

On the Front Lines: The COVID-19 Experience of School Nutrition Programs

Background

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) served over 30 million children annually, most from families in need. School closures, supply chain disruptions, and the need for new safety protocols—coupled with unprecedented demand for school meals—have placed immense challenges on school nutrition programs.

Federal and state lawmakers developed several supports for school nutrition programs over the course of the pandemic. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued waivers that allow students to be served outside of traditional mealtimes, allow parents and guardians to pick up meals, and allow meals to be served in non-congregate settings (e.g., meal pick-ups in parking lots). Further, COVID-19 relief packages have provided much needed financial support for programs. Despite these measures, programs need more support to be able to meet their charge: to ensure all kids have access to a healthy meal at school.

To understand the emerging challenges and provide recommendations for stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, CSPI conducted a survey with an informal sampling of U.S. schools and school districts.

Methodology

CSPI recruited school nutrition representatives from schools and school districts across the 50 states and DC via email, listservs, Facebook, and partner networks to participate in a SurveyMonkey questionnaire between June 22 and November 2, 2020. Two hundred two responses were received from schools and school districts, of which four were duplicates. Responses came from all states except Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. CSPI performed a thematic analysis of open-ended survey questions that queried the following challenges faced by schools and school districts:

- **supply chain** challenges
- actual and anticipated **budget cuts**
- access to **personal protective equipment** (PPE)
- **support needed** from USDA, their State agency, their school district, and their community for their SY 2020-2021 school nutrition program.

Emerging Challenges

Supply Chain

Many respondents reported that food costs, packaging costs, delivery costs and staffing costs increased, despite some reporting that delivery costs and staffing costs did not noticeably change. Most reported challenges with food availability, packaging, and delays in delivery. Some reported unapproved product substitutions on the day of delivery.

Budget Cuts

For the almost half of respondents who said they had already made or anticipated having to make cuts to their program as a result of the financial impact of COVID-19, the most common budget cuts cited were related to staffing, including leaving vacancies unfilled, furloughs, layoffs, reduced hours, and staff reassignments.

Limiting the number of menu options and menu variety was a common response to budget cuts. Healthy items were first to go in some instances. We have provided some quotes for illustration.

*“Because everything is packaged, variety has been omitted because the “option” is taken out of the equation since we’re only able to offer one item. The item is often what we know will boost participation the most not necessarily what is a healthier or best choice ...so **healthier options are being used less,**”* said one South Carolina respondent.

“Decreased offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables,” said a Michigan respondent.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Most respondents reported having access to PPE and enough to last for the fall 2020 semester. Typically, these were gloves, masks, face shields, and hand sanitizer, while some had dividers.

Support Needed

Respondents were asked:

“If you could ask for one thing to support your program in SY 2020-2021, what would it be: from USDA? From the State agency? From the school district? From the community?”

The table below summarizes the top five asks identified from responses (in order).

<i>From USDA</i>	<i>From the State Agency</i>	<i>From the School District</i>	<i>From the Community</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extend free meals 2. Funding 3. Extend waivers 4. Product support 5. Reduce administrative burden 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support and/or guidance 2. Reduce administrative burden 3. Funding 4. Expediency 5. Extend free meals 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support and/or guidance 2. Funding 3. Compassion 4. Communication 5. Logistical support 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participation 2. Compassion 3. Support 4. Awareness of protocol 5. Promotion

Table 1: Top five responses to the question, “If you could ask for one thing to support your program in SY 2020-2021, what would it be... from USDA? From the State agency? From the school district? From the community [?]”

Clear, topline asks for USDA and State agencies were for funding, extension of free meals, support, guidance, and reduced administrative burden (most commonly, waiving the administrative review requirement for school nutrition program staff). *“It is one more thing to find time to do,”* said one Missouri respondent regarding the review. Requests for support and guidance varied, but examples included instructions on interpreting the waivers, technical assistance, menu ideas, safety recommendations, and training.

Respondents had a more earnest request from their school districts and communities: participation, compassion (e.g., understanding in a time of crisis), and awareness of protocol (e.g., paying attention to when meal pick-up days are scheduled and filling out surveys as requested). One survey respondent captured this sentiment well: *“Just come and be kind.”*

Notably, a large portion of respondents expressed that they would not ask anything more of their State agency and/or school district for school year 2020-2021. One respondent noted, *“the State agency is supportive of our needs, but they don’t have authority to make changes to [child nutrition] program regulations.”*

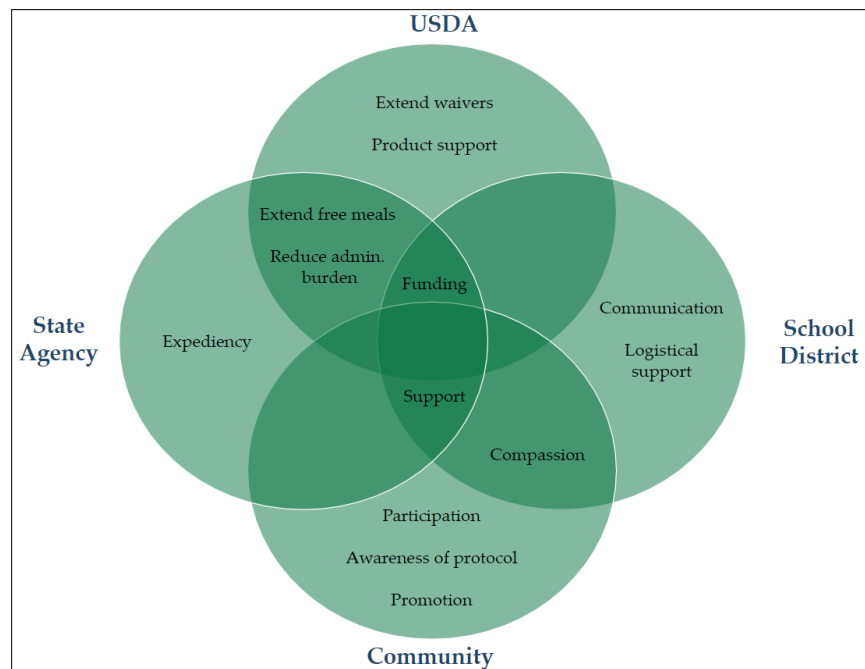


Figure 1: Venn diagram illustrating overlapping asks for USDA, the State agency, the school district, and the community. The top five were summarized from responses to the question, “If you could ask for one thing to support your program in SY 2020-2021, what would it be... from USDA? From the State agency? From the school district? From the community [?]”

Recommendations

Most schools will fully reopen by the fall of 2021, but the effects of the pandemic on school nutrition programs will persist without support from all stakeholders. Programs will be resuming full operation but with a vastly reduced or brand-new workforce, depending on whether they were able to fill vacancies over the summer. They will be faced with the equipment shortages they shouldered to cut costs during the pandemic.

*“Fund all schools,
feed all children”
survey respondent,
Oregon*

For Congress

During [Child Nutrition Reauthorization](#) (CNR), Congress reviews the laws governing school nutrition programs. This happens roughly every five years (although the last CNR was the Healthy, Hunger Free-Kids Act of 2010). The best way that Congress can support struggling programs in this CNR is by making **healthy school meals for all permanent**, for example by including the Universal School Meals Program Act (S. 1530/H.R. 3115). Healthy school meals for all would solve many of the issues cited by survey respondents: they would provide a

guaranteed source of funding for programs, increase participation, and decrease administrative burden.

For USDA and State Agencies

State agencies should, in partnership with USDA, provide ongoing training and technical assistance to support schools. New staff will need training on how to develop appealing menus that meet strong nutrition standards. Kitchen equipment grants are also critical; in order to provide healthy meals to all, functioning equipment is a necessity. Some respondents noted that they had foregone necessary kitchen equipment upgrades or replacements to cut costs. Even prior to the pandemic, 88 percent of schools needed at least one piece of updated kitchen equipment to meet current nutrition standards.¹

For School Districts

School Districts can support school nutrition programs by providing clear communication, promoting school meals (such as, on the district website), and working with programs that are struggling.

For the Community

Congress has authorized free meals for all students through June 2022, so families have an opportunity to support school nutrition programs (by participating) at no cost to them. Parents and caregivers should encourage their children to eat school breakfast and lunch (no enrollment forms necessary). This will ensure critical funding for programs from USDA, help demonstrate the importance of funding free meals for all, and provide a balanced meal for kids. Parents and caregivers can also provide support by keeping abreast—to the best of their ability—of school communications such as pick-up protocols and surveys, by showing compassion for the challenges school nutrition program operators may face, and by speaking positively and helping to promote the school meals program.

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

¹ Pew Charitable Trusts. Serving Healthy School Meals Kitchen equipment. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2013/12/18/serving-healthy-school-meals-kitchen-equipment>. 2013. Accessed June 2021.