



SERVING REMOTE LEARNERS: MEAL SERVICE MODEL GUIDE

The importance of equity and virtual learners

Providing meals to all students

Well-nourished children learn better, tend to have higher test scores and less behavioral problems. In addition, recent studies show that well-fed children are absent less than those who miss meals. Feeding virtual students is an important way to ensure students are fed and stay connected to their school community.

In some areas, districts have permanent virtual schools for the 2021-2022 school year. Operating through the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and utilizing the available waivers makes it possible for schools to serve their virtual learners this year, whether students are still enrolled in their traditional school but taking advantage of a virtual option or enrolled in a separate virtual academy.¹

Disparities exist in access to in-person learning

Throughout the pandemic, half of Black and Latino students were in fully remote districts, compared to one third of white students.² For various reasons, including students living in multigenerational households where older family members could be at risk for virus transmission, these students remained at home. This can be challenging for districts and students, especially those with internet access challenges who cannot get broadband to all their remote learners. Although districts have been returning to in-person instruction, Black and Latino students have been slower to return. Polls have consistently shown that parents of color prefer remote only learning for their children.

Serving Virtual Students in Action

Hay Elementary, Dallas ISD (TX)

At Hay elementary school in Dallas ISD, they are planning on using a hybrid model to provide both virtual and in school meals to students. The virtual students will attend school two days per week and meals will be provided on Thursdays for the Friday, Monday and Wednesday of the next week. They will also have the option of ordering their meal preferences online with a new pre-ordering system. Although most schools are trying to get back to regular service in the cafeteria, kiosk usage has taken off in many schools across the district. All communication methods available have been used to spread the word about the hybrid serving model at Hay. Local television media has been a huge support to the Dallas community in getting the word out about their meal delivery programs.

¹ This might not be the case for all-virtual schools that are not affiliated with a physical school or run by a traditional school food authority. Schools should work with the agency that administers the school meals programs in their state to determine eligibility.

² American Enterprise Institute (June 7, 2021). Return to learn tracker: <https://www.returntolearntracker.net/race-charts/>

How to Serve Virtual Students

Determine the Need

Clear communication with families that choose to continue virtual learning is key. Reach out to these families to determine their school meal needs and what service model is preferred.

- [Survey families](#) about their meal preferences through email, social media, phone calls or host virtual focus groups.
- Learn more about adapting your meal program to meet families' needs with our [Conversation Starters for Designing More Inclusive Meals Programs](#) and [Designing More Inclusive Meals Programs Workshop Recording](#).

Evaluate Your Capacity

Staffing shortages, students returning to in-person teaching, and alternative meal service models like breakfast and lunch in the classroom may limit your capacity to feed virtual learners. Utilizing resources and innovative production methods you relied on during SY 20-21 can stretch your capacity to feed more students.

For example, if you purchased a food sealer and extra freezer space during the pandemic, use that to pack and freeze the meals you are preparing for in-person students. Those meals can later be distributed to virtual students through any of the service models outlined below.

Choose Your Service Model(s)

Bulk meal or grocery service may be the easiest and quickest method of providing healthy meals to your virtual students. How do you distribute the bulk meals and/or groceries will depend on you school's resources, staff capacity, and virtual family preferences. The models below can be combined and customized to meet your school's needs and make the most of your resources.



Meal Service Model	Description	Resource Needs	Student Considerations
Home Delivery	Deliver meals directly to students' homes	Transportation (buses or school vans), staffing, bulk meal preparation, packaging, refrigeration, freezers	Actively update your virtual student roster to accommodate students that move, are unhoused/multi-homed, or temporarily quarantined.

How to:

- Survey virtual families to see if they can accept home delivery of meals and what days of the week and times are best.
- Create one or multiple delivery routes that group together home deliveries across your school district.
- Utilize buses or school vans after student drop off or pick-up to deliver meals.
- Update your student roster and routes frequently to accommodate student moves and students who are new to the school or recently enrolled.

Bus Route/ Communal Space Delivery	Deliver meals to communal spaces or along pre-existing bus routes for family meal pick-up	Transportation (buses or school vans), staffing/ volunteers, bulk meal preparation, packaging, refrigeration, freezers	Pick-up times and locations need to accommodate parent/guardian availability
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How to:

- Survey virtual families to see what bus route stops and community spaces are most accessible.
- Ask what days of the week and times are best for families to pick-up from these sites.
- Create delivery routes and communicate the routes and times to virtual student families.
- Utilize buses or school vans after student drop off or pick-up to deliver meals.
- Work with community partners to host community pick-up sites and provide volunteer distribution support.

Partner with Community Organizations	Find partners to provide volunteers, deliver meals, or even host a meal site.	Staffing, packaging, strong communication	Strong communication about the partnership will be needed for families to know this service is available and free for them to utilize.
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How to:

- Reach out to your local food bank, YMCA, or other community centers to discuss how you can work together to provide meals to virtual students.

Curbside Grab-n-Go	Parent/Guardian pick-up meals from school or community locations	Staffing, packaging, bulk meals, refrigeration, freezers	Pick-up times need to accommodate parent/guardian availability.
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How to:

- Survey virtual families to see what dates and times they are available for curbside pick-up.
- Set a consistent schedule for meal pick-ups and communicate it to families.

Pair with current school distributions	Tie meal distribution to homework pick-ups, school tests, or administrative needs	Staffing, packaging, strong communication, refrigeration, freezers	Strong communication to parent/guardians about meal pick-up times
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How to:

- Work with the administration and teaching staff to pair homework pick-up and other administrative needs with meal distributions.

Tips & Tricks For All Models

Food Safety

Be sure to follow food safety standards while packing and storing meal boxes. Freeze any meal components that can be frozen and keep frozen until distribution. Use coolers and/or hot/cold rolling carts to store meals during distribution.

Communicate storage and reheating needs to parents/guardians. Consider writing or labeling boxes as 'Perishable' or "Keep Refrigerated' to let parents know how to store the meals correctly. Provide a handout that lists the items in their box, how to store them, and how to cook or reheat the meals.

Staffing

Volunteers can be used to pack, label, and distribute meal boxes. Volunteers can come from within the school community, such as older students and parents. Volunteers can also come from community partnerships with your local businesses and non-profit organizations.

Learn more tips for alternative staffing in our [Tips for Staffing Summer Meals Programs](#).

Allergies

Pay close attention to your virtual student roster and their potential allergy needs. Consider leaving out common allergy items such as peanut butter from all meals.

Equipment Needs

Learn more about how to use different equipment for meal service models with our [Equipment Tips For Meal Service During The 2021-2022 School Year](#).

Storage

Find open spaces in your school to use as set up for boxing/bagging meals, especially if you have a large number of virtual students. This can be done by cording off part of the cafeteria, gym, library, or unused classroom to use as meal prep space and storage of self-stable goods.

Menu Planning

Be sure to plan for how you will utilize your USDA commodities. Some fresh fruits and vegetables can be put straight into your meal boxes, but others might need to be broken down into a usable state. Utilize volunteers or out of school time hours, such as spring or winter break, to break down commodities into usable meal items.

Communications

Consistent communication with parents/guardians is vital for the success of any meal program. Send weekly reminders for meal pick-up. Be sure to utilize all forms of communication available such as social media, email, robocalls, and letters with the full meal pick-up schedule. Use student favorite meals to drive participation and advertise the menu in these weekly reminders.

Meal Tracking

For bus and home delivery models, use a bus tracking system or text messaging service to let parents/guardians know what time to expect their meals to be delivered.

