



School Meals During COVID-19

**From the Voices of Superintendents,
School Nutrition Directors,
and Other School District Leaders**

A MIDYEAR REPORT

March 2021



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Project Overview

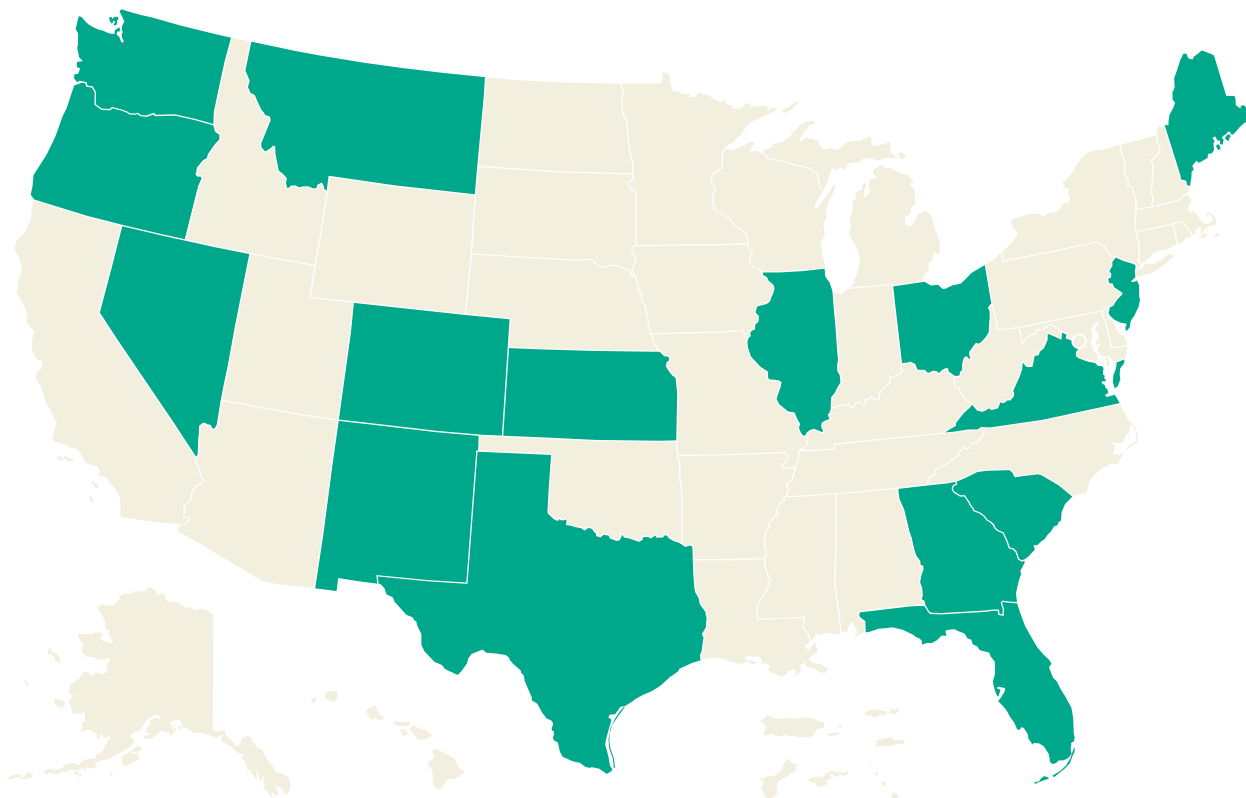
This report highlights a preliminary set of findings from the midpoint of a yearlong project that aimed to understand how K–12 school district-level administrators and school nutrition operators are working together, thinking about meal programs, and providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are based on a series of 36 interviews that FoodCorps conducted from November 2020 through January 2021 with superintendents, school nutrition directors, and other district leaders across a diverse profile of 19 US school districts in 16 states. A second set of an estimated 40 interviews will take place during spring 2021. A synthesis of all conversations during the 2020–21 school year, as well as key insights learned during the process, will be published in a complete report in summer 2021.

District & Stakeholder Selection

By January 2021, FoodCorps had completed conversations with school district administrators (primarily superintendents) and school nutrition directors (including three foodservice management company employees) from 19 school districts in 16 states across the country. School districts, which are deliberately unidentified in this report, were selected to ensure diversity across several criteria:

- Student population size (including very small, small, medium, large, and extra-large district sizes*)
- Federal free/reduced-price meal eligibility percentage (37–97%)
- Geography (representation from 16 states in the contiguous US, across all four major regions*)
- Locale (including districts in rural, town, suburb, and city locales*)
- Student population racial demographics

**Definition based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data*



The 16 U.S. states where participant districts are located.

Methodology

The FoodCorps team hosted a 45-minute conversation with each of the 36 stakeholders. Key topics explored during these fall/winter conversations included the following:

- Approaches to ensuring students receive school meals during the 2020–21 school year
- Successful strategies, adjustments to date, and areas of concern
- Ways district administrators and school nutrition operators coordinate and share key decisions related to students' access to meals
- Communication and connections between nutrition and education

The final report will synthesize key insights across all the key topics. This preliminary report, however, will only highlight perspectives on providing school meals during the pandemic to date.

The 2020–21 school year has presented unique challenges for school districts nationwide. Although almost all school districts went remote in March 2020 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, since the beginning of the new school year, school reopening plans have varied considerably. Some districts have chosen to remain fully remote, while others have employed a hybrid model or reopened entirely. Many have alternated between approaches at different times of the year. In general, district leaders emphasized the importance of adaptability and flexibility in their learning and meal service models for the 2020–21 school year because changes often have been compelled with very little warning or notice based on health department or local government guidance.

Learning Models

Of the 19 districts FoodCorps interviewed, 14 were using a hybrid model, five were fully remote, and zero districts were fully in-person.

Hybrid

There was substantial variation across the 14 school districts employing hybrid learning models. Examples included students alternating days (i.e., half the students coming into buildings on “A days” and the other half receiving in-person instruction on “B days”) or some grades being fully in-person, while others were fully remote (typically, younger grades have been prioritized for in-person). Across the hybrid districts, family preference often was a factor in whether individual students chose to continue as remote learners or return to in-person learning once available.

Remote

Remote learning districts conducted all lessons and educational activities virtually.

Food Service Models

Similar to the variation across learning models, there were substantial differences across the interviewed districts in regard to meal distribution models. Because most of these districts were using hybrid learning models, they also required hybrid approaches to foodservice to provide meals to both in-person and remote learners. Among the remote-only districts, there was additional variation in preferred meal distribution models. Overall, district leaders indicated a priority to provide the same meals to all students, regardless of delivery method.

In-Person

Most of the hybrid districts interviewed used some variation of in-classroom meals for in-person learners. In some of these districts, both breakfast and lunch were consumed in the classroom. In-classroom meals were identified as the preferred option for these districts because it allowed for continued social distancing and kept students in their existing class pods. Delivery methods for the classroom meals varied: students picking meals up from the cafeteria and bringing them back to classrooms, cafeteria and/or other school staff delivering meals directly to classrooms, and use of strategically located grab-n-go carts (students pick up meals en route to class).

In other hybrid and in-person districts that FoodCorps interviewed, students consumed lunch in the cafeteria, gym, or other large rooms; this approach allowed students to leave their classroom and experience a new environment for lunch, while still maintaining the necessary social distancing recommendations. For many districts, there were no local mandates regarding in-person feeding; meal service decisions were a collaborative approach between nutrition service staff, principals, and other school stakeholders to determine the best model at each location.

Remote

All the interviewed districts indicated that at some point between March 2020 and

fall 2021 they employed some version of remote meal distribution. Approaches to remote meal service varied widely, and many district leaders noted that their remote meal model had changed based on community feedback, district guidance, and public health regulations. All districts provided pickup sites where students/families could receive meals in person, and seven districts also offered meal delivery along preexisting school bus routes. The frequency of remote meal distribution ranged from daily pickups, in which students/families would visit designated meal pickup sites for the day's lunch and next day's breakfast, to pickups two to three times a week (providing three to five days' worth of meals) to weekly meal pickups (bulk meal bundles with a week's worth of meals).

Top Subject Areas

Mirroring the pandemic's effects on other areas of society, schools have had to remain flexible to respond to new challenges arising and changing every day. Emergency meal service was one of the key challenges and priorities that began in March 2020 and continued through spring and summer as schools remained closed. With many unanswered questions about the 2020–21 school year, including the availability of regulatory flexibilities regarding student meal service, district leaders struggled to develop and implement multiple approaches. By late fall/early winter, however, nutrition services staff had experienced most scenarios and had developed processes to respond effectively to changing learning models.

For school administrators, top COVID-19-related areas of concern and priorities shifted to establishing protocols and procedures for safe reopening to in-person learning, getting staff vaccinated, addressing learning loss among remote learners, and shifting from crisis management to new best practices. For school nutrition operators, top priorities remained providing meals to all students, wherever they were learning, while keeping employees safe. This included coping with supply chain challenges, adjusting menus, modifying preparation and packaging processes, identifying barriers to meal access and participation, and managing budgetary strains.

In FoodCorps' conversations with district leaders, there were a total of 849 individual comments related to COVID-19 and school meals. This report is organized to reflect the order of subject areas that were raised most often in

response to three questions: “What’s working well?”, “What are challenges and areas of concern?”, and (when able to reflect and articulate) “What lessons have been learned?”

Top Subject Areas (by total number of comments shared)

- Teamwork (138)
- Food (110)
- Foodservice Model (94)
- Participation Rates (89)
- Budget (86)
- Providing Meals and Fighting Hunger (55)
- Decision-Making (50)
- Communication (35)
- Food and Foodservice Employee Safety (33)
- USDA Regulations (31)
- Partnerships (30)



Findings Summary

Two key areas of inquiry (“What’s Working Well” and “Challenges & Areas of Concern”) are summarized within each key subject area, with a third area (“Lessons Learned”) summarized in key subject areas where relevant. All summaries reflect examples shared by multiple districts rather than single trends across all districts. They also reflect perspectives that sometimes differ between districts and different leader vantage points. The report concludes by “Defining and Evaluating Success” for school meal programs in 2020–21. FoodCorps hopes that district administrators across the country will use these findings to improve their awareness of varying meal service approaches in response to the COVID-19 crisis as they prepare for the 2021–22 school year.

- 1 **Teamwork**
- 2 **Food**
- 3 **Food Service Model**
- 4 **Participation Rates**
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Teamwork

1

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- **Adjusting:** Staff commitment, passion, and ability to adjust and do whatever it takes to get the job done well
- **Partnering:** Foodservice teams partnering with the transportation department to distribute meals to remote learners
- **Adapting:** Staff demonstrating flexibility and patience and finding humor
- **Collaborating:** Non-foodservice teams in the school community (superintendent, principals, teachers, administrators, custodians, and others) pitching in to help distribute meals
- **Committing:** Department and/or district commitment to continuing to pay and retain employees
- **Appreciating:** Heightened visibility and appreciation for school nutrition staff from district leaders and families
- **Connecting:** Strong existing relationships with vendors and community partners

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Managing coverage, including finding substitutes, when school nutrition staff are unable to work during COVID-19 surges and quarantines
- Avoiding staff stress and exhaustion from operating in an extended emergency mode
- Incentivizing staff to stay and recruiting for open positions
- Keeping up staff morale
- Keeping staff safe in the work environment

“We didn’t have barriers between departments. We had principals, teachers, counselors, transportation, etc., everyone supporting this mission. I don’t know what flipped the switch, but everything became focused on the mission and the mission was feeding kids.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“If the superintendent gets COVID, the district goes on. If food service or the bus drivers get it, we have to take a left turn.”
—Superintendent

“Employee morale—it can be a lot sometimes. Keeping everyone safe and motivated is a constant challenge.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

Comments related to teams numbered higher than those for any other subject. This is a broad category that varies in context, sometimes encompassing the entire school community and sometimes being used in reference to the nutrition services operation or to staff in another department. In the context of meal service, the level of foodservice staff commitment and the quality of school community support has been extraordinary, even as the logistical and emotional challenges of managing these different teams throughout the school year has been, at times, overwhelming.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Trust your people, and let them do their jobs. Don’t underestimate your staff.
- Communicate early and often with other stakeholders (principals, union, etc.) to gain their support for initiatives or actions.
- Ask for help. Leverage the expertise of staff from other departments when needed (e.g., it was helpful to have school personnel on the bus route to answer non-lunch-related questions from parents at remote pickup sites).
- Remember that it is a marathon, not a sprint. It’s important that people take care of themselves.
- Keep lines of communication open with all staff to answer questions and address concerns.
- Take the time and opportunity to celebrate achievements and staff efforts.
- Be flexible, and take it one day at a time.

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Serving high-quality food that people want
- Providing multiday (three to seven days) meal packs for remote learners and their families, including scratch-cooked, larger-quantity meals for multiday packs
- Serving the same meals across all meal service models to streamline preparation
- Expanding the menu and variety to increase participation
- Being able to provide hot meals
- Having appropriate transportation, equipment, and packaging to deliver both hot and cold items
- Distributing recipes, coordinating competitions, and developing other ways to engage the community

The menu and food that's served may be the area most impacted by the pandemic, particularly by needing to provide meals in ways far removed from normal operations. Getting quality meals to remote learners, and serving hot meals outside of the cafeteria, have been particularly challenging and have required drastically reduced menu variety as well as investments in new equipment and packaging.

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Delivering hot meals and cold items like milk, especially to remote learners
- Overcoming reduced student/family interest in meals/menu items due to delivery challenges; reduced menu variety; and a high reliance on processed, shelf-stable, prepackaged, individually wrapped items
- Managing reduced availability of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Increasing food waste due to limited variety and students not being able to self-select menu items
- Making rapid menu adjustments and meeting meal-planning challenges presented by supply chain issues and item outages

"We've gone back to Styrofoam. I'm so ashamed to admit it. I can't even believe I'm saying that. We've taken steps backward in nutrition and sustainability."
—Director of Nutrition Services

"What jumps out to us is that we serve really high-quality meals that are wanted. We started with, 'What does our customer want?' and built that."
—Superintendent

"We can't get menuing done because by the time the menu is published items are out of stock."
—Superintendent

"We were all lamenting that lunch kind of sucks right now; it's not joyful. It's not salads and spice bars and build-your-own bars, it's all back to pre-package."
—Director of Nutrition Services

Foodservice Model

3

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Serving multiday meal packs (saves on labor and means families don't have to pick up multiple times per week)
- Adding distribution and pickup options and locations when needed (e.g., holidays)
- Offering home deliveries when needed
- Making improvements based on experiences to date (e.g., packaging, service, logistics)
- Coordinating bus routes, drop-off and pickup locations based on need (e.g., creating a "heat map" of low-income students overlaid with the remote learner map, choosing site(s) with ample loading/unloading areas for pickup)
- Continuing special meal celebrations and traditions to maintain some normalcy
- Working with community partners to identify locations to best serve those in need
- Experiencing benefits associated with meals in the classroom (e.g., easy-to-implement safety protocols, increased student participation, more adult engagement)

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Maintaining sufficient food and labor to meet both community need and new and evolving pandemic systems/approaches/changes
- Addressing requests from families for expanded hours/flexibility for meal pickup
- Providing multiday meal packs mean fewer fresh foods, and the possibility of no-shows means waste of multiple days' worth of meals
- Having limited time to pivot when a need for quick changes arise
- Changing distribution plans and routes as teaching models, needs, and numbers change
- Running multiple operations at once (e.g., two different programs under a hybrid model, different operations at different schools)
- Serving meals in the classroom
- Identifying meal distribution times that don't conflict with teaching times
- Balancing the need to give staff break time while meeting community need/demand for meal pickup

It's difficult to overstate the agility and adaptability that school nutrition departments have demonstrated while serving school meals throughout the pandemic. While there is universal commitment to doing whatever is necessary to ensure families receive meals, the details of each district's foodservice model—what it looks like, what's working, and where the challenges lie—vary based on specific circumstances, including a district's learning structure (e.g., in-person, remote, hybrid), district size and geography, and other district-specific characteristics. Teams are learning as they go and from other districts' experiences.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Make the process as convenient as possible for families, including pickup logistics.
- Expand hours to ensure social distance and other COVID-19 safety measures.
- Stay up-to-speed with new meal sign-ups for families. Be consistent with bus routes.
- Offer as much meal variety as possible.

"We're also getting kids back into schools now, so now we're trying to run two programs, which is hard."
—Director of Nutrition Services

"Maybe I could deliver a bunch of meals every day and use buses, but I need those buses to [transport children to] limited in-person instruction [settings].
I can't do it all."
—Superintendent

Participation Rates

4

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Increasing participation rates by:
 - offering meals on weekends and holidays,
 - adding different service modalities (e.g., drive-through pick-up, new delivery locations),
 - engaging in marketing and family outreach, and
 - adding more meal variety.
- Observing unexpected increases in participation among remote learning participants in some districts, thanks to more youth in the broader community being deemed eligible

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Observing monthly drops in participation when qualifying families receive Pandemic EBT and other assistance
- Seeing families signing up for meals but not picking them up
- Observing that, in some districts, lower meal participation among remote learners than in-person learners
- Lacking an understanding of reasons for ebbs and flows of participation from day to day and throughout the year and, as a result, inability to identify effective strategies to address the inconsistencies
- Identifying meal pick-up times that work for families, especially those with multiple children on different and conflicting remote learning schedules
- Anticipating inaccurate projections of participation rates without supporting documentation of meal applications in light of regulatory waivers providing free meals

The pandemic has undoubtedly impacted school meal participation rates in most districts, but there is no single consistent trend. For many districts, 2020–21 participation is significantly lower than in recent years. But for a small number of communities, participation is similar to or even higher than pre-pandemic years. Of the superintendents and school nutrition directors FoodCorps interviewed, some understand specific factors impacting fluctuating participation rates, but others are puzzled as to the causes of certain ebbs and flows in the numbers.

“It’s not good out there; it’s not good. We still haven’t figured out the demand. Some days, for meal pick-up we’re running from one school to another, and other days, it’s completely dead. We can’t figure out the pattern; it’s a crapshoot.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“How do we feed more kids in distance learning? Counts of kids during distance learning is significantly lower than when kids are in person. It’s a fraction of the kids [the nutrition services department] normally feeds.”
—Superintendent

“In a normal year, we know our [free/reduced-price enrollment] is 40,000 and then, boom! We’re doing 52,000 [meals]. Some of that is [from] charter school and private school kids.”
—Superintendent

“We added service modalities because we were serving 25,000–30,000 meals a week, and now we’re serving 49,000–55,000 meals a week.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

Budget

5

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Receiving higher USDA meal reimbursement rates, extended through September 30, 2021
- Beginning the crisis with a significant financial reserve
- Using CARES Act funding to underwrite some new costs, such as equipment purchases
- Receiving donations from the local community

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Managing staff/labor costs (including salaries, benefits)
- Making decisions regarding budget adjustments and trade-offs needed just to stay afloat (e.g., downsizing staff, buying less-expensive foods, finding other ways to lower food costs, deferring planned upgrades)
- Having high reimbursement rates available through waivers, but this year is proving to have even higher expenditures
- Depleting a full year's worth of DoD Fresh allocated funds during the first part of the year
- Being uncertain of how budget allocations and planning will work next year
- Experiencing food waste

Most school nutrition departments are losing money or struggling to stay in the black, despite United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) waivers and preexisting financial reserves. However, there is a shared “we’ll figure it out” attitude among school nutrition leaders, who are doing everything they can to provide quality meals to families, maintain and support their staff, and remain financially self-sustaining. Many expressed their commitment to avoid dipping into the district’s general fund—recognizing that districts need those dollars for education expenses, critical upgrades for safety protocols, and more—while some acknowledged that if they must cross that bridge, they are prepared for the conversation.

“Much of the success of the nutrition department is the ability to balance the budget. It’s crude to say, because we want to feed kids, but we want to do [so] without dipping too much into general funds.”
—Superintendent

“All these projects in the pipeline that are frozen; we had done work for local procurement . . . [and] marketing in lunchrooms to encourage students and families to want to participate, those are all frozen; new upgraded kitchen equipment—it’s all frozen now.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“I don’t think there will be issues from a budget perspective, since we have the extension of the summer program. I don’t think it will be a problem, but if we didn’t have the extension, I’d definitely be concerned about the budget.”
—Superintendent

“Financially, I’m losing \$1.5–2 million a month, because of fixed costs I have no control over: employee salaries, benefits, gas, electricity, things still being utilized [even if schools remain closed]. It’s really, really hard to watch our cash balance go away.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

Providing Meals and Fighting Hunger

6

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Knowing that feeding kids regardless of everything else that is happening is the most important thing
- Creating a sense of community through meal distribution, where families are supporting their community by taking part
- Reframing school meals as a positive thing, rather than shameful
- Getting buy-in and support from other school staff

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Shifting to a new model so quickly
- Fighting against poor perception of school food and other stigmas and stereotypes
- Knowing that universal meals would make things easier
- Wondering, if participation is lower, who is not getting the meals and why?

For many communities, the pandemic has underscored the important role schools play as both nutrition providers and community hubs. It has created more recognition of the role schools play in addressing hunger, with school food filling a need some didn't even know existed. Some school leaders commented that, at times during this crisis, they have had to forget about finances and budget and just feed kids and families.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Be more in tune with participation and engagement patterns to be able to pivot more easily when things change.
- Know that it's essential to constantly be learning and adapting to meet needs.
- Understand that, in some communities, taking the meal is a source of shame, so it's important to reframe the value of school meals to make them more socially palatable.
- Be creative with meal boxes and what you can distribute to families.

"These people outside of our department now see the delight and how excited students are to get food—how necessary it is. Now we have these ambassadors who see how many people show up. It makes the need real."
—Director of Nutrition Services

"65% of kids [in our community] live in households without access to healthy food. Staff feel like they have to come in, even at their own peril, because kids need the food."
—Director of Nutrition Services

"With freezer space and cafeteria and kitchen space, we were the best option to help our community in need. We started with our students and went in with compassion over compliance."
—Superintendent

"We were all surprised by the food need. All of us have been shocked by food scarcity. People were afraid to go to the grocery store, so demand was significant."
—Superintendent

Decision-Making

7

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Working collaboratively with other departments and staff, with school principal buy-in being key
- Making needs known, advocating for oneself and one's staff, and having a seat at the table when decisions are discussed
- Having a strong mission and vision that guides the decision-making process
- Receiving regulatory flexibility and technical assistance from USDA

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Making decisions that fit the unique needs of each school/site; processes need to be customizable but also fit into a general framework
- Observing that parent and teacher opinions often override the perspectives and expertise of district administrators, including school nutrition operators, even if those opinions are not grounded in facts

Many of the leaders FoodCorps interviewed emphasized the importance of relying on a strong mission and vision when approaching significant decisions. They also talked about the importance of trusting the team and making sure all relevant stakeholders have a seat at the table. Most of the leaders agreed that a top-down approach is ineffective in this type of environment. But many school nutrition operators felt they faced unrealistic expectations on the part of other district stakeholders when it came to reshaping their entire production model with little notice.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Use of a top-down approach to decision-making does not work.
- Listen to your team members and trust their expertise—give all the necessary people a seat at the table.
- Engagement between school nutrition staff, superintendent, school principals, and other school administrators is crucial.
- Be adaptable and responsive to the situation at hand.
- Create a general framework for school meal production and distribution, but let individual sites refine it to reflect their needs.

“The most important thing, throughout this experience, is having a seat at the table and a voice in the room when we’re trying to figure out what to do. The key is not to redo things five to six times; the key is to have a seat at the table. You have to get loud and have your voice heard.”

—Director of Nutrition Services

“The district used to be top down, but things would have been terrible if I had to make all the decisions.”

—Superintendent

“I think step one is really to listen to your people. You need to rely on your experts. If they say something won’t work, you should probably listen to them.”

—Superintendent

“Site based management, with center-based leadership, [is the most effective model].”

—Director of Nutrition Services

Communication

8

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Using multiple forms of communication to reach everybody (e.g., flyers, emails, calls)
- Ensuring constant and consistent communication within the nutrition services team as well as with other department teams (e.g. transportation, facilities, etc.) and with the community
- Using video communication (e.g., wellness videos, recipe demonstrations, Q&A sessions)

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Keeping people up to date with what's happening when things change quickly
- Lacking feedback opportunities to determine what is and is not working
- Trying to understand and track where people are going for meal assistance outside of school meal programs

District-level leaders emphasized the importance of constant and consistent communication within teams, across teams, and across the larger school community. Many leaders recommended employing a variety of communication tools to increase reach. Top challenges centered around the difficulties of keeping people up to date in a quickly changing environment as well as a dearth of feedback opportunities and the absence of any system to track what is and is not working.

“Communication is huge.
Consistency is huge.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“Communication is late all around, whether it's coming from the state or the [federal] government or even the district sometimes.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“We've gotten local media. But I'm always worried about those disengaged who haven't always had district information.”
—Superintendent

“For this year, we still need to do a feedback loop. Are you eating the food? If yes, why? We don't really understand why [participation] numbers are down. If it's free for everyone, why aren't kids eating?”
—Superintendent

“Sometimes things change so fast, that by the time people get communication, it has changed.”
—Superintendent

Food and Foodservice Employee Safety

9

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Packaging machines have made packing menu components a self-operated option that allows districts to reduce reliance on pre-packaged, processed items, and allow them to provide a greater variety of menu items
- Partnering with the health department as a successful way to obtain PPE supplies for nutrition service staff
- Leaning on preexisting H1N1 pandemic plans from 2009, which were available in certain districts

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Ensuring team members change their practices and habits to remain socially distanced and to stay in staff pods
- Aging nutrition services staff have a higher COVID-19 risk
- Packaging individual portions for all meal components is time consuming, labor intensive, and wasteful from an environmental perspective
- Breaking down of meal service processes if/when a staff member gets sick or is exposed to the virus and needs to quarantine
- Knowing that COVID-19 is an added layer in an already-complicated foodservice system
- Enforcing safety requirements when, in some areas, there is cultural resistance to mask wearing

Best practices and concerns to address both food safety and the safety of foodservice employees during the COVID-19 crisis varied across the districts. Many leaders described a variety of methods used to keep staff safe, including partnering with local health departments to obtain personal protective equipment (PPE), and creating staff pods for worker schedules. To address safety guidance that encouraged individually wrapped food items, many district school nutrition operations acquired packaging/sealing machines to simplify the process.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Keeping staff in pods helps manage contact tracing and social distancing.
- The process of using school buses to deliver meals needs to be balanced with the added in-person interaction it creates between drivers and families during the height of lockdowns.
- Give kids food components that are not obscured by to-go packaging.

“There is a lot of plastic that goes into the trash bin—a lot of disposable [packaging] now, more than ever. The teachers are concerned; I’m concerned.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“This contact tracing is no joke. Doing it in a building of 1,000 students will take you out. Managing it in my department of 80 is a huge responsibility.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“COVID impacts everything we do now; it’s a job on top of a job.”
—Superintendent

USDA Regulations

10

What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Providing waivers in the spring and extending them into the 2020–21 school year was crucial; regulatory flexibilities include
 - making all students eligible;
 - allowing students to pick up meals at any location;
 - allowing for bulk meals; and
 - allowing full reimbursement for meals, even if kids take only selected menu components (e.g., they bring their own entree, but get fruit/milk from school)
- The ability to feed all kids regardless of family income has eliminated considerable paperwork logistics
- Observing that, even in some schools with a low free/reduced-price-eligible enrollment, more kids are eating because the meal is free

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Having regulations dictate what is and is not funded
- Changing guidelines make planning difficult
- Announcing 2020–21 school year waiver late

All the district leaders interviewed by FoodCorps affirmed that the provision and extension of USDA meal waivers has been the most important factor in the successful implementation of COVID-19 meal service. Even among those schools where students have returned to in-person learning, having the waivers since March 2020 allowed foodservice staff to think more creatively about how they ensured families received quality meals.

“USDA waivers. None of this happens without the waivers that allow us to offer multiple meals at one distribution or parent pick-up without a student. Those are critical.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“It’s lifesaving to have the USDA waivers, knowing we can operate under summer meals until September 2021 is so huge. It’s given us leeway to do much better work.”
—Director of Operations

“The USDA did not extend the waivers until right before school started (and some districts had started long before). It was a logistical nightmare; an iceberg waiting for a ship.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“I think the [ability to serve] universal free [meals] has had the biggest impact. Even at our affluent school, we’re seeing more students eating. It’s not like they don’t have the money to eat, but since it’s free, they’re eating.”
—Director of Operations

Partnerships

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What's Working Well (e.g.,)

- Connecting with food banks, missions, etc. to allow for community-wide distribution of essentials beyond school meals
- Connecting with local farmers, food providers, fishers, etc. in some districts
- Partnering with other district departments, such as transportation
- Transforming schools into community hubs
- Seizing opportunities to strengthen farm-to-school partnerships

Challenges & Areas of Concern (e.g.,)

- Building on the capacity of other organizations

Many leaders lauded their district, school, and community partners, attributing their success to those relationships. Many district administrators and school nutrition operators talked about the partnerships forged among district staff, such as with the transportation department. Others cited relationships made with local food banks and area farmers and how these partnerships allowed them to feed their community while supporting local businesses.

Lessons Learned (e.g.,)

- Build on existing relationships—network during the good times, so you can lean on those people when things get bad.

“We have been able to work with external partners who want to contribute to broadening the reach to students.”
—Superintendent

“The partnerships we have developed with the transportation department and community organizations [are crucial]. It’s not just that we have help or that bus drivers are getting paid to drive a bus [when schools are closed]. It’s that we have created a whole new set of school lunch ambassadors.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“In so many ways, we’ve benefited from strengthening relationships and, in some ways, building relationships we didn’t already have.”
—Superintendent

“You have to plan and have a network to plan with. During an emergency is not the time you want to be meeting someone you need in your network; you don’t want to be reaching out for the first time in the middle of the pandemic.”
—Director of Nutrition Services

Defining and Evaluating Success

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Some Common Metrics and Definitions of Success

- Balanced school nutrition department budget
- Meal participation rates
- Students having food to eat every single day
- Parent and student feedback that needs are being met
- More people opting into school meal programs next school year
- Continuous improvement and growth of nutrition services staff and the overall program
- Successfully navigating staff quarantines and still providing meals
- Number of meals being served
- Improvement in numbers over the course of the year
- Meeting goals established in the long-range strategic plan
- Cost-per-meal
- Managing labor and related costs
- Team morale; ensuring employees feel valued, supported, secure and understood
- Keeping staff employed
- Employee retention

How do we define and evaluate success during such a dynamic, difficult, and singular year? Some school district leaders are looking at traditional metrics, like budget and participation; others are studying how meal service is meeting the needs of the students, community and staff, while others are examining a combination of many factors in evaluating the nutrition services operation and defining success.

“Honestly, for me the most important metric is, How many kids did we feed?”
—Superintendent

“It’s survival mode; you can’t get into the thrive mode.”
—Superintendent

“Employee engagement . . . If we finish in the black and then 50% of our remaining staff hand in resignation letters in June, then we haven’t really been successful, right?”
—Director of Nutrition Services

“I would be irresponsible if I didn’t start with finance. We need to operate with fiscal responsibility.”
—Superintendent

Summary

Clearly the past year has brought many challenges to districts, to schools, to students, to families, and to communities across the country and around the world. Through it all, and as evidenced in our conversations with school district leaders, it is also abundantly clear that nutrition services staff and district administration leaders have been utterly heroic in how they have adjusted and responded to the needs of their districts and the communities they serve. With grit and grace, they have put their lives on the line and have rallied their site teams and school colleagues to join them, all rolling up their sleeves in service of providing healthy school meals to students and families.

The 2020–21 school year is in its final few months, and preparations have already begun for 2021–22. It has been both joyful and sobering to participate in these conversations, and district leaders have left us full of admiration and gratitude for all they—and their peers across the country—do every day, year in and year out. We hope that these preliminary findings are interesting and useful to you in your ongoing work, and that they provide both food for thought as well as broad perspectives of the challenges and successes that districts are likely to continue to face across the country.

FoodCorps looks forward to continuing conversations with school administrators and school nutrition professionals over the next several months and to sharing all our findings from the 2020–21 school year with you over the summer. In the meantime, please reach out to Lucy Flores at lucy.flores@foodcorps.org with any thoughts or questions, and know you have our best wishes for strength and health as we collectively navigate these troubled times.

Thank you.

