



CONVERSATION STARTERS

FOR DESIGNING MORE INCLUSIVE
SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMS

Students and their families are the most important stakeholders in school nutrition programs. These questions can be used to guide conversations with school nutrition staff for the purposes of identifying barriers that students and their families may face in accessing school meals.

Questions for Identifying Barriers that Students and Families May Face in Accessing School Meals

- ❑ **Have you connected with your district's McKinney-Vento liaison to identify ways to support students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity within your district?**

If so, how are you tailoring the meals programs to meet children's and families' needs?

For example, a school district in CA made special accommodations for families experiencing housing instability, including offering daily hot meal pick-up for families without refrigeration or freezer capacity required to participate in their standard weekly meal service that includes a mix of hot, refrigerated, and frozen meals.

- ❑ **Are there any families with immigrant or refugee status within your district?**

If so, how are you adapting to meet dietary preferences, communicate in preferred languages, and create an environment at meal sites where families feel represented, welcomed, and respected?

Families with immigrant status may be hesitant to access public benefits, including school meals, fearing immigration consequences due to public charge action. FRAC's resource, [Food Over Fear: Overcoming Barriers to Connect Latinx Immigrant Families to Federal Nutrition and Food Programs](#), features important recommendations from immigrant

families on opportunities to connect families to federal nutrition programs, including school meals.

- ❑ **Are there students who speak languages other than English in your district? What are the primary languages?**

If so, are communications about the meals programs in those languages? Is there an opportunity to hire someone from the communities who speaks languages other than English to be a part of the team and communicate with students and their families?

- ❑ **Are there transient/migrant populations in your district, including seasonal workers, families with unstable housing, military families, and children in foster care?**

If so, how are you tailoring your meal program to meet various needs?

You may consider surveying families to better understand their schedules and then tailoring meal service accordingly so that families who may not have permanent residence in your district can still participate in school meals. For example, if seasonal farmworkers and their families live in your school district, are you making meals available at times and locations that families can access and that fit within their schedules?

Continued on next page

Questions for Identifying Barriers that Students and Families May Face in Accessing School Meals

(continued)

- ❑ **Are there families without regular or reliable access to transportation to meal sites? Are there families for whom distance is a barrier to accessing meal sites? What efforts are being made to reach them?**

For example, some schools are delivering meals directly to families' homes/places of residence. Others are partnering with nonprofit organizations to coordinate delivery.

- ❑ **Are the meals that you serve reflective of cultural and dietary preferences of the families within your school district? Are there families within the district that follow religious food guidelines?**

If your school district is in a community with a variety of cultural or ethnic groups, consider designing menus that include each of them. One of the first parameters to consider when creating menus is families' cultural preferences and religious affiliations. Are fish or pork off-limits for any community members? Are there particular seasons during the year where families will not eat these types of food, such as during Ramadan and/or Lent?

When you offer dishes that come from a particular culture, reference them by their traditional names, which will make them more familiar and recognizable to students and families. For vegetarian options, consider food items that can omit the meat portion, and still stand on their own for taste,

quality, and design. For instance, you may have a pasta that can be served without meat.

- ❑ **Are you making accommodations for families who are essential workers at this time?**

For example, are you providing pick-up times that align with varying work schedules? Are you surveying families regularly about what pick-up times work best for them and adapting your program accordingly? Are you delivering meals directly to families' homes so that students can access meals even if their parents are away at work?

- ❑ **Are there other student populations that your meals program might be missing?**

Compare school enrollment to participation, and compare current participation to a normal school day or summer day. If demographic data is available, consider breaking down data by race, ethnicity, age, and geography to help you identify opportunities in program access.

Consider bringing together a representative group of community stakeholders, including parents and caregivers, to explore ways you can collectively identify communities that your meals program may not be reaching.

Questions for Engaging Students and Families in Designing a More Equitable Meal Service

When families are included at every stage of program design and delivery, they have better access to and are more excited about the meals served, and consequently, more children receive healthy and nutritious food.

The previous section was designed to identify barriers to accessing meals. The following questions are meant to guide conversation around *how* students and families can be intentionally included as thought partners and co-creators of school meals programs.

For examples of how schools and nonprofit organizations have put these strategies into action, visit our resource, [Let Your Community Shape Your Program](#).

How can you seek input from the kids, teens, and families you are trying to reach?

Start with informal conversations with current participants, as they likely have a hunch about why others may not be participating. A few simple questions can be a great way to begin building inclusive practices that will reach more families. If you're looking for more formal feedback, consider administering a short survey or hosting a focus group. Surveys and conversations that are in hosted in languages that families feel comfortable speaking will be more productive, and if possible, appropriately compensate parents/caregivers for their time. Consider bringing local caregivers onto the team as staff to help with translation.

Can you authentically build new relationships with the families and within the communities that haven't been reached?

New community partnerships can be a great way to align your program with families' needs. Relationships can be formed with community organizations, community and faith leaders, or individual people. When reaching out, consider the work already taking place, the ask that you are making, and the timing of your outreach. Keep in mind that relationships often require ongoing communication; try not to only connect when you need something.

How can you work with trusted community partners and families to create a more accessible and inclusive environment where kids, teens and caregivers are excited to participate?

After collectively identifying barriers that may restrict program access for families, teens, and younger children, how might you work together to minimize those barriers? To identify and implement possible improvements? Note that if you are asking someone to do work with you or for you, especially if it requires the labor of a person of color to leverage personal experience and expertise, acknowledge their commitments and discuss fair compensation.

Do staff represent the communities you hope to reach?

As available openings occur, ensure that you consider hiring staff who reflect the communities you are trying to reach, provide anti-racism and anti-bias training for staff, and retain staff who have the time and resources to build authentic relationships with families. The people serving meals can make a big difference for how comfortable kids, teens and their families feel at meal sites. Furthermore, centering diversity among staff members provides various perspectives, fosters creativity, and improves team productivity. Consider the relationships that staff have with the communities and food served. Does your team trust and value local community members? Does your program serve culturally appropriate meals?

What opportunities exist to reach families with additional resources, besides food for kids? Are there community partners whom you can work with?

In community conversations, families may identify additional opportunities for support, beyond food for kids. Who can you partner with to reach families with additional resources? How might you work with local SNAP and WIC offices to help families apply for additional food assistance? Can you work with local food banks to promote their services or integrate them into yours? If families are looking for support with housing, healthcare, or employment assistance, who in the community might be able to help, and how might you make them part of the conversation? Can you co-locate these services with meal service for easier access?

How will you hold yourselves accountable to this work over time?

What will you do to ensure positive outcomes? Actively seek feedback from kids, teens, and families, and ask the above questions throughout the year. Through continued and open community communication, you'll be better able to assess the success of collective efforts, identify opportunities for further improvement, and make sure kids, teens, and families have access to and are happy with the meals program.

For more COVID-19 meals program resources from No Kid Hungry's Center for Best Practices, visit <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/>.

Have a story or tip of your own to share? We'd love to learn from you! Email us at bestpractices@strength.org.