

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL MEALS

When schools closed due to COVID-19, school nutrition staff made sure that students could still access the meals they needed. School meals became a lifeline to many children and families, easing the financial strain and uncertainty caused by the coronavirus and providing a comforting source of consistency for students. School meals will be important in the new school year as families continue to struggle, so engaging the school nutrition department in planning is critical.

School Meals Are Essential to Student Health and Academic Success

School meals are critical to students' well-being and readiness to learn. Research has shown that children who eat breakfast and lunch at school rely on school meals for half of their daily energy intake.¹ With food insecurity rates skyrocketing due to the economic hardship triggered by the coronavirus pandemic – one in four children are estimated to be struggling with hunger² – school meals will be essential to more children than ever. Research has also shown that school meals are healthier than meals brought from home or elsewhere: students eat more fruits, vegetables, and milk when they consume school meals, and they are less likely to consume desserts and snack items.³ And this all has an impact on the classroom: students who eat breakfast the morning of a standardized test have significantly higher scores in spelling, reading, and math, compared to those who do not eat breakfast.⁴

Superintendent Debra P. Pace, of the School District of Osceola County notes:

“The challenging times that our nation and local communities continue to work through have resulted in many more students and families experiencing food insecurities than ever before. For a large number of children in our community, school meals are their only certain food they receive.

The Osceola School District truly believes in the critical contribution that adequate food and good nutrition make to a child's academic success and on their physical, cognitive, and behavior development. Ensuring that our students had food during our extended school closure was a priority, and it will be an important part of our reopening plans in the fall, as we continue to provide every child, every chance, every day.”

Supporting School Meals Means Supporting Local Business

School nutrition departments must operate as nonprofit businesses. They are generally expected to be self-sustaining, and their budget must remain separate from the school district's education budget and general fund. All school nutrition revenue, whether from federal meal reimbursements, any supplemental state reimbursements, or sales revenue, must be re-invested back into the school meals programs. So, when school nutrition departments succeed, money goes back into local employees' pockets, back to local vendors that supply food, and back into making school meals healthy, delicious, and easily accessible to students. By supporting school meals, you are directly supporting local business and the local economy.

**Support local
business by
supporting
school meals!**

Include School Nutrition in Back-to-School Planning

School meal service will need to be adapted to meet safety recommendations and align with district and school operations. It is critical to include your school nutrition director in planning efforts to ensure that the school nutrition department is prepared to meet students' needs in the fall. The school nutrition director can also advise on whether certain plans would have particular logistical or financial ramifications for school meal service. Active communication and collaboration among school nutrition staff, administrators, and educators is essential to ensuring that reopening plans work for everyone and that all staff are bought in to new protocols.

Making Meal Service Work for Everyone

Students may not be able to eat in the cafeteria while maintaining social distance depending on its capacity and the school's operating status. If the cafeteria is not an option for some or all students, they may eat outdoors (weather permitting), in other common areas, or in classrooms.

Options for distributing meals in your district or school may include:

- In the cafeteria using the serving line
 - This may be possible whether students eat there or take meals elsewhere.
 - This could allow the most options for meals and menu items while giving teachers a break.
- At kiosks in hallways or common areas
- Delivery to classrooms



The right choice may depend on factors like equipment availability, school layout, schedule considerations, labor needs, and the ages or abilities of the students – carrying meals from the cafeteria to the classroom may be tough for young students.

The entire process of breakfast and afterschool meals in the classroom, including service and clean up, takes about 15 minutes.⁵⁻⁶ Therefore, lunch in the classroom wouldn't take considerably more time to execute. Classroom instruction is often incorporated into meals in the classroom, with teachers using this time effectively for announcements, reading aloud, nutrition education, social-emotional learning lessons, or other tasks. The time devoted to meals in the classroom can be more than offset by students' improved focus and behavior, and reductions in school nurse visits and disciplinary issues due to hunger.⁷⁻⁸

Teachers spend an average of \$300 of their own money to feed hungry students.⁹

Trash and messes, other commonly cited concerns, can be overcome by training students to pick up after themselves and coordinating with school nutrition and custodial staff. Facilitating collaboration between school nutrition staff and teachers is also critical to creating a plan that minimizes the burden on teachers while ensuring students' access to healthy food. This student support can itself mitigate the burden on teachers since they often see the need to feed hungry students.

School meals are essential to student success and well-being. With collaboration and planning, meals can work for everyone. For more information and resources, visit the [Center for Best Practices website](#).

References

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