



COVID-19 and School Meals

The National Education Association recognizes the vital role that public schools and child care centers play in providing healthy and nutritious meals to children throughout the school and program year. Some 30 million children across the country participate in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-funded school meal programs every year. A large majority of our children rely heavily on these programs because they are in low-income households: According to [USDA data](#), nearly three-quarters of school lunches nationwide are provided for free or at a reduced price. The free lunch participation rate has gone up every year since 2001, and was 20.2 million in 2018. The CDC estimates that children consume as many as [half of their daily calories at school](#), with kids from food-insecure households getting a larger proportion of their daily food and nutrition intake from school meals.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to necessitate school closures, NEA is here to provide guidance to our Affiliates on how to continue providing meals to students in need.

Continue Meal Service

The USDA has authorized School Food Authorities (SFAs) and other eligible community organizations to continue serving meals to students affected by school or child care closures.

Apply for the Area Eligibility Waiver

The USDA recently granted a nationwide waiver that will allow program operators to serve meals in a non-congregate setting, provides flexibility to the meal service time requirement, allows operators to forgo the educational/enrichment activity requirement, and permits caregivers to pick up school meals without the presence of a child. Unfortunately, these waivers do not go far enough. In this time, when we are expecting the virus to spread and more families to lose jobs and teeter on the edge of food insecurity, it is critical that states provide additional meal sites and apply for the area eligibility waiver.

Do More

Due to a number of challenges, only one in every six eligible students utilizes the summer meals program. States can do more to ensure students and families do not go hungry during this time. The recent COVID-19 federal relief legislation enables states to provide emergency allotments (supplements) to SNAP households and give income-eligible families with children in closed schools Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to use at food stores and farmer's markets. States will need to inform the USDA of their plans to

take part in these programs.

Best Practices

Continuation of school meal programs is an important part of maintaining the health and well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities that have closed schools have relied on a variety of approaches to distribute meals. Some best practices include:

- Providing information related to meal sites in multiple languages and formats (e.g., social media, flyers, phone calls);
- Distributing information through multiple channels (e.g., schools, government agencies, local non-profits);
- Maximizing access to meal sites by providing flexible hours;
- Offering multiple meals at the same time while practicing social distancing;
- Offering "grab and go" meals outside of buildings;
- Providing drive-thru options;
- Decentralizing food preparation and distribution and engaging multiple kitchens;
- Delivering meals to school bus stops;
- Delivering meals directly to students; and
- Collaborating with local non-profits (e.g., food banks) to provide groceries along with meals.

Other Considerations

During this frightening time, students in need of meals may also need other support such as health care, mental health services, and social services. Be sure to virtually convene your specialized instructional support personnel, such as social workers and counselors, as well as local service providers to discuss addressing the entire range of student needs while schools are closed. Some districts have staffed their meal delivery buses with school nurses and/or social workers.

Resources

- [NEA COVID-19 webpage](#)
- [NEA Education Votes: Child Nutrition](#)
- [FRAC: Ensuring Access to the Child Nutrition Programs in the Event of School Closures](#)
- [FRAC: SNAP updates](#)
- [USDA: Guidelines on Child Nutrition Program Meal Service During COVID-19 Outbreaks](#)
- [USDA: Guidance on Human Pandemic Response](#)
- [USDA: SFSP and SSO Meal Delivery Using Existing Authority](#)
- [Hunger Free America: 4 Steps States Can Take to Advance "Pandemic EBT"](#)
- [USDA: State Plan for Pandemic EBT](#)
- [USDA: Request to Provide Emergency Allotments \(Supplements\) to SNAP Households](#)

