

SCHOOL MEALS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

A Vital Service During COVID-19 and Beyond

To inform future food service practice and policy in rural school districts, this brief:

- highlights the risk of food security and hunger in rural communities,
- outlines rural school meal programs' responses to school closures during the 2019-2020 school year,
- discusses promising practices and potential pitfalls of school meal programs, and
- provides federal policy recommendations to support school meal service in 2020-2021 and beyond.

COVID-19 School Closures Put Millions of Students at Risk of Hunger

When schools shuttered in March of 2020, millions of families across the country were left wondering where their child's next meal would come from. Approximately 75% of the 30 million students who eat School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) meals pay a fraction or none of the cost based on their families' income,¹ making school meals a critical source of nutrition in their diets.

Experts predict that in 2020, food insecurity could affect more than 18 million U.S. children, meaning 1 in 4 could go hungry.² If prior patterns of food insecurity are an accurate predictor of future harms,^{3,4} rural communities may be especially hard hit by the economic downturn. Food insecurity rates in rural communities are typically comparable to urban and higher than suburban rates.⁵ And although the number of students participating in school meals is typically greater in urban schools, the percentage of students who eat school lunch is higher in rural ones (59% versus 47%).⁶

Childhood Food Insecurity Is a Persistent Problem in Rural Communities

Children in rural communities are especially vulnerable to food insecurity. In theory, access to food in the very places where it is produced should be easy, yet 2.4 million rural families are food insecure, and of the counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity, 86% are rural.⁷

For all rural families, food access and higher food prices in rural areas make it more difficult to eat enough and to eat well. Grocery stores, food pantries, and soup kitchens are often far away, and transportation options are limited.^{8,9} Distance from major food distribution centers also means that food in rural grocery stores is often more expensive.¹⁰ Federal nutrition programs like SBP and NSLP fill a critical gap for families, helping to ensure that children can enjoy multiple meals in a given week.

National Rates of Rural Food Insecurity Tell Only Part of the Story

Within rural communities, some families are more likely than others to worry about their next meal. For example, rural families in Southern states have higher rates of hunger than rural families in Western states. And if consistent with national food insecurity patterns, rates of food insecurity for rural children of color could be among the highest.

Research shows that Black and Latinx families with children are nearly twice as likely as White families to struggle with food.³⁰ Food insecurity is closely linked to poverty.³¹ Poverty rates for "non-metro" rural Black and Latinx families top rates for rural White families,³² as well as rates for Black and Latinx city-dwellers, meaning that more than 40% of rural Black and Latinx families could currently be food insecure.³³ Letters from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Legal Defense and Education Fund to state administrators suggest that Black students in many rural districts may not have equitable access to meals during school closures.^{34,35}



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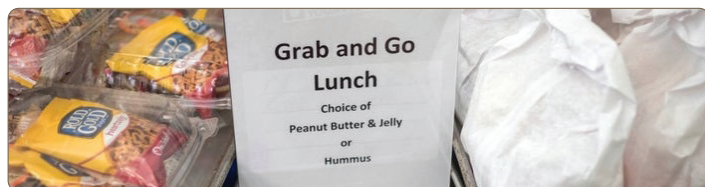
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School Meals Help to Prevent Childhood Hunger and Future Diet-Related Diseases

More than 5 million rural students regularly rely on school meals.¹¹ These meals play an important role not only in preventing children and adolescents from going hungry, but also in ensuring that the meals they eat are healthy. Regular consumption of school meals can improve dietary intake, as students who eat school meals every day consume more fruits and vegetables, fiber, and whole grains compared to those who do not.¹² Before the pandemic, one in three children and adolescents aged 2 to 19 years was overweight or obese, which are among the most common comorbidities associated with COVID-19 hospitalizations.¹³ Researchers are now predicting that school closures may exacerbate childhood obesity and increase disparities in obesity risk.¹⁴ Children in rural communities typically have poorer health outcomes and higher obesity rates than their urban counterparts.^{15,16} School meals can help to keep kids healthy in regions of our country where childhood hunger and diet-related disease are among the highest.

The Federal Government Waived School Meal Requirements During COVID-19 School Closures to Help Prevent Students from Going Hungry

Recognizing that closing schools could mean students going hungry, Congress authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to waive many school meal requirements during the public health emergency.¹⁷ After initial hesitation, the agency responded by issuing nationwide waivers that allowed districts to provide grab-and-go and home-delivered meals; expand the hours when districts served food; deviate from nutrition standards when there were supply chain disruptions; and allow guardians to pick up meals for children. USDA also issued “area eligibility” waivers, making it easier to serve meals to low-income students in areas where poverty is not as concentrated, as in many rural districts. Under normal circumstances, USDA requires providers in areas where fewer than 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM) to verify each individual’s family income before serving meals. With so many families’ financial status changing over the course of the pandemic, requiring districts to verify income could have left many students without meals.



Other Federal Programs Designed to Address Student Hunger during COVID-19

Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT)

In addition to loosening program regulations, Congress also established a temporary electronic benefits program for students called P-EBT. Because districts were not required to continue serving meals during school closures, P-EBT was designed to serve as an alternative for families who could not easily access school meals. Low-income families in states that applied for P-EBT received an additional \$5.70 per child for each day school remained closed.³⁶ As of September 2020, USDA approved P-EBT in all 50 states but not all benefits have been distributed.³⁷

The “Meals to You” Program

USDA took COVID-19 school closures as an opportunity to expand a controversial summer meals pilot to reach low-income students in rural communities. The agency launched the “Meals to You” initiative with PepsiCo, Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, and McLane Global.³⁸ The public private partnership required districts to apply to the program so that individual families within approved rural districts could then apply online. Participating families received a box of 20 shelf-stable meals in the mail for each child eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. As of July 11, the initiative had reached only 268,277 rural students³⁹ and served a fraction of the total meals needed. In contrast, P-EBT and school meals have reached millions.

Many Rural Districts Developed Innovative Meal Service Models During COVID-19 School Closures

Serving school meals is no easy task, even in normal times. All food service directors must navigate a warren of federal, state, and local regulations; balance tight budgets; manage complex operations; oversee staff training and development; design appealing menus; and promote those menus to students and families. Serving a diffuse population, as rural districts do, comes with its own set of challenges. Long bus rides can limit the time students have to eat meals, specifically breakfast.¹⁸ Vendors may not offer convenient delivery schedules, competitive prices, or the assortment of high-quality foods local food service directors desire. And rural schools may have fewer staff to perform administrative duties like purchasing, invoicing, training, and creating menus—functions made all the more critical in disruptions such as COVID-19.¹⁹

To understand how rural school districts responded to the heightened threat of food insecurity during the 2019-2020 school year, we collected data on school food practices and pol-

In Normal Times, Rural Districts Adopt Creative Strategies to Feed Students

Rural school districts have responded to the routine challenges that lower population density and greater distances can create by pooling resources and thinking creatively. For example, districts have created purchasing cooperatives and partnerships with local business to drive procurement costs down and access additional foods. To ensure students traveling long distances have time to eat the food schools are serving, some districts have instituted “breakfast after the bell,” as well as grab and go options. And other rural districts have gone the extra mile, supplementing school meals with backpack programs that provide food for weekends and long holidays and establishing pantries on campus.⁴⁰

icies from districts’ websites, Facebook pages, and social media. Using the 2015 Common Core of Data, the American Community Survey, and the Generalizer tool,²⁰ we created a representative sample and pulled publicly-available information from each district’s website from mid-April through May of 2020. This dataset focused exclusively on districts with Title I schools. Title I schools have large concentrations of low-income students, the same students who are likely to rely on school meals.²¹ Choosing districts with Title I schools enabled us to focus on rural communities where we knew there was need.

District Demographics

The rural school districts in our sample ranged in size from 200 to 29,970 students, with an average of 3,738 students.²² See Table 1. On average, 66% of students in these districts were eligible for FRPM, which is lower than the national average of 75%.²³ Still, many districts included schools that were eligible to take advantage of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows high poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students without collecting applications for free and reduced-price meals.²⁴ Of the school districts in our sample eligible for CEP, less than half (42%) participated, suggesting that many students in these rural communities are from low-income households and may be especially vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Table 1: School District Demographics

Demographics	Average
Number of students	3,738
Percent of students eligible for FRPM	66%
Percent of eligible schools participating in CEP	42%

Meals Service and Planning

Ninety-seven percent of the districts in our sample continued to provide meals during the closures. See Table 2. The majority of districts provided lunch and breakfast for students. Several of the districts that continued serving food did not specify which meals. Many districts required families to pre-order student meals, either by phone or online, for the following week. Districts were then able to use the advance notice to forecast and more efficiently schedule food production and labor to meet the need. Pre-ordering meals may help maximize district resources, but could potentially limit access by placing additional burdens on families.

Table 2: School District Provisions

Food Served	Percent
Any food	98%
Breakfast	72%
Lunch	86%
Meals, type not specified	10%
Mean days of service per week	3.88



Frequency

The frequency of meal service varied by district. Some served meals every day, while others provided meals only on certain days, such as Mondays and Wednesdays. The districts that provided meals on specific days of the week typically served multiple days' worth of meals. On average, the districts served meals just under 4 times per week. Serving multiple days' worth of meals can reduce transportation barriers for families, but may not be a feasible option for districts with limited staff or volunteers.

Distribution

Districts also varied in their approaches to meal distribution. Some districts offered meals for pick-up at a specified list of schools, while others delivered food along existing bus routes. Many combined approaches. A few districts offered community pick-up locations at local libraries and community centers. Offering delivery and multiple pick-up locations potentially increased families' access to school meals.

To promote access and reduce food insecurity, many districts also allowed families to pick up meals at schools other than their own. Most districts in this study expanded their meal service to include all children 18 years old or younger. Consistent with the nationwide waiver allowing guardians to collect meals without children present, several districts indicated that to reduce potential transmission, parents could pick up meals alone. See Table 3 for more information on best practices.

District Highlights

Overall, rural districts took creative steps to prevent students

going hungry. Examples of rural districts across the country that continued to provide students meals in new and innovative ways include:

- **Carbon School District, Utah** provided meals for all children, from birth through age 18, twice a day at every elementary bus stop.
- **Menomonie Area School District, Wisconsin** provided bags with seven breakfasts, seven lunches, and milk in gallon containers for families to pick up once a week.
- **Union Parish, Louisiana** delivered meals to all elementary and high school students whose families filled out an application form. Applications were available online and, for those without internet access, at the ticket window at the high school football stadium.

And still, districts could have done more, especially when it came to communicating with rural families. Many rural districts included language on their websites indicating that children had to be present to pick up meals, despite the federal waiver. No districts in our sample published menus. And between mid-April and May, only two districts published information on their websites about either of the other two federal programs available to students: the "Meals to You" and P-EBT Program. That only two districts in our scan included information on the "Meals to You" Program may reflect how few districts successfully applied to the program. No districts published information about P-EBT. With many districts closed at least part time for the 2020-2021 school year, communicating accurate information in a timely manner is key.

Table 3. Promising Practices and Potential Pitfalls for School Meal Service during COVID-19

Practice	Advantage	Disadvantage
Requiring families to pre-order meals	Districts can better anticipate demand and more efficiently plan for procurement and labor.	Additional steps to access may prevent families from getting the food they need.
Serving multiple days' worth of meals	Families with tight schedules or who lack reliable access to transportation may access meals more easily. Less frequent contact minimizes potential transmission.	Districts with limited staff and/or volunteers may not be able to prepare and package larger quantities of food in a shorter time frame
Offering delivery and multiple pick-up locations	Families with tight schedules, with members who are sick or have severe disabilities, or who lack reliable access to transportation may access meals more easily.	Districts with limited staff and/or volunteers may not have the capacity to deliver meals or man multiple distribution sites.
Communicating information on the other two federal food programs designed to feed students, P-EBT and "Meals to You"	P-EBT is more convenient for families and less costly for schools. With P-EBT, families can purchase foods that meet their needs and cultural preferences, and the program generates additional local economic activity.	"Meals to You" is only available to families in districts that applied for the program and have internet access to order online every two weeks. "Meals to You" provides only shelf-stable food.



The Federal Government Needs to Provide Additional Support to Ensure Rural Students Don't Go Hungry in the 2020-2021 School Year

With so much uncertainty, districts are facing the unenviable task of determining how to feed students in the 2020-2021 school year. Food service directors are rallying staff, tweaking safety protocols, developing new menus for service in and out of school, and working to balance budgets depleted by emergency food service in the 2019-2020 school year. To ensure all rural students have access to healthy meals next school year, the following recommendations should be implemented:

- **Congress Should Pass Universal School Meals Legislation:** At a time when childhood hunger is so high and so many families are newly qualifying for federal nutrition programs, the last thing that districts should be worrying about is how to process meal applications. Congress should pass the Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act to provide free breakfast, lunch, and dinner to every student.²⁵ Universal meals would reduce the administrative burden on districts, especially those just above the CEP cutoff, many of which are rural.

- **USDA Should Publish Strong Guidance for P-EBT:** Congress recently passed legislation to extend P-EBT this school year, but states need good guidance to get these benefits to students. Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) is more convenient for families and less costly for schools.²⁶ With P-EBT, families can purchase foods that meet their needs and cultural preferences. They can also feed their children for the week with a single trip to their preferred grocery store—an important distinction in rural communities where travel distances and access to transportation can act as barriers. P-EBT can also infuse additional dollars into rural economies. Cash benefits like P-EBT are a highly effective economic stimulus.²⁷ According to the Congressional Budget Office and Moody's, every dollar spent through EBT generates \$1.50 in economic activity, making these benefits among the most effective economic supports during a downturn.²⁸
- **USDA Should Develop a Strategic Plan for School Meal Service in the 2020-2021 School Year:** School operations are inherently local, but federal resources can help districts focus their limited food service resources on what matters most: making sure their most vulnerable students do not go hungry. In the spring of 2020, the absence of a coordinated national emergency plan resulted in redundancies. Thousands of districts worked to procure emergency supplies, train staff on new safety procedures, develop grab-and-go menus, and identify effective emergency meal distribution strategies. USDA should develop a model food service plan for staggered schedules and remote learning that details best practices specific to geography and population density.²⁹ The plan should highlight grab-and-go best practices for procurement, menu planning, preparation, meal service frequency, and communication with families. To support rural districts, USDA's plan should outline criteria districts should consider to optimize meal distribution. Criteria should include neighborhood demographics like race and poverty; logistical concerns like travel distances, access to public transportation, and rates of car ownership; hours and days of operation; amount and quality of food; and community access to broadband internet.

Future Considerations

This brief provides an overview of rural districts' school food responses to the COVID-19 crisis. This brief does not evaluate the effectiveness of districts' responses, whether districts equitably served students, or how healthy meals were. Future research should identify strategies used by districts with highest participation during the crisis, determine differences in participation by geography and race, and document the healthfulness of options offered.

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