

# Adapting School Nutrition During COVID-19

## A Back-to-School Case Study

**“It’s all about community. This program is bigger than the meals we serve.”**

Community and family involvement is tradition at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, located in the Pacoima neighborhood in Los Angeles. Nicknamed “the little school that could,” Vaughn was the first charter school conversion in the US in 1993. With support from the visionary Dr. Yvonne Chan and a team of dedicated teachers, students at Vaughn dramatically improved their academic performance, garnering national recognition. Together, Vaughn established a bold new vision for education that took decision-making to the community. It was in this tradition that Vaughn built a community-centered school nutrition program, championed by the Food Services team, CEO Fidel Ramirez, and the entire Vaughn staff and community. As Food Services Director Frances Montoya puts it, “Vaughn is teamwork at its best.”



*Alicia Escoto, a proud Vaughn employee for 24 years, serves meals to students, including her grandkids.*

To support students schooling from home with nutritious meals, the Food Services team at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center redesigned their school nutrition program by collaborating with families and Vaughn staff. In the era of COVID-19, Vaughn has been able to sustain participation in their school meals program at 42% of what they would serve on a typical school day, despite trends of heavy participation losses across the country. Against the odds, Food Services is even seeing participation *increase* as they head back to school. How does Vaughn do it?

## Family Involvement

Vaughn knew the weight of the moment. Rising unemployment amidst an economic crisis meant that not only were students and families facing hunger, but school nutrition staff were also at risk of losing their jobs if they could not sustain participation in the program. With 30 dedicated community members each working ~29 hours/week in the school nutrition department, Director Frances Montoya knew that feeding kids and keeping jobs were critical to the health of her community, and that sustaining the school nutrition program would be a team effort.

The Food Services team first sought input, ideas, and buy-in from the directors at each school (Vaughn’s title for “principals”), and together, they came up with the idea of hosting four “parent forums” and a community survey. The goals for each were to stress the importance of participation, solicit community input on the design of the meal distribution, and to answer families’ questions or concerns.

## Parent Forums

Vaughn held four parent forums, two in English and two in Spanish, on Zoom and live-streamed to Facebook. Families joined to ask questions and offer feedback on the logistics of picking up meals, safety and sanitation plans, and menu offerings. The core message from Vaughn was encouraging participation. “This is about providing kids with nutritious meals and about supporting our staff, suppliers, and farmers through difficult times.” Montoya made sure to highlight the community connections, even inviting a representative from their supplier to attend. Directors and teachers joined, as well, to show united support and enthusiasm for the program.

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### Parent Surveys

The Vaughn Team hosted an online parent survey promoted to families via email and social media to gather preferences for meal pickup days and times. The survey was in both English and Spanish. Almost everyone preferred Monday, but about half of the respondents wanted evening pickup times, while the other half preferred early afternoon pickup times. The meal distribution program was then designed to accommodate both, operating on Mondays from 11-1 and 3-5, serving a week's worth of delicious meals at a time. If a family says they cannot make Monday meal distribution, Montoya will work with them individually to coordinate a separate pick-up time.



Sergio Alvila fills a family's order for produce for the week.

### Food worth Celebrating

The amazing staff at Vaughn are excellent cooks who prepare meals from their proud Latino culture. Pupusas, black bean soup, homemade fresh pico de gallo with nopales, tamales, and Montoya's favorite, cauliflower ceviche. They make meals that students and families love – and it shows!

Montoya and her team are finding new ways to serve their delicious and healthy meals to students schooling from home. When a student or their parent/guardian shows up to the Monday meal distribution, they place their order like they would at an In 'n Out Burger. A "#1" is a "hot, fresh, and frozen combo" including one hot lunch for the day, one refrigerated lunch for the next, and three frozen meals with heating instructions for Wednesday-Friday. A "#2" is an "all frozen" option. Produce is set up like an outdoor market, which Vaughn advertises with fun slogans, like "Crunch your way through the week with celery!" The staff especially love serving fresh cut fruit to the kids on hot summer days, and they have an impressive variety of produce to offer.

### Ingenuity and Innovation

"We have to make it fun. We want families to come and enjoy the program."

To make their meal distributions inviting, the Vaughn team is getting creative. In addition to their In 'n Out-style ordering system, produce stand, and catchy marketing, they are working on fun giveaways, a prize wheel, and theme days. Just like at a baseball game, Montoya and her team are giving away lanyards and other swag to those who pick up meals. On days that the LA Dodgers play, the hot meal for the day are baseball-style hot dogs.

To speed up the lines, Montoya worked with her point-of-sales software provider to create unique barcodes for each household and ordered barcode scanners. Because Vaughn is 100% CEP, they are issuing one barcode per household to further streamline the counting and claiming process.

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Now, families do not have to remember student ID numbers or wait for staff to find a student's name on a roster. Instead, they can display the barcode in their car windshield or via a picture on their phone.

Montoya is also working on a partnership with her distributor Goldstar Foods that is currently distributing food boxes through USDA's Farmers to Families Program. By having Goldstar distribute those food boxes at Monday's meal distribution site, they will serve as a one-stop shop for both school meals and food for the family.



*Mainland staff work hard to get ready for the day's meal distribution.*

## Collaboration and Communication

Collaboration and support from directors and teachers are key to the success of Vaughn's program. Montoya and her team work hand-in-hand with all staff to integrate information about the meal distribution program into all family communications. Some families only learned about the meal distribution from "Coffee with the Director" calls that have spotlighted the program. Food Services staff will even let teachers know which students are not showing up to Monday meal distribution, and those teachers will check in with parents/guardians during regularly scheduled "parent hours."



*Students show their gratitude for Food Services staff with homemade signs.*

Montoya and her team also advertise the program through social media and email communications to families. Check out this adorable [video](#) of staff giving well wishes to students at home!

"All in all, this is truly a team effort borne out of love for our community," says Montoya.

**Vaughn's school nutrition program could not survive without the hard work, support, and inspiration from:**

Food Service Staff: Misty Alvarez, Sergio Avila, Maria Bernal, Marina Cornejo, Alicia Escoto, Olga Fernandez, Valeria Galvan, Monica Garcia, Victor Gonzalez, Julian Guzman, Connie Jimenez, Cecelia Moreno, Lavern Owens, Maria Paz, Antonia Perez, Maria Perez, Martha Perez, Patricia Ramirez, Emma Rosales, Laura Soderquist, and Leticia Tovar, Esther Barajas; Danny Orozco;

Cafeteria Managers: Anna Lazcano, Maria Arreguin, and Omar Gonzalez;

Food Service Office Staff: Lynda Marshall (Coordinator), Erika Lazcano (Manager), and Priscilla Casillas (Account Clerk);

Vaughn Leadership: Yvonne Chan (Founder), Anita Zepeda (CEO, 2007-2018), and Fidel Ramirez (CEO, 2018-Present)

For more back-to-school resources, from policy guidance to meal service tips and tricks, visit <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/back-school>

