

URBAN SCHOOL FOOD DURING COVID

How Four Urban Schools Distributed Meals during COVID-19

Urban school districts with large populations of economically vulnerable students used different strategies to provide meals during 2019-2020 school closures. Districts tended to place sites in higher poverty and higher minority areas, but participation still decreased.

This is a research brief for the article: McLoughlin GM, McCarthy JE, McGuirt J, Singleton C, Dunn CG, Gadhoke P. Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of Large Urban School Districts during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0>

School Meals are a Critical Source of Nutrition for Students during COVID-19

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for schools, making it more difficult for school food service to provide students meals through the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). School meals can provide more than one-third to one-half of the daily calories U.S. students consume.¹ These meals can improve the diets of food-insecure children at increased risk for obesity and diabetes.^{2,3} Research has shown that students who eat school meals every day consume more fruits and vegetables, fiber, and whole grains.^{4,5} To prevent childhood obesity and health disparities from increasing,⁶ it is critical that students can continue to access school meals during the COVID-19 crisis.⁷ Because lower income children and children from racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be food insecure,² meal sites must be placed in areas accessible to these students.

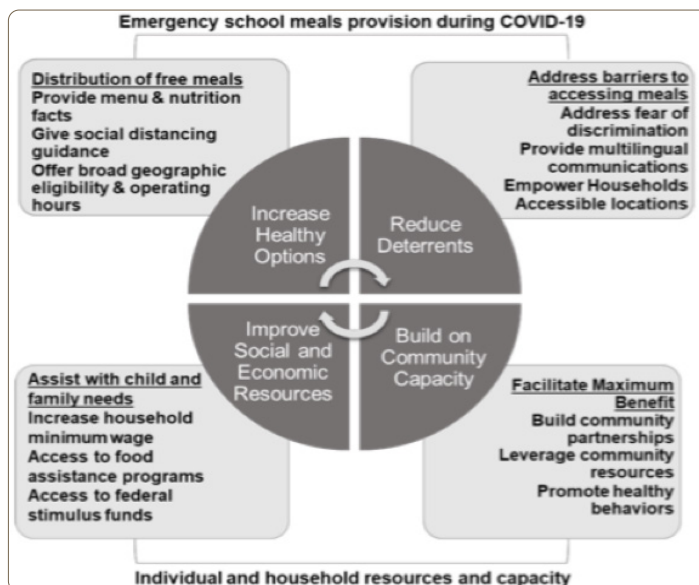
Study Overview

A team of researchers, including researchers from the Tisch Food Center, conducted a case study of four of the largest urban school districts in the United States: Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Houston Independent School District (HISD), Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE).

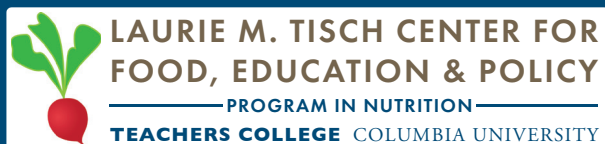
To determine how these urban school districts served meals and how many students participated in school meals, the team analyzed data from documents on school district websites and social media pages be-

tween mid-March and mid-May, 2020. Using the Getting to Equity Framework,⁸ the team analyzed strategies that the districts adopted to ensure equitable access to school meals, including increasing healthy options, reducing deterrents, building on community capacity, and increasing social and economic resources. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Getting to Equity Framework for Emergency School Meal Provision



To analyze school meal site placement, the team determined the median percent poverty level and median percent minority level for each school district. Then, for each census tract within a school district, the team determined the number of school meal sites and indicated whether that tract was above or below the median percent poverty and minority levels. For example, if a tract was above the median percent poverty level, that tract was referred to as a “higher poverty area.”



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Each District Adopted a Different School Meal Distribution Strategy

All four districts took steps to increase access to healthy options. They provided at least one meal per day for students, displayed food safety information, and advertised that all children could eat for free regardless of where they were enrolled. CPS, LAUSD, and NYCDOE served grab-and-go meals, while Houston served groceries. Table 1 shows the school meal distribution strategy that each school district used.

Table 1: School Meal Distribution Strategy by School District

	CPS	HISD	LAUSD	NYCDOE
Number of Sites	276+	25+	63+	439+
Number of Meals	3 days of the breakfast and lunch	~30 lb food boxes	Breakfast and lunch	Breakfast, lunch, and dinner
Pick-Up Times	9:00 am - 1:00 pm	Times vary by location	8:00 am - 11:00 am	7:30 am - 11:30 am
Days of the week	M - F	M - Sat	M - F	M - F

Providing a choice of meals can increase school meal participation. For example, NYCDOE offered Kosher, Halal, and vegetarian options for each meal. HISD was the only district that did not offer any special or restricted diet options. However, HISD and CPS provided multiple days' worth of food, which is another strategy that can improve participation.

Providing information in multiple languages can also increase participation. NYCDOE published information about school meals in 11 languages. LAUSD provided information in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese, and HISD offered resources and educational materials in both English and Spanish. CPS provided information in English only despite having many Spanish-speaking students. In terms of the content of this communication, information about the composition and quality of meals—such as menus or nutrition information on school websites and social media pages—was limited in all districts.

To support families and improve access to school meals, all school districts leveraged community resources. For example, all districts helped families to access wellness programs or centers. HISD partnered with the Houston Food Bank to distribute meals from convenient community locations, and LAUSD offered free meal distribution at homeless shelters.

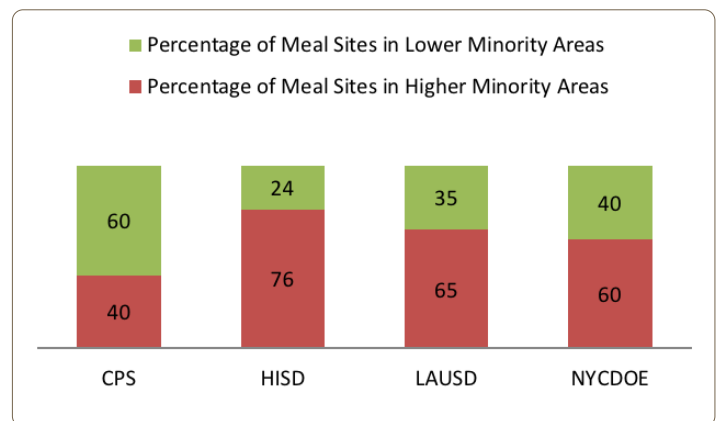
Districts Placed a Majority of Meal Sites in Areas with Higher Rates of Poverty and Higher Rates of Racial and Ethnic Minorities

The distribution of sites across cities varied. In Houston and Los Angeles, there were fewer overall sites, but these sites were strategic placed in centralized locations to maximize reach. In New York and Chicago, there were more overall sites across more neighborhoods.

All school districts placed more than half of their school meal sites in higher poverty areas. HISD had the greatest percentage (68%) of sites in areas of higher poverty, and NYCDOE had the greatest number (301). However, in NYCDOE, a considerable number of higher poverty tracts did not have meal sites.

More than 50% of school meal sites were located in areas with a higher percentage of minority families in all districts, except for CPS. HISD had the greatest percentage (76%) of sites in neighborhoods with a greater population of racial and ethnic minorities. CPS was the only district in this study that did not place more than half of its school meal sites in higher minority areas. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: School Meal Site Distribution by Percent Minority



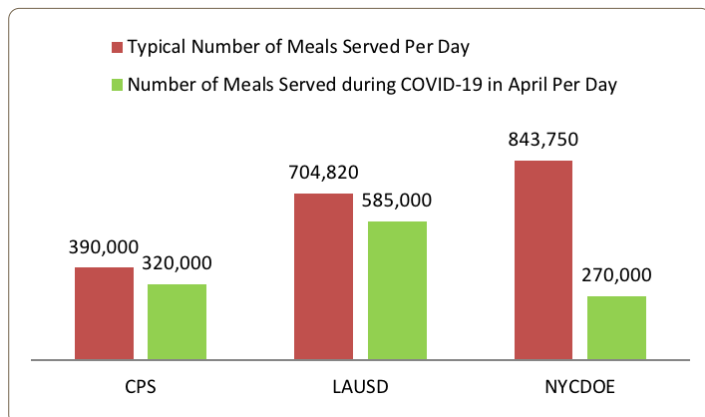
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Student Participation in Schools Meals Decreased during COVID-19

Despite adopting a variety of strategies to serve meals, participation decreased in April 2020. See Figure 3. Because each district examined in this case study implemented different school food service strategies, there were no clear patterns to suggest how different strategies affected participation.

Figure 3: Student Participation in School Meals in April 2020



The greatest drop in participation was in NYCDOE, where the number of meals served per day in April was only 32% of the typical number of meals served. This may be due to the greater prevalence of COVID-19 in NYC at the time or because in New York, unlike in Los Angeles and Houston, more people rely on public transportation.

While participation decreased in all districts, participation in school meals was still higher than the 15% participation that experts are now warning is the national norm.⁹

USDA Should Develop a School Meal Distribution Plan for Future Emergencies

All districts deviated from initial distribution plans and participation rates remained low, suggesting that districts have much to learn when it comes to meal distribution during school closures. Absent comprehensive federal guidance, school food authorities worked to implement strategies that optimized meal provision during the crisis. But implementation of emergency school meal measures has been incredibly difficult and districts are reaching only a fraction of students who typically eat school lunches.

Congress has mandated that states submit a report to USDA describing how districts altered meal distribution during COVID-19. Congress should require that, from these reports, USDA develop a school meal distribution plan for future emergencies. Based on data from states and stakeholder interviews, the plan should highlight best practices for:

- Distribution strategies, including frequency, number of meals, and time of day;
- Communication, including content, medium, and languages;
- Community partnerships; and
- Meal site placement, including neighborhood demographics like race and poverty and logistical concerns like travel distances, access to public transportation, and rates of car ownership.

Comprehensive guidance could help school food authorities increase participation rates and promote equitable distribution of school meals, making sure every child in America can enjoy healthy food.



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