

Maintaining Healthy School Meals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background

In March 2020, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)¹ established a meal pattern waiver² for federal child nutrition programs (e.g., the National School Lunch Program) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The waiver allows local child nutrition program operators (typically “school districts”) to waive specific aspects of the meal pattern (e.g., required amounts of fruit and vegetables). Common reasons for the meal pattern waiver included:

- Supply chain disruptions due to COVID-19 caused a supplier to be unable to provide their usual variety of vegetables. The district could request a waiver for the vegetable subgroup requirements (which require a minimum quantity of various types of vegetables to be offered weekly).
- The number of students picking up meals from each age group (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12) varied widely day to day, making forecasting challenging and resulting in waste. The district could request a waiver to offer a single meal pattern to all age groups.
- The district bundled meals to last three or five days and requested a waiver to serve certain meal components in bulk (e.g., a bag of apples instead of individual apples, a gallon of milk instead of individual milk cartons).

The waiver was made available to all states, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) required that districts request approval from their State Agency. The waiver is currently available until June 30, 2021.

To identify best practices for ensuring students receive the healthiest meals possible while retaining district-support and flexibility, CSPI conducted a nationwide survey of state-level implementation of the waiver as well as an informal sampling of schools and school districts to compile best practices for implementing the waiver.

Methodology

CSPI invited via email 13 school districts to take part in a Zoom interview to identify procurement and meal service challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and to distinguish best practices employed by school districts to address those challenges. The sample included the Urban School Food Alliance’s 12-member school districts (which include the largest school districts in the country by enrollment), as well as suburban and rural school districts in our key campaign target states. Interview questions were developed with input from advocacy partners, particularly those with direct interaction with school districts. Interviews were conducted from August 26, 2020 to October 1, 2020. Interviewee responses were grouped and analyzed into unifying themes and areas of consensus and convergence.

Of the 13 school districts, CSPI identified three districts that successfully provided meals that met the meal pattern to as many students as possible using innovative distribution strategies. The three districts were invited back for a second interview to answer follow-up questions about the funding and implementation of their strategies.

Wake County Public School System, North Carolina



Meal preparation at Wake County Public Schools

Child Nutrition Services at Wake County Public School System in North Carolina is committed to strong nutrition standards, despite COVID-19. Through their **innovative distribution strategies and resourcefulness**, they have ensured healthy meals for students without using the meal pattern waiver. The district committed to a daily service, operating **47 curbside locations**, which provided hot lunch and warm breakfast for the next day.

Additionally, the district had a central warehouse and 200 schools that had food in storage. Wake County made sure no food went to waste during the COVID-19 shutdowns. The school district also brought products directly from manufacturers rather than from distributors. They focused on products that met the meal pattern and felt familiar to their students, providing comfort during a time of uncertainty.



Meal distribution at Wake County Public Schools

Wake County established **pop-up sites for delivering meals by bus** to students from families that are economically disadvantaged or lack adequate transportation to school. Since launching in May 2020, the program has delivered meals to 72 sites throughout the county, including 38 hotels where homeless students reside. The district's biggest challenge in implementing the



Student eating lunch at Wake County Public Schools

program was uncertainty with which bus system they would be able to use and whether their transportation department could service their program. To resolve these issues, the school district forged a new relationship with their local YMCA branch, allowing their "Big Bus" program to **deliver weekly meals on YMCA buses**. After months of low engagement in YMCA programs, it is a perfect opportunity for YMCA staff to engage with kids again, in addition to keeping the Big Bus program running and getting food to every student.

At the root of Wake County's success is a **committed and adaptable staff**. When COVID-19 shutdowns began and not much was known about the virus, staff members were given paid leave for 3 months. Many continued to work during this time, regardless, remaining committed to providing healthy meals to students. Wake County Public School System's success highlights the importance of teamwork and adaptability in a crisis.

Budget Concerns in Wake County

Child Nutrition Services at Wake County is very underfunded. Although there are still 700 staff members, many are simply grateful they have a job. Due to remote learning, the district is only serving about 10% of students who are eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Meals. This is only about 5,000 lunches and 5,000 breakfasts per day.

New York City Chancellor's District, New York

The Office of Food and Nutrition Services at New York City Chancellor's District views their school meals program as a way to **provide the highest quality nutritious meal possible** to

Budget Concerns in NYC

The district had a \$26 million budget cut from March to June. Without compromising nutritional standards, they tweaked their menus by increasing the frequency of cheaper items and decreasing the frequency of more expensive items. They also maximized USDA foods such as chicken to make them into different food items. Additionally, the district paused the expansion of breakfast in the classroom. When schools reopen, students will be getting breakfast and lunch on their way into the building, taking it into the classroom.

students to combat diet-related diseases and reduce obesity. As a result, they have prioritized serving food familiar to their students that meets the meal pattern requirements.

From September to November 2020, the school district decided to serve all **cold meals** in order to ensure a steady supply chain and safe food handling practices, a critical strategy in being able to serve meals that met the meal pattern. Each element of the cold meal was placed into a clear plastic bag to make it as appealing as possible to kids. Starting in December, the district began serving hot meals to students who opted for in-person learning, while still operating cold **grab & go stations** at each school for students learning remotely. Not only was the district serving students, but about 200 schools were providing additional meals in the evening that were

available to the entire community. Adults in the community enjoyed the level of care and quality put into these meals.

Serving cold meals allowed for consistent service, ensuring they could provide meals that met the **strong nutrition standards** set by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The district is meeting the sodium reduction Target 2 (less than 1,080 milligrams of sodium for high school lunch) and is very close to meeting Target 3 (less than 740 milligrams). All grains provided are whole grain-rich. The district is also implementing the **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program**, giving kids an extra fruit or vegetable serving in addition to the meal they receive at the grab & go stations. From Meatless Mondays to grab & go salad entrées, they continue to offer plant-based, vegetarian options during COVID-19.



Meal distribution at NYC Chancellor's District

A **strong connection to the community** enabled staff to focus on providing highly nutritious meals to children. Getting to know students, families, and community members on a personal level allowed employees to see the positive impact their work had on the community. The connection to the community also enabled the staff to improve distribution and the nutritional quality of their meals, despite the pandemic. Fostering community among the staff was equally important; staff came together to troubleshoot adapting their program to remote learning.

Prince William County Public Schools, Virginia

The Office of School Food and Nutrition Services at Prince William County Public Schools faced considerable challenges with product procurement and the supply chain due to COVID-19. Through **persistence and creative solutions**, the district successfully continued distributing healthy school meals to their students.

The district experienced issues sourcing many of their products, including juice cups, yogurt, and fruit. By demanding more from their current partners, they ensured the delivery and distribution of high-quality, nutritious products. They also came up with **local solutions**, switching to locally produced tortillas and corn tortilla chips. Side dishes are freshly prepared in their kitchens, and many entrées (such as their meatloaf) are made from scratch. Cooks bake bread from raw ingredients four days a week. Creative menu planning allowed them to maintain supply and **control sodium levels**. The district has been meeting sodium reduction Target 2 since the 2017-2018 school year, and they are only serving grains that are whole grain-rich.

Another aspect of the district's success is their **investment** in their programs and products. The staff's goal is to show the kids they serve that they are cared for and to earn their trust. The district bought 300 combi ovens, allowing them to provide a higher quality of food and standardization across the district. They bought new uniforms for their staff to convey to kids



Meal kit at Prince William County Public Schools

that there is an entire team of people that cares for them and their success. The district has high standards for the food they invest in. They strive to purchase minimally processed items with less ingredients.

At Prince William County Public Schools, **the cafeteria is the largest classroom in the building**. The staff are respected as professionals and as experts at what they do. Nutrition education is an important part of building trust with the students, parents, and teachers and is the cornerstone of their school foods program.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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¹ Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127.

² US Department of Agriculture. COVID-19 Nationwide Waiver to Allow Meal Pattern Flexibility in the Child Nutrition Programs. March 25, 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/covid-19-meal-pattern-flexibility-waiver>. Accessed December 18, 2020.