



RESEARCH BRIEF

# LESSONS THAT MATTER

Strategies To Translate Pandemic-Era  
School Meal Innovations to Common Practice

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### **Introduction**

In the Spring of 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed abruptly causing school meal programs across the country to rapidly change. They transitioned from providing individual meals to students in schools to providing grab and go meals at community sites, often including multiple meals or days of meals at one time. All of this occurred amid many unknowns and fears related to COVID-19 disease spread. The USDA issued a series of waiver flexibilities to support meal programs in feeding children and mitigating the increased food insecurity that is typically observed during anticipated school closures (e.g., summer and other school breaks). Food insecurity was expected to rise dramatically due in part to these sudden widespread pandemic-related school closures.

### **Methods**

The data analyzed in this report were collected from two previous studies by research teams across two states, Maryland and North Carolina. The previous studies interviewed local child nutrition program leadership and staff (including public school districts and a few charter schools) to understand new practices that were put into place during the pandemic and perceived benefits of the USDA waiver flexibilities. This report describes a secondary analysis conducted using these data, with a focus on how lessons learned may impact future operations.

## Results

The aim of this study was to identify lessons learned by child nutrition program staff while operating school meal programs during a pandemic with COVID-19 related waivers, and translate those lessons learned in practice and policy recommendations. We summarize findings into five categories for reporting: **(1)** communication across multiple stakeholder levels, **(2)** staffing and professional development, **(3)** partnerships, **(4)** preparedness and infrastructure, and **(5)** financial structures. The main findings are described within each category and include supporting quotes and practice recommendations mapped onto the frequently-cited Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) strategies. Across the categories, we consistently found the need for all child nutrition program staff to be more connected with others—to learn from each other, strengthen relationships, and improve communications across all levels of the program.

1. **Communication.** School nutrition professionals felt that communication increased and was improved during the pandemic at all levels—between State administrators, district leaders, meal service staff, and families. State administrators created centralized communication platforms that school nutrition directors could use to share and get recommendations. However, frequent constant policy changes at the federal level meant the information received from State administrators was not always clear or received timely. Local directors utilized multiple avenues to reach families.
2. **Staffing and Professional Development.** Staff took on new roles and were more involved in decision-making which helped them to feel more invested in their jobs and created operational efficiencies. In recognition of increased responsibilities and staffing shortages, directors invested in staff appreciation events and incentives, something that is important to cultivate in non-pandemic times as well.
3. **Partnerships.** Partnerships with people both within (e.g., social workers and bus drivers) and outside of the school district (e.g., non-profit organizations and churches) were critical to run meal service effectively, know where to place meal sites, access additional equipment and resources, and reach more kids.
4. **Preparedness and Infrastructure.** School nutrition professionals felt unprepared to alter operations during a pandemic situation and had to make creative and unexpected infrastructure investments amid a lot of uncertainty and rising costs. These decisions were made more challenging by delays in issuing waivers.

5. **Financial Structures.** The pandemic exacerbated the disconnect between feeding kids and financial solvency. School nutrition directors were not always in a position to focus on what was best to reach the most kids due to uncertain federal requirements and financial concerns. The financial uncertainty caused by delays in waivers prevented nutrition directors from making decisions to improve operations. Universal school meal service was crucial to being able to provide meals to kids during the COVID-19 pandemic and would also make operations easier during non-pandemic times.



## Conclusion

This report is for stakeholders at the national, state, and local level to understand what school meal program staff learned during the pandemic. Recommendations are provided for operational changes that school meal operators can implement now and for future school closures, and for policy changes to address barriers that led to inefficient responses that are not within the direct control of schools or state agencies.

## Practice Recommendations

Child nutrition program leaders play an important role in determining how school meal programs operate. Based on the findings from this study, we recommend the following key practices:

1. Increase communication with families to promote school meal programs—utilizing multiple avenues of communication.
2. Reassess staffing structures and roles, and provide incentives to retain staff and boost morale.
3. Cultivate relationships with a variety of school and non-school partners that work with families to streamline efforts, access resources, and better reach families.
4. Develop a formal blueprint for how to handle operations during unanticipated school closures and know ahead of time the type of infrastructure changes that will need to be made.

5. Flexible financial structures must be in place to allow school meal professionals the ability to implement necessary program changes and address challenges associated with the pandemic, as well as making the program easier to operate during typical times.

A full list of specific examples of practice recommendations can be found [here](#).

### Policy Recommendations

School nutrition professionals frequently emphasized in the study the importance of receiving timely communication about allowable program flexibilities. There are two policy recommendations that would help with this during a future pandemic:

1. **Permanently establish child nutrition program waiver authority and other flexibilities during emergency situations.** State agencies and school meal professionals should know before a pandemic occurs what program requirements will be relaxed, that consistent options will be available nationwide, and be provided with a simple and streamlined process for waiver adoption. School meal professionals should be given as much flexibility as possible.
2. **Provide additional funding and flexible financial structures (such as universal free meal service) as soon as possible to ensure that school meal programs remain financially solvent.** This will help FNS Directors focus on feeding kids, and allow them to make the best, most efficient decisions related to reaching them.

Many of the learnings from this study can also inform policy recommendations to improve meal programs during a typical school year. These include:

1. **Make certain waiver flexibilities a permanent option during anticipated school closures (e.g., summer) to make it easier for children to access meals.** FNS Directors gained a lot of experience in how to best reach kids when they are not in school and made investments that facilitate this type of meal service. Allowing some of the COVID flexibilities, such as non-congregate meal service, to be options during other school closure periods will ensure that kids are still able to access needed meals.
2. **Increase access to no-cost, healthy school meals for all through both federal and state-level policies, such as expanding the Community Eligibility Provision or eliminating the reduced-price category, to streamline administrative processes and bring the benefits of school meals to more children.** There were many benefits to the universal free meal service implemented during the pandemic such as reduced operating costs, school lunch debt elimination, and reduced stigma that would improve program operations during a typical school year.