needs to help make these programs financially solvent to ensure students have access to healthy meals in 2020-2021.

Provide increased funding for school nutrition programs for school year 2020-2021

Current funding levels do not fully account for increased costs or outstanding deficits incurred from emergency meal service during the course of the pandemic. School nutrition programs need increased funding to meet their communities' unique needs. Without adequate funding, programs will lack critical safety and food preparation resources required to meet the demands of serving meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The USDA extended waivers on some regulatory flexibilities to support schools in serving meals throughout the varied learning environments anticipated during the 2020-2021 school year. However, there are concerns that the school meal reimbursement structure will not provide sufficient funding, given the increases in overall costs and potentially lower student participation than typical school years. During COVID-19 unanticipated closures, school nutrition programs reported significant deficits, despite having additional reimbursement under the SFSP. Table 1 (see next page) outlines some of the contributing factors for increased program costs in school nutrition programs.



Table 1: Increased School Nutrition Program Costs and Lost Revenues

<p>Lost Revenues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reduced student participation ● Loss of income from à la carte sales ● Loss of income from catering and vending sales ● Offer vs. serve limitations increase food and waste costs ● Payments for unfulfilled contracts (equipment maintenance, health inspection) ● Lost fixed labor costs from school year 2019-2020 unanticipated closures
<p>Food</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expired foods due to unanticipated school closures ● Rising cost of food, packaging and supplies ● Supply chain interruptions ● Low availability of individually-wrapped foods and pre-cut produce ● Water bottles or installation of contactless hydration stations ● Cost of disposable food wares (trays, serving cups, utensils)
<p>Operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hazard pay for employees ● Increased labor costs for additional meal periods (staggered schedule) ● Increased labor costs for time spent packaging and sanitizing ● Additional foodservice equipment (packaging units, carts, refrigeration, storage, thermal bags) ● Purchasing of touch-free point-of-sale units and meal ordering software ● Increased marketing costs to reach distance learning households ● Transportation costs associated with food delivery
<p>Safety and Precautions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff training on COVID-9 safety and sanitation ● Personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, aprons) ● Support equipment and signage (sneeze guards, social distancing decals, safety and hygiene signage) ● Sanitation products (hand sanitizer, cleaners, soap) ● Thermometers (for screening staff and students)

Here are some of the ways that program directors have discussed additional financial burdens, in their own words:

"Serving meals during the pandemic has been a critical resource for our community. However, our participation has been much lower than when schools are open and children are present. We lost nearly \$1,750,000 in revenue compared to the same months last school year. I spend nearly \$500,000 a month on employee salaries, which remained a fixed cost throughout this time."

"We suffered a \$2.3 million loss in revenue from March to June 2020 due to unanticipated school closures. We also had a 71 percent increase in total meal cost. Due to the lack of revenue our labor cost per meal jumped by 60 to 65 percent due to COVID-19. Our labor cost per meal before COVID-19 was \$1.71 per meal and during COVID-19 jumped to \$2.90 per meal due to loss in revenue. The cost per meal with food and labor was \$2.91 per meal before COVID-19 and during COVID-19 was now at \$4.10 per meal. This was huge for us."

"In our small district we serve 3,300 students and are experiencing a \$350,000 shortfall in the 2019-2020 school year due to COVID-19. Most of this was due to paying fixed labor expenses in spite of extended school closures and significant decreases in school meal participation. The hybrid model being proposed for school reopening will continue to have a negative impact on revenue while food, packaging and labor for packaging and classroom delivery will continue to increase."

Looking ahead to the 2020-2021 school year, the current reimbursement model risks falling far short of school districts' financial needs. Advocates and elected officials should identify potential opportunities to infuse funding into child nutrition programs that ensure they can continue to offer high quality meals that support students' health and learning. One immediate action could be reimbursement at the SFSP rate for the 2020-2021 school year. Increased costs for labor, food and transportation to feed eligible students in blended learning environments will likely mirror, if not exceed, expenses related to unanticipated school closures. In addition to increasing the reimbursement rate for school meals, government dollars should be channeled into existing funding mechanisms to support school nutrition programs.

School kitchen equipment grants

Since 2008, the USDA has provided limited but essential funds to support school districts upgrading their foodservice equipment. For the upcoming 2020-2021 school year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that students not congregate in large group settings, necessitating significant logistical shifts in how school meals will be served and consumed. Cafeterias that serve students in person will require safety measures such as sneeze guards and increased wrapping and packaging. Points of sale will need substitutions for touchpads and other equipment to limit shared objects and surfaces. Many schools are opting to eliminate buffet-style eating. This will increase the quantities of mobile carts, coolers and thermal bags required for schools that choose to serve meals in classrooms or outdoor settings.

School nutrition programs need assistance in procuring adequate equipment that adheres to public health recommendations. Even before the pandemic, nearly 90 percent of schools needed at least one piece of updated school kitchen equipment.¹¹ When schools do not have adequate equipment, they are forced to use costly and inefficient workarounds, which pose an even greater risk during COVID-19. Foodservice departments will also take on the extra expense of personal protective gear and increased labor hours due to lengthier meal service times. Schools are stretched to respond to the food insecurity caused by the pandemic and its economic impacts while also facing significant financial losses from the crisis. An infusion of additional funding can help ensure schools are prepared to serve nutritious foods and beverages when schools return.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

Underlying diet-related chronic disease is a major risk factor for experiencing severe COVID-19 complications. In the face of this pandemic, it is essential that federal nutrition assistance programs focus on foods and beverages that promote a healthy lifestyle. The purpose of the FFVP is to introduce children to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and help them develop lifelong eating habits that improve health and prevent obesity-related chronic diseases.

The FFVP operates in elementary schools across all US states and territories and prioritizes schools with the highest percentage of children certified as eligible for free and reduced-price meals. FFVP has been successful; a recent evaluation indicated that students eat more fruits and vegetables without increasing total caloric intake, suggesting the fruit and vegetable snacks replace less healthful foods.¹² Parents reported that their children eat more fruits and vegetables at both school and home.¹² Increasing children's fruit and vegetable consumption – particularly among high risk and disadvantaged student populations – provides the greatest public health benefit and demonstrates good stewardship of public funding.¹³ Exposure to nutrition education also tends to be higher in schools participating in the FFVP than those not participating.

Now is the time to double down on the benefits of this successful program, which also stands to benefit our agricultural producers who have suffered significant financial losses during the pandemic. To ensure FFVP's success, flexibilities issued at the beginning of the pandemic will need to be extended throughout the 2020-2021 school year. In April 2020, the USDA indicated unspent 2019-2020 dollars could be rolled over to 2020-2021 school year. However, as many schools will still be offering alternative meal distribution in the new school year, these dollars cannot be accessed without a waiver extension.

Farm to School Grants

The USDA's Farm to School grant program is an opportunity to invest in public health and resilient food systems during COVID-19. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 funded and authorized the USDA to establish this grant program. Farm to school programs broadly refer to "efforts that bring regionally and locally produced foods into schools," with a focus on enhancing child nutrition.¹³ The goals of these efforts include increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among students, supporting local farmers and rural communities and providing nutrition and agriculture education to school districts and farmers.

Farm to school results in a triple win for children’s health, local economies and environmental sustainability. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have bolstered local food economies and supply chains by purchasing and serving locally-grown foods and using their facilities to redistribute foods that may have otherwise gone to waste. As school districts gear up for serving meals in the 2020-2021 school year, enhancing the Farm to School grant program would be a wise and timely investment to ensure local farmers have a dependable market and children have access to nutritious food.

Conclusion

Healthful school meals are as crucial to learning as textbooks and pencils. The Academy believes additional funding to support school-based federal nutrition assistance programs are an investment in our country’s future. We must act now to safeguard children’s health and academic success. Mobilizing our school nutrition programs is a proven policy strategy. As President Harry Truman stated when establishing the NSLP: “In the long view, no nation is any healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers.”



Photo by: Dayle Hayes, MS, RD, at James Simons Elementary in Charleston County School District (this photo was taken in 2018)

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