



FULL REPORT

SUSTAINING THE CHANGES THAT MATTER

State Agency and Local Sponsor Perceptions on
Pandemic-Informed Operations in 2021-2022 School Year

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARPA - The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

CARES - The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

ERIC - Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change

ESSER - Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

LS - Local Sponsor(s)

SA - State Agency(ies)

TA - Technical Assistance

USDA - United States Department of Agriculture

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INTRODUCTION

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced nationwide school closures in March 2020, Congress authorized the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to issue a series of waivers that would enable school meal programs to continue to operate. The implementation of these waivers during the highly-controlled initial months of the pandemic (March – August 2020) among local sponsors (LS), including organizations that administer school meal programs like public school districts and non-public private schools as well as community organizations and others that implement summer meals programs) has been well-studied. However, the extent to which these processes informed more permanent operational changes or best practices is less known. In 2021, Share Our Strength commissioned a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected from LS in two states (North Carolina and Maryland) during these initial months of the pandemic, applying the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) framework in order to translate lessons learned from waiver implementation into sustainable policy and practice recommendations (hereafter, “Phase 1”).^{1, 2, 3}

Since spring and summer of 2020, the national policy context related to school

meal programs has continued to evolve, children have returned to school on different timelines and formats across states and districts, supply chain issues have persisted, media attention has waned, and many state- and regionally-specific operations changed. Waivers were extended, enabling children to continue to receive free meals and school meal programs to receive higher reimbursement rates. Additionally, school meal programs had access to a variety of funding resources through designated COVID-19 relief funds.⁴

While the body of literature on school meal programs implementation under waivers during 2020 school closures grows, there is limited insight into how implementation evolved as schools resumed and what components of waiver implementation may be sustainable following waiver expiration in 2022. Further, our current understanding of school meal programs operations under the COVID-19 waivers reflects the LS perspective, and does not include the perspectives of the state agencies (SA) that oversee LS (e.g., Departments of Education, Departments of Agriculture). SA act as intermediaries between USDA and LS and play a key role in school meal programs administration.

¹ Lane, H., Dinh, J., Rader, A., Soldavini, J., Grover, K., Ammerman, A., Hager, E., Read, M. “Lessons that Matter: Strategies to Translate Pandemic-Era School Meal Innovations to Common Practice”. Share Our Strength Report. February 2023. Accessible at: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/lessons-matter-strategies-translate-pandemic-era-school-meal-innovations-common-practice>.

² Waltz TJ, Powell BJ, Fernández ME, Abadie B, Damschroder LJ. Choosing implementation strategies to address contextual barriers: diversity in recommendations and future directions. *Implement Sci.* 2019 Apr 29;14(1):42. doi: 10.1186/s13012-019-0892-4. PMID: 31036028; PMCID: PMC6489173.

³ Powell BJ, Waltz TJ, Chinman MJ, Damschroder LJ, Smith JL, Matthieu MM, Proctor EK, Kirchner JE. A refined compilation of implementation strategies: results from the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) project. *Implement Sci.* 2015 Feb 12;10:21. doi: 10.1186/s13012-015-0209-1. PMID: 25889199; PMCID: PMC4328074.

⁴ Share Our Strength (2022). “Supporting Child Nutrition Programs with COVID Relief Funds.” Available at: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/supporting-child-nutrition-programs-covid-relief-funds>.

OBJECTIVE

Building on the findings from Share Our Strength's secondary analysis of North Carolina and Maryland qualitative interviews, additional data collection with SA representatives and LS from diverse states across the country was conducted. SA representatives and LS were recruited from across USDA regions in order to (1) explore school meal implementation across the country following nationwide pandemic response school closures (i.e. Fall 2020-Spring 2022) and (2) to strengthen strategy guidance identified in Phase 1.



METHODS

Study Design

In the current work ("Phase 2"), we applied a prospective qualitative study design to SA representatives and LS staff interviews to explore school meal implementation processes during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to refine strategy guidance from Phase 1. We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants who were purposively recruited across USDA regions.⁵ We analyzed interview data through a hybrid deductive-inductive approach guided by Phase 1 findings and the ERIC framework. ERIC is a taxonomy of strategies to embed and implement innovations within organizational settings.⁶

Recruitment and Sample

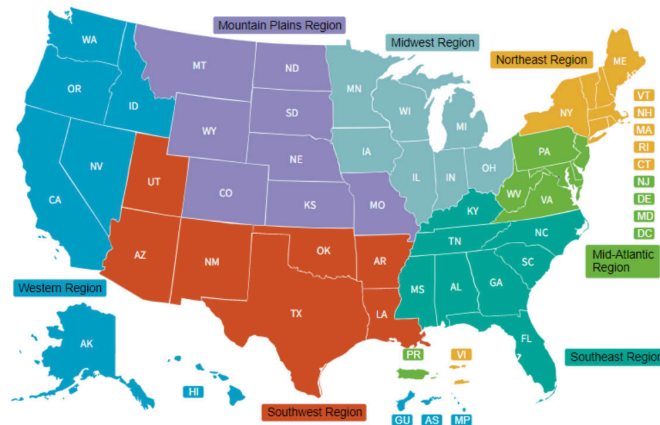
Our initial recruitment plan used purposive sampling and a multi-pronged approach

to recruit both one SA and one LS from 1-2 states in each of USDA's 7 regions (targeting 14 interviews, total). We identified states that did not have significant ongoing support from Share Our Strength, and were not involved in existing or planned research studies related to school meal programs. For each target state, we emailed staff from state agencies overseeing Child Nutrition Programs and emailed USDA's regional office staff with a request to reach out to state agencies. In this communication we requested both a SA interview and recommendations for districts within the state to interview. Additionally, to overcome initial recruitment strategy challenges, we also emailed LS staff directly using publicly available email addresses and asked interviewed staff to recommend other Sponsors in their state.

⁵ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-regional-offices>.

⁶ Powell, B.J., Waltz, T.J., Chinman, M.J. et al. A refined compilation of implementation strategies: results from the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) project. *Implementation Sci* 10, 21 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-015-0209-1>.

Figure 1: The goal of purposive sampling was to achieve representation of all 7 USDA regions.



We contacted a total of 133 participants, and conducted 15 interviews (7 with SA representatives, 7 with LSs, and 1 joint interview with a SA and LS) in 8 total states. All 7 USDA regions were represented. Our goal of interviewing both a SA and LS was achieved in 4 states. In the other 4 states, we interviewed a SA only (2 states) or an LS only (2 states) due to non-response. Enrolled states and districts had substantial variability in terms of size, operations model (e.g., through a food service management company, self-operated), locale classification, state-level political context, and demographic characteristics. Interview participants were also heterogeneous in terms of scope and responsibility.

Instrument Development

From Phase 1, 5 categories of best practices from the perspectives of LS were identified that could improve school meal program reach and implementation beyond the pandemic relief period.⁷ These categories were: communication structures, staffing, partnerships, preparedness and infrastructure, and financial structures. These findings were then shared with the larger study

team, who identified four key priorities for the Phase 2 interview guides, which were: more in-depth exploration of multi-level communication structures, evolving attitudes related to financial structures, waivers, and administrative changes, changes to staffing structures and use of community partners, supply chain issues, and overall thoughts on future program needs. Interview guides were developed iteratively by the team and piloted with two food service directors. Guides are included in the Appendix.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted by 3 trained staff members between December 2021 and June 2022 via Zoom. Interviews were audio-recorded. Interviewers completed debrief forms after each interview. The study team met after the first two interviews to make minor modifications to the interview guide. Interviews averaged 53 minutes (range: 38 to 91 mins). Participants received a tumbler for their participation. Recordings were transcribed and uploaded into Dedoose Version 9.0.54 (Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC) for analysis.

⁷ <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/lessons-matter-strategies-translate-pandemic-era-school-meal-innovations-common-practice>.

Our codebook was grounded in the 16 implementation strategies identified in Phase 1, with a goal of refining and expanding guidance. For each strategy, a team of four coders identified key concepts using a team-based consensus approach over several coding rounds. We used a hierarchical coding structure to generate tailored guidance by personnel level. Given the heterogeneity of the study sample as well as the policy and societal changes over the 6-month course of the study, we described key concepts rather than constructed themes and provide salient examples. In combination, the themes and salient examples broaden the applicability and enhance the practicality of our best practice guidance.

RESULTS

Overview

In the sections and tables below we describe key concepts, examples, and implementation guidance for the nine of the 16 Phase 1 strategies within 4 domains of interest: (1) Communication Structures; (2) Staffing; (3) Partnerships; (4) Financial Structures. When appropriate, we also describe available resources/guidance for implementation from Share Our Strength. We split one strategy into two under the Communication domain and condensed two strategies in the Partnership domain based on new data. We also report a single strategy for Financial Structures, with separate guidance provided for that strategy at the Sponsor, State Agency, USDA, and state/federal legislature levels.

It is important to note that we found substantial variability in state-specific procurement policies, political will, culture, and infrastructure across



included states. Thus, developing blanket implementation guidance was challenging. Thus, in our recommendations we note considerations that may need to be taken into account at the state or regional level.

Domain 1. Communication

Both LS and SA participants felt that communication became more “regulated and regimented than ever before” during COVID-19. Across all levels, (USDA, SAs, LSs), as school resumed and waiver operations became more predictable, communication channels remained in place but less frequent updates were needed. Overall, participants acknowledged that communication across levels improved, but expressed the need for strategies to ensure better preparedness and more streamlined communication, particularly from USDA, in future waiver scenarios.

A. Implementation Strategy: Create a Learning Collaborative

Both LS and SA participants noted the continuing value of opportunities organized by SAs for LSs to “bounce some things off” peers (e.g., town hall meetings). These opportunities continue with less frequency beyond the initial pandemic year, with more collaboration and resource-sharing happening behind the scenes. For example, a LS from a smaller district with limited staff capacity noted that a larger district in the state began publicly posting their procurement bids, which gave them a model template to use in their bidding process and could stay in compliance with USDA regulations.

SAs often mentioned USDA Regional Office calls as a forum for sharing ideas and troubleshooting challenges, but also as a forum to offer feedback to the national office.

“ I do think [USDA regional office staff] hear us with concerns, I do think they take them up to national office, positives and negatives, and that has been, it's been really good. And so they have been a very big piece into our successes in our state, no doubt about it. And so that's probably grown us closer together too, as a group of states and with our agency.”

[State Agency representative]

SAs and LSs both felt that the town hall meetings strengthened relationships and informal collaborations, and hoped they would continue beyond the pandemic period.

B. Implementation Strategy: Centralize Technical Assistance from SAs to LSs

In Phase 1, our findings suggested that LSs received technical assistance from SAs in a more centralized way (e.g., via webinars attended by all LSs) rather than the pre-pandemic individualized model (e.g., auditing and feedback). Phase 2 data suggest that this centralized model—through offerings such as on-demand recorded trainings and live Q&A sessions—continued (although less frequently) even as operations under waivers stabilized. As noted by the SA representative below, using web-based platforms to provide centralized assistance led to advances in infrastructure for data collection and reporting to USDA.

“ We started using Monday.com [project management software]...to manage data collection and points of contact because we have multiple people doing a particular part of a task. It was beneficial...because we didn't have, and still don't have, a formal training platform online. That's partially why we've always done in-person trainings—to demonstrate our management of the program to USDA, we have to be able to track participation and we've not been able to do that in the past electronically. [COVID-19] kind of forced us to find some new workarounds. So we still don't have a formal system, but we do have a way to track training. And we converted a lot of our trainings that were previously only offered maybe once or twice a year into an on-demand format that we're able to use going forward.”

[State Agency representative]

LS staff and SA representatives generally endorsed making centralized technical assistance “a permanent part of our culture” because it increases communication, strengthens relationships, and breaks down barriers to participating such as time and transportation costs (“it’s just a click of a button and I can see you. Before it was get in your car and drive 3 1/2 hours to [state capital] for a meeting.”); however, some respondents wanted more of a hybrid model that also includes individualized, in-person support that considers the unique contexts of individual LSs.

“ We’re finding that people in our small state prefer a one-on-one interaction if they have a particular question. A lot of times, especially with the waivers, the questions are very situationally specific, like we don’t always want to address those questions more broadly because they confuse people. So from a collaboration standpoint among partners, Teams and Zoom have been really effective and we’re continuing that even as we’re back in person. But from a field communications standpoint, email and personal phone calls or follow-up meetings and on-demand trainings have been most effective.”

[State Agency representative]

To implement a hybrid technical assistance model, SAs recognized the need to build capacity among their own staff. One SA representative described how they re-organized their model to better meet the needs of LSs:

“ We went to more of a point person model. We have a team that conducts reviews, works on applications, works very closely with our sponsors. Before, it was kind of, not a free for all but, that team would then contact the point person or expert in that area. So we switched to one person having a caseload of districts that they work with on everything, because with operations changing so drastically and day-to-day, that way at least one person had some background knowledge of where [a Sponsor] came from, what they’ve tried, versus trying to connect with multiple people.”

[State Agency representative]

SA representatives were critical of USDA’s slow response times and lack of support in the initial months, because it hindered their ability to provide support to LSs.

“ It took [USDA] a while to get into the groove of communicating with us as frequently as we needed. Because we were there for our program operators, we needed USDA to be there for us, and it did take them a little while. But we finally established a weekly meeting with them—you know, if we don’t have an open mic then we are just going to barrage them with emails and phone calls. They were just a little slow on the uptake...I think that they were reluctant to have these meetings if they didn’t have solid information. But I think there is value in meeting to understand the questions whether you have answers or not.”

[State Agency representative]

C. Implementation Strategy: Organize Implementation Team Meetings

SA reps reported more use of web-based meeting platforms and project management tools to streamline internal communication and processes and “ensure everyone was on the same page.”

“ We learned [that we need to] ensure that everyone on our team was on the same page and had the same understanding for the different nuanced things and waivers coming out and ever-changing. So we used Smart Sheet, and we would come up with talking points to ensure that the messaging was going out to all of our customers the same way. Really digging into those with everyone to make sure there is a clear understanding and interpretation because, again, things were changing so quickly, and still are.”

[State Agency representative]

Use of web-based platforms to facilitate within-group communication was less common among LSs—several described staff discomfort with technology as a primary challenge. LSs did report increasing the frequency of informal in-person meetings to support school staff:

“ We visit schools regularly so we can address any issues. That practice of visiting schools, talking with staff, trying to address issues immediately and not just let them go so that people know that they’re heard and that we care about.”

[Local Sponsor participant]

SAs and LSs also held or attended more meetings with outside partners such as distributors and vendors. One SA personnel noted being invited to attend more local meetings, which increased understanding of various partners’ experiences and improved relationships.

“ Our Department of Education has a rural alliance and it’s a group of superintendents from the rural districts in [state]. We started being invited to those meetings to report out where we are at, what type of flexibilities were in place, things along those lines. That had never happened before, and now superintendents are a little bit more involved and understand the meal program a little bit better now, because they were feeding communities where there was no other food anywhere else. So I think that has really opened up some really new channels for us that we’ll continue to utilize moving forward.”

[State Agency representative]



D. Implementation Strategy: Develop and Distribute Educational Materials

Educational materials and information were distributed to families from LSs via many channels (e.g, parent apps such as Remind, Facebook, other social media, district websites, local newspapers). LSs felt that parents were more likely to pay attention when school or district communication channels were used.

“ We partnered a lot with our district communications department, because more parents follow the district Facebook and communications than they do ours. I think it has improved our communication for the future, because we have a lot more people following our Facebook page and that sort of thing.”

[Local Sponsor participant]

In terms of materials distributed to LSs from SAs, SA reps described augmenting their live communication (e.g., technical assistance webinar) with strategically-timed or as-needed materials such as “Friday emails,” email newsletters, FAQ sheets, and recorded webinars and on-demand trainings.

“ We would just kind of group everything on Fridays, and it just happened that waivers would come out. So we would always send an email out before the media got a hold of it. And then we would regroup and at the end of that email say ‘more information will be coming Tuesday at our reopening meeting.’ And then we would have these weekly reopening meetings.”

[State Agency representative]

“ We tried to stay on that same weekly schedule, although that was sometimes the challenge with, USDA would release something on a Friday and our newsletter wasn’t going out to the next Thursday and we thought our customers really needed to hear that.”

[State Agency representative]

In terms of educational materials guidance from USDA, both SAs and LSs respondents were critical of the timing of policy waiver memos, which were often released broadly to the general public rather than first being released to SAs, which led to unnecessary panic and confusion among LSs and families. USDA also often released waiver implementation guidance later than expected, causing SAs to scramble to create their own which led to excessive and confusing information for LSs.

“ We tried to give LSs as much guidance as we could on how to implement the waivers. Unfortunately...we often ended up in a position where we had to give guidance before we actually had it from USDA because the LSs needed something to go on to develop planning. Then we would get guidance from USDA days later that was contradictory to what we put out. And so...In some ways I’m sure that LSs would say that we were not that helpful. But in some ways, I think that has a benefit too, because it did make them really think through the different options and understand the requirements.”

[State Agency representative]

ERIC STRATEGY	KEY THEMES	GUIDANCE FOR USDA, STATE AGENCIES, LOCAL SPONSORS	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE
Communication Structures			
1. Create a learning collaborative*	Within-level learning collaboratives (e.g., regular virtual meet-ups and resource exchange) was helpful across levels.	<p>USDA regional offices and SAs should maintain infrastructure for virtual town halls to facilitate a collaborative learning environment for peers to share ideas and improve operations.</p> <p>While remote forums may enable participation for LSs with limited travel budgets/time, regional gatherings may facilitate resource-sharing and relationships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operate on a regular schedule, with additional meetings as need arises (e.g., pandemic EBT or non-congregate) Use web platforms to formalize infrastructure for meetings and sharing relevant materials Convene virtually and in-person Emphasize a collaborative, rather than competitive, approach to information sharing among LSs
2. Centralize technical assistance*	<p>The shift to centralized TA was successful due to strong foundational trust between LSs and SAs.</p> <p>The <i>lack</i> of technical assistance from USDA in the initial months hindered SAs ability to support LSs.</p> <p>Centralized TA improved communication and removed time and transportation barriers, but individualized support also improved as SAs learned to better align TA with unique local contexts.</p>	<p>SAs could shift from centralized to a <i>hybrid</i> technical assistance model, whereby SAs provide some training via frequent, scheduled live or recorded webinars on project management software across all LSs, supplemented with as-needed individualized approach to address local challenges.</p> <p>Technical assistance from USDA is valuable for SAs even if guidance is not yet released.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use project management software to track metrics (e.g., views/attendance; adherence to new protocols) and evaluate whether hybrid model meets needs. Consider organizing technical assistance by state region rather than topic area to build relationships and increase local knowledge among SA staff.
3. Organize implementation team meetings	<p>SAs used web-based meeting platforms and project management tools to streamline communication and processes.</p> <p>SAs strengthened/formed new relationships with state and local partners through attending meetings.</p>	<p>SAs and LSs should meet with staff regularly to troubleshoot local challenges, reflect on lessons learned, and support mutual learning. Leaders should continue to use virtual platforms and infrastructure to make team meetings more accessible and efficient. If possible, diversify perspectives through multi-level, multi-sector meetings (e.g., distributors, vendors).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If rapid information-sharing is necessary (e.g., under waiver operations), streamline and provided uniform messaging around new guidance or information. LS: include technology training in staff onboarding to ensure all staff can participate in meetings. SA: attend local implementation meetings to increase understanding of partners' experiences and improve relationships.
4. Develop and distribute educational materials	<p>Reaching parents was easier through schools/districts communication channels rather than directly from food service department.</p> <p>SAs combined TA with regularly distributed (e.g., weekly newsletter) and responsive (e.g., email updates as memos were released) materials.</p> <p>USDA's release of waiver-related memos and guidance to the general public was often ill-timed and led to panic and confusion across levels.</p>	<p>SAs and LSs should invest in multi-pronged marketing strategies. LSs should partner with district communications teams or other trusted sources for parents to assist with development or distribution of materials.</p> <p>USDA should provide a timeline for release of guidance, and work with SAs to distribute materials to LSs rather than releasing to the public, to ensure state-level relevance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage existing communication structures within districts, and ensure that materials are culturally acceptable and at an appropriate reading level. Catalog materials to re-use in future emergency feeding scenarios. In future scenarios where timely guidance from USDA policies is needed, SAs could remind LSs to review guidance from USDA, but wait for state-specific guidance before taking action.

Domain 2. Staffing

During the interview period, kitchen staffing shortages were a primary concern for continuing program operations. LSs reported attempting myriad strategies to recruit and retain staff with varied success. LS and SA personnel generally expressed appreciation for meal service staff, and supported institutionalizing strategies to recruit, retain, and express value of staff.

A. Implementation Strategy: Revise Professional Roles

Our findings build on our prior findings that more dynamic training and professional development opportunities for staff are needed to increase skills and retention. We identified examples of LSs “rewriting job descriptions for a modern post-pandemic time,” in order to both retain existing staff but also to reduce the need to hire new staff: hiring/formalizing full time “floater” positions rather than part time staff, and rearranging day-to-day responsibilities for efficiency (e.g., all staff reporting to a single site and dispersing where need, more pre-assembly prior to lunch shift). These changes may have had an added benefit of improving staff trust and well-being.

“ When people would communicate that they were burning out or when they you know, had to take time off for family reasons, being able to step in either us as admins or finding subs to give them peace of mind. They take a lot of pride in their sites, in their schools, and feeding their students. So knowing that that was taken care of was important and being able to do that without there being disruptions was good.”

[Local Sponsor participant]

Many LSs and SAs were concerned about training and preparing staff, many of whom were not employed prior to COVID-19, to get “back to business as usual” (e.g., collecting applications, charging students, and reporting sales through data management platforms) after several years under waiver operations.

“ With turnover at the State and district, people in their roles now and ones to come for next school year will need extensive training outside of waivers. What we consider normal because we’ve been around and remember what once was, it’s really hard to communicate that to someone that wasn’t there. So we have to get over our own selves of ‘back to normal, back what it used to be,’ you can’t really use that language anymore.”

[State Agency representative]

LSs and SAs universally acknowledge the rigor of this training, and felt that school kitchen staff should be viewed as trained nutrition professionals and front line, essential educational partners.

“ More recognition and then of an elevation of [USDA’s required professional development] in regards to how people see school nutrition professionals would help in their stance in the school and community, as somebody who provides a resource to students on a daily basis that is actually trained. It is required by USDA, so it is something that is above and beyond a lot of entry-level food service staff. It’s targeted for school children. So I think recognition and an elevation of those processes would be helpful.”

[Local Sponsor participant]



B. Implementation Strategy: Alter Incentive Structures

Local Sponsors used different financial strategies to “treat the employees that we have the best we can” and recruit new employees to build capacity when needed such as leveraging COVID-specific funding sources (e.g., ESSER funds), working with SAs and school district officials to increase hourly wages and/or provide retention bonuses, providing flexibility and accommodations, and creating new administrative positions.

“ I got to a point where I was spending probably two thirds of my week just dealing with food shortages. So I created a purchasing manager who just focuses on finding [food]. ESSER’s paying for that. And I created a site supervisor...I needed another administrator because if I got sick or something, there needed to be somebody there that could keep the operation running. Those are positions that didn’t exist and I created that came out of the pandemic.”

[State Agency representative]

“ Our district right now is really working on retention. I know that they put retention bonuses out for employees. We’re working on re-evaluating meals per labor hour and trying to give as many current employee benefits as possible, increasing hours when warranted instead of hiring from outside, just really focusing on how can we make people love what they do here and love the employer, you know love the district and want to stay.”

[Local Sponsor participant]

ERIC STRATEGY	KEY THEMES	GUIDANCE FOR USDA, STATE AGENCIES, LOCAL SPONSORS	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE
Staffing			
1. Revise professional roles	<p>LSs focused on revising roles of existing staff to reduce hiring needs, including rearranging operational responsibilities.</p> <p>LSs and SAs were appreciative of staff and endorsed strategies to elevate their role and increase visibility.</p> <p>LSs and SAs were concerned about training staff for “business as usual” after several years under waivers.</p>	<p>Engage existing staff members in re-assessing staff roles based on professional skills and interests, restructure responsibilities to reduce operational numbers, and advocate for Sponsor-level hiring decisions that better enable flexibility.</p> <p>Increase visibility of the USDA training requirements for school meal staff among district and school personnel.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift from part time/sub model to full time floater and cross-train staff to serve multiple roles. • Make operational changes to streamline staff roles (e.g., pre-assemble items, distribute staff differently as needed daily). • Anticipate and build in infrastructure and time for training related to inevitable changes to federal and state policies. • Publicly elevate training required to work in school foods to legitimize the profession.
2. Alter incentive structures	<p>COVID-specific funds enabled strategies to retain staff (e.g., higher wages, bonuses, flexible hours, accommodations for staff) and create new administrative positions.</p> <p>SAs and districts worked with LSs on retention-focused financial solutions.</p>	<p>Establish incentive structures that enable recruitment and retention of school meal employees both during the school year and during closure periods (e.g., overtime pay, bonuses, child care provision) to ensure coverage, appeal to new applicants, and maintain morale.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify state or district-specific labor and education laws and procurement practices that may enable or hinder staffing changes. • Work with SAs and LSs to sustain positions hired through COVID-specific funds. • Engage staff in defining desired benefits. • Formally, frequently assess and address attrition to reduce the strain of turnover.

Domain 3. Partnerships

Both SA and LA participants noted the role of partnerships—both internal to the district and external—early in the pandemic. As one LS noted, “everyone wanted to be involved” in the initial months—to hand out books, take leftover food to senior centers, and donate freezer space. Some of these partnerships were maintained as school resumed and personnel hoped they could continue during normal operations. While many respondents hoped to “grow the local partnerships” beyond the pandemic period in order to improve operations, support the local food system, and add variety to menus, few specific recommendations for practice emerged. The resources and support needed for SAs and LSs to sustain vital partnerships warrants further investigation as normal operations resume.

A. Implementation Strategy: Build a Coalition/ Develop Resource Sharing Agreements

We collapsed the two strategies identified in the prior report into a single recommendation, to ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial and formalized to support long-term growth.

Among our sample, partnerships that began in the initial pandemic months for practical purposes (e.g., to “fill the gaps”, transport meals, and combat supply chain issues) evolved to become more formalized. These partnerships were mutually beneficial, and included entities such as local suppliers, other community-based organizations focused on reducing hunger, and local governments.

“ We developed a partnership with our [State Department of Tourism] during the early days of COVID, people weren’t touring state parks. So, we utilized state parks to socially distance when our schools are teeny. And some of those partnerships have continued...they came on the scene to help during a crisis and now they’re a partner in education. They are a permanent site for summer feeding. Kids are doing field trips there. They’re doing distance learning there. It’s a silver lining out of a really bad situation. They’ve developed a strong bond, and we’re happy to see that.”

[State Agency representative]

“ The community partnerships have grown out of the pandemic and continue to be strong and will only increase. We’re now offering local fish on the menu...we just had to find ways to serve good food to kids especially after we got done sending meals home and kids started to come back, we found all of these great partnerships and avenues to pursue. They will become a permanent part of what we do. Who knew there were root vegetables you could get all year? We never really thought about it prior to this. We always thought strawberries in July, apples in the fall, but the conversation was never had about parsnips and beets in the dead of winter. So, here it is. It’s part of our menu now.”

[Local Sponsor participant]

Another related finding was that the operational flexibilities under the waivers “opened up school districts’ willingness” to test new initiatives such as breakfast in the classroom.

“ I think schools and principals might be more on board with, that they never really were before pre-COVID, breakfast in the classroom or recess before lunch, just some different things that would potentially change their schedules or teachers wouldn’t get on board with. Now, it has become a more common thing because they had to with COVID. And I think there’s a lot of benefits in those things. So hopefully that relationship with the admin and teachers at schools and the food service department continues to stay, and I think it was strengthened a lot by this.”

[State Agency representative]



ERIC STRATEGY	KEY THEMES	GUIDANCE FOR USDA, STATE AGENCIES, LOCAL SPONSORS	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE
Partnerships			
<p>1. Build a coalition/ Develop resource sharing agreements</p>	<p>While district and external partners were most involved in the early months, some remained strong. LSs often wanted partnerships to continue, but sustainability strategies were not always clear.</p> <p>Supply chain issues led to increased procuring from local farms and businesses, which added seasonality/variety to meals and supported the local food system.</p> <p>Waiver operations strengthened interest of district and school personnel in new initiatives (e.g. Breakfast in the Classroom).</p>	<p>Cultivate mutually beneficial partnerships with local service organizations, other district employees (e.g., social workers) that reach same families or are similarly dedicated to reducing hunger or improving local food sources. Convene frequently, and intentionally discuss ways to streamline services, share resources, and communicate.</p> <p>Formalize relationships with local suppliers, producers, vendors, caterers and restaurants that have resources to support meal programs, in order to improve menu variety, use funds locally, and/or secure grants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to meet via web platforms to ease participation and promote engagement. • Explicitly outline ways in which partnerships are mutually beneficial. • Apply for partnership grants (e.g., Farm to School). • Continue to engage teachers and school leaders as proponents and partners in initiatives to increase participation.

Domain 4. Financial Structures

Many personnel noted that in the 2021-2022, LSs were experiencing—many for the first time—relative financial “self-sufficiency” due to increased participation rates, higher reimbursement rates, pandemic-related funding sources, and increased procurement of commodity foods (e.g., foods purchased by USDA and provided to LSs at minimal costs). Both LS and SA representatives were concerned about the “financial crisis that’s coming” as the waivers expired amid continued supply chain challenges and rising food and labor costs. In addition, respondents were concerned about re-training families and staff on application and reporting processes as well as the return of stigma and “lunch shaming.”

“ Last year was great. Everyone wants to be fiscally responsible and you actually felt successful last year with that because you were getting reimbursed enough to cover your expenses. And I’m just devastated for what next year is going to look like, you know, lower reimbursement rates and back to claiming and categories.”

[State Agency participant]

A. Implementation Strategy: Alter Allowance Structures/ Make Billing Easier

We identified a single implementation strategy, with recommendations for USDA, SAs and LSs. Similar to our prior report, most personnel advocated for Congressional and/or state-level legislation to support some version of no-cost healthy meals for their students. Respondents described the series of waivers as a “*beautiful test program*” to bring financial stability to the programs, reduce “*overt identification and stigma*,” lower overhead costs, and eliminate school districts’ obligation for unpaid meal charges. They were realistic, however, about the challenges of achieving no-cost healthy meals (“*I think that’s just a wish at this point*” [Local sponsor participant]).

Respondents stressed with equal importance the need to re-assess the reimbursement formula to reflect the current market, account for recent operational changes (e.g., higher wages for staff), and provide extra funds. Respondents provided examples of how funding from COVID-related sources help them responsibly build program capacity, such as updating cafeteria plumbing and infrastructure, ordering new equipment, resetting families' unpaid meal fees, increasing wages, and purchasing higher quality food.

“...[in the future] I would love to see districts get a little bit more back in reimbursement. They all feel comfortable and financially healthy. We have a lot of rural districts in [state] who need and deserve some kitchen updates but don't have the financials to do that. Through getting these extra COVID funds, they've been able to replace equipment that's 20 years old, and remodel their kitchens so that their dining areas have booths and table tops that are higher and things that are cool and try to increase their participation by having a welcome dining room.”

[State Agency representative]

Respondents also noted a similar need to re-assess current federal and state administrative processes, such as reviews or reporting, the use of applications in Title 1 funding formulas, and the expenditure timeline of State Administrative Expenses (which makes it difficult for states to use the funds to meet their needs).

“It takes a lot of staff for [LSs] just to follow the regulations, they don't always have time to make things healthier because they're caught up in the administrative side of the program. That does end up affecting the finances because you need more people—you need the administrative piece done and you also want staff that are able to cook healthy meals. So I think if they're able to streamline the regulations and provide additional reimbursement, we might see some major changes across the nation.”

[State Agency representative]



ERIC STRATEGY	KEY THEMES	GUIDANCE FOR USDA, STATE AGENCIES, LOCAL SPONSORS	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE
Financial Structures			
<p>1. Alter incentive/ allowance structures and make billing easier*</p>	<p>Increased participation, higher reimbursement, COVID-related funding sources, and increased use of commodity foods led to relative financial security and “self-sufficiency that many LSs had not experienced before. Benefits included cafeteria upgrades, cleared unpaid meal fees, increased wages, and higher quality food.</p> <p>As waivers expired while food costs and supply chain issues persisted, LS and SAs worried about drastic impacts on participation and stigma.</p> <p>Most LS and SAs advocated for no-cost meals for all, but noted other solutions (e.g., expand Community Eligibility Provision, breakfast in the classroom, re-assess reimbursement formulas) as more realistic.</p>	<p>LS: Leverage momentum to institutionalize practices that increase participation, such as breakfast in the classroom or after the bell.</p> <p>SAs: Re-assess and streamline monitoring and auditing models and training.</p> <p>USDA: modify funding structures (e.g., higher reimbursement rates), grants, and administrative funds to better align with timelines and operational and labor needs of LSs. Devise responsive structures that enable local sponsors to continue operating during periods of school closures, including institutionalizing flexibilities and issuing them with longer timelines to acknowledge the necessary recovery periods. Consider administrative changes that enable LS to use strategies that increase participation (e.g., breakfast in the classroom).</p> <p>Legislatures: permanently authorize universal school meals, and/or allocate funds for higher reimbursement rates or altered funding formulas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide education on which governing bodies are responsible for which components of the program, and how policies differ across state contexts. • Engage staff in state and federal advocacy efforts.

**In prior report, these were described as a single strategy.*

DISCUSSION

Our findings informed refined implementation guidance for USDA, state agencies, and local sponsors to sustain COVID-related operational changes with intent to increase participation, reduce food and nutrition insecurity and improve diet among children. Implementation guidance is provided across nine communication, staff, partnership, and financial strategies, refined from the initial 16 strategies. This guidance was carefully constructed in light of the ever-evolving political and financial landscape at the federal, state, and municipal level. The waivers that enabled operational flexibility in the first two years of COVID-19 expired in June 2022, and in most schools normal meal operations resumed in SY 2022-2023. The Keep Kids Fed Act⁸ enabled continued reimbursement at higher rates through the 2022-2023 school year, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023⁹ allocates funding for permanent non-congregate summer meal service in rural areas. In addition to these policy considerations, our guidance was constructed with consideration to other state and local contextual factors, such as education and labor laws, existing infrastructure, weather, and geography.

Communication across families, Sponsors, state agencies, and USDA regional office levels evolved out of necessity during waiver operations. Strategies such as learning collaboratives, centralized technical assistance models, more frequent team meetings, and new channels to distribute educational materials, were facilitated by new technological infrastructure that was built

in the initial pandemic months, but continued to be useful as in-person operations resumed. Share Our Strength and other supporting entities can support sustainment of this communication infrastructure, including developing online learning platforms or offering trainings and best practices for centralized technical assistance models as federal or state legislation continues to bring operational changes. Entities should ensure that new technical assistance models are flexible, but also meet USDA's success metrics, and assess the impact of increased communication (and understanding of one another's roles) on operations and participation.

The Sponsor staff retention challenges identified in our study reflects current national trends. School Nutrition Association's annual survey shows persisting staff challenges: 59% of 2022 respondents report staffing as a significant challenge in their program. The various strategies that our respondents described using to recruit, retain, and improve development opportunities for staff were mostly (though not fully) facilitated by LSs' financial stability during waiver operations.¹⁰ Thus, it was unclear whether changes made to improve staff retention and morale would be sustainable. Similarly, our limited findings related to partnerships suggest that while Sponsors are invested in maintaining partnerships formed out of necessity during school closures, they noted needing additional support to sustain those partnerships as their needs evolved. Share Our Strength and other entities can more explicitly support Sponsors'

⁸ U.S. Congress (2021). Keep Kids Fed Act. Public Law No. 117-158. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2089/text>.

⁹ U.S. Congress (2022). Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023. Public Law No: 117-328. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2617>.

¹⁰ School Nutrition Association (2023). 2023 School Nutrition Trends Report. Accessed at: <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-School-Nutrition-Trends-Report.pdf>.

staffing initiatives and partnerships by creating templates for partner agreements, identifying funding mechanisms that are mutually beneficial to partners, and compiling information about creative staffing models that have been used successfully by LS. Potentially holding trainings, webinars, or open forums to discuss creative staffing models could also be effective dissemination strategies for Share Our Strength and similar entities to provide the LS community.

Financial structures-related findings from this analysis support federal and/or state policy changes to (1) provide healthy meals for all students at no cost and (2) revise current funding formulas in order to increase per meal reimbursement rates. With the participation increases that resulted from no-cost meals for all children and higher reimbursement rates, many Sponsors reported financial solvency that had never been achieved before, even amid higher food costs. SA and LS respondents both perceived that no-cost meals also reduced stigma, enabled more creative and local procurement practices, and increased enthusiasm for evidence-based strategies such as breakfast

after the bell. National waivers permitting universal free meals expired at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, and waivers permitting higher reimbursement rates expired at the end of SY 2022-2023; however, as of the publication of this report, both of these policy changes are being debated in federal and state legislatures across the country. California and Maine passed legislation to permanently offer no-cost school meals for all students beginning in SY 2022-2023. While data are preliminary, research suggests reductions in unpaid charges meal debt, and stigma for low-income families, and increases in participation in these states.^{12, 13} In contrast, several national investigations reported large reductions in participation, and increases in stigma and meal debt after waiver expiration in states without this legislation.¹⁴

For per-meal reimbursement, rates are currently derived from the Food Away From Home series of the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers.¹⁵ This calculation does not include professional food service equipment, transportation of food and non-food products (e.g., trays, cleaning supplies), food packaging,

¹¹ Hecht AA, Olarte DA, McLoughlin GM, Cohen JFW. Strategies to Increase Student Participation in School Meals in the United States: A Systematic Review. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2023 Jul;123(7):1075-1096.e1. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2023.02.016. Epub 2023 Feb 28. PMID: 36863526.

¹² Cohen JFW, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Read M, Olarte DA, Patel AI, Schwartz MB, Turner L, Zuercher M, Gosliner W, Ritchie LD. Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-19 and beyond: Challenges and Benefits for School Meals Programs in Maine. *Nutrients.* 2022 Sep 28;14(19):4031. doi: 10.3390/nu14194031. PMID: 36235683; PMCID: PMC9571988.

¹³ Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. Providing School Meals to All Students Free of Charge during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Challenges and Benefits Reported by School Foodservice Professionals in California. *Nutrients.* 2022 Sep 17;14(18):3855. doi: 10.3390/nu14183855. PMID: 36145229; PMCID: PMC9500887.

¹⁴ Schaal, K. & Hysom, E. (2023). "Participation in School Meals Drops as Large Districts Return to Normal Operations." Blog post, FRAC Chat. Available at: <https://frac.org/blog/2023-large-district-report?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=48f707b1-7ce5-4412-b4ef-7b7689f7fe86>.

¹⁵ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>.

and wages that rise periodically. In the 2022 SNA survey, over 50% of respondents felt that reimbursement rates were not sufficient to cover food and labor costs, and most perceived that the problem would worsen over time.¹⁶ According to SNA's annual survey, 61% of Sponsors that returned to the income-based payment model had to raise prices for families—and this was more common in smaller districts.¹⁷ Thus, as states debate the merits of no-cost healthy meals, it is also critical to advocate for national changes in per-meal reimbursement rates that reflect the current costs associated with producing, transporting, preparing and serving nutritious meals. Further, just as restaurants and grocery stores adjust costs of products to reflect climate, economic, and social forces and local cost of living, school food operators should be able to adjust their reimbursement requests.

While our financial implementation strategies are primarily policy-driven, Share Our Strength and other entities that support state agencies and Local Sponsors can provide support by investigating alternate funding models and providing data to support the financial argument for no-cost healthy meals for all and increased reimbursement. For example, estimating the administrative costs of processing free-and-reduced price meal applications and handling school meal debt compared with the estimated costs of universal meal policies. Some of our respondents indicated the challenges of no-cost meal legislation in their states without additional political interest, impact data, or infrastructure changes. To support legislation in such states, research is needed to investigate the impact of financial changes beginning in SY 2022-2023 as waivers expired but food costs remain high on families.



PRACTICE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings reinforce the policy and practice recommendations outlined in the first phase of this work.¹⁸ We also identify additional recommendations geared toward state agencies and entities such as Share Our Strength who support Local Sponsors.

The following recommended actions relate to practice and operations:

1. Facilitate a shift to hybridized, collaborative technical assistance, including opportunities for peer learning.
2. Continue investing in web based/digital tools to streamline auditing, reporting, and general communication.
3. Support Local Sponsors in institutionalizing staffing changes (this may require targeted advocacy to school districts and/or state agencies to secure sustainable funding).

¹⁶ School Nutrition Association (2023). 2023 School Nutrition Trends Report. Page 4. Accessible at: <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-School-Nutrition-Trends-Report.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/lessons-matter-strategies-translate-pandemic-era-school-meal-innovations-common-practice>.

4. Assist Local Sponsors with formalizing partnerships, including creating templates for resource sharing or collaboration agreements and sharing best practices for ensuring mutually beneficial partnerships.
5. Continue to consider state or region-specific contextual factors (e.g., geography) when refining guidance across specific states and districts.

In terms of policy recommendations, our findings suggest two primary actions. Importantly, as these policy changes and their corresponding implementation guidance are discussed in state and federal legislatures, it is important to ensure that any policy changes align with the program operators' and administrators' (e.g., Local Sponsors and state agency representatives) needs, resources, and local needs.

1. Permit no-cost healthy meals for all students through state and/or federal legislation to assure broad access to school meals while reducing administrative complexity.
2. Revise federal school meal reimbursement formulas to allow per meal costs to match current economic conditions and update reimbursement formulas frequently (bi-annually) to assure pacing of costs with economic conditions.
3.I think that they were reluctant to have these meetings if they didn't have solid information. But I think there is value in meeting to understand the questions whether you have answers or not." **[State Agency representative]**

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations to our study sample should be noted as findings are interpreted. Selection bias likely operated in our recruitment approach, and thus our findings may not capture the experiences of state agencies or local sponsors with discrepant experiences and policy recommendations. Second, we were unable to recruit enough dyads to aggregate and compare perspectives of state agency representatives and local sponsors due to sample size limitations. However, the heterogeneity of findings across states suggests that this comparison may not have yielded definitive findings. Third, recruitment challenges led to interviews being conducted over a 6-month time frame, during which waiver extensions and expirations occurred that were not captured in all interviews. Despite these limitations, our sample includes representatives from states in all 7 of USDA's regions. We are appreciative of the participants for agreeing to be interviewed during a contentious and chaotic time in their profession. The information they shared holds important power.

CONCLUSION

This study describes implementation strategies that could enable translation of operational innovations during COVID-19 waiver operations to sustained practice. We elicited perspectives of both state agency and local sponsor representatives to inform multi-level guidance and recommendations for practice related to communication structures, staffing and partnerships, and financial structures. Entities that support school meal programs should review the guidance outlined in this report, and provide resources to state and local personnel to promote sustainability.

APPENDIX

Phase 2 State Agency Interview Questions

Communication Across Levels

We recognize that communication was a challenging task in the early months of COVID-19, with constant waiver changes. Looking back, and thinking of what's happening now, can you talk a little bit about how the methods and channels of communication have changed in your state throughout the pandemic? What communication strategies worked well? What challenges were there?

Probes: Your state and USDA, you and your directors (and directors with each other), directors and staff, directors and families, who had what role in decision-making process?

Thinking back on lessons learned during the pandemic, what permanent structures could be put in place to improve communication across levels? This could be generally or in future times of disaster.

Financial/Waiver Situations

Let's first talk a bit about the current financial state of the programs in your state. In your position, do you get information about the financial situation of districts in your state? [if no, don't spend much time on this section]

[If yes] What is your sense of how they are doing (e.g., % of districts at a deficit and size of deficit)? What financial resources did your district have access to (e.g., CARES Act money, emergency operational offset funds)?

Probe: What type of support did your agency provide to help districts use those financial resources (e.g., spending CARES act money)?

What kinds of financial support does your state agency need (if any)?

Probe: Have you received additional financial support from the USDA during COVID? If yes, how has it been used?

In terms of the future, what, if any, permanent changes to funding structures do you anticipate seeing due to COVID-19? What are your thoughts on these changes (e.g., considerations, facilitators, barriers)?

What changes to funding structures would you like to see? What barriers and facilitators do you see and what supports are needed?

Have school districts in your state struggled with supply chain issues? If yes, can you tell me more about these issues?

Probe: Has the state helped resolve these issues with school districts? If yes, how?

Let's move on to the COVID-19 waivers, most of which have been in place since March 2020. What was your familiarity with the waivers before COVID-19? During COVID-19, how did the approvals work in your state?

Probe: We talked about communication already, but do you have anything to add about how your agency communicated with districts about the waivers?

Probe: Has the pandemic changed your opinion of any of these waivers?

Similar to the question above, which, if any, of the waivers do you anticipate becoming permanent for the school year and/or summer? Which would you like to see become permanent for the school year and/or summer?

Innovations and Best Practices

Okay, for this last bit we want to focus on addressing any topics we haven't discussed thus far, and hearing about some innovations or "best practices" that have been happening in your state. What are some practices that have happened among programs in your state during this time that you want to share? What facilitated their success?

Probe: Did state agency play a role in this success? (e.g. by automating certain processes, navigating supply chain challenges)?

Overall, how do you anticipate seeing meal program operations change in your state as a result of COVID? What changes would you like to see at the state, sponsor, and site levels?

Probes: What supports/resources are needed?

Okay last question, it's more big picture. In your opinion, what do we need to do to ensure that school meals programs meet child food security needs?

Phase 2 Local Sponsor Interview Questions

Communication Across Levels

You were given a pretty challenging task in the early months of COVID-19, in terms of communicating the constant waiver changes and other updates with your staff and your families. Looking back, and thinking of what's happening now, can you talk a little bit about how the channels of communication have changed throughout the pandemic?

Probes: Your state and USDA, you and your directors, directors and staff, directors and families

Probe: What methods of communication (especially with families) were most effective? What was challenging?

Probe: Were there other sources of information

if you did not get it from USDA or your state agency (e.g., other directors, organizational resources from FRAC, NKH, etc)?

Thinking of innovative things that you did or heard of others doing, what permanent structures have been/could be put in place to improve communication and decision-making across levels (e.g., Liaising with other organizations or district departments)? This could be generally or in future times of disaster.

Financial/Waiver Situations

Let's next talk a bit about finances. Can you tell me a little bit about your financial situation? How has this situation evolved over the course of the pandemic?

Probes: Shift in financial/procurement models (e.g., navigating supply chain issues, use of local vendors/restaurants, administrative efficiencies); how CARES money was spent; other financial supports or grants (e.g., emergency operational offset funds)

Probes: How was your state agency involved?

Have you had any supply chain issues in your district? (If yes) Can you tell me a bit about the issues you've faced?

Probes: What are the issues - not being able to procure products you once regularly procured? Have there been issues with delivery, delays, or order requests not being fulfilled?

(If yes) How have you dealt with these supply chain issues?

Probes: Have you found replacement products from different vendors? Have you changed your menu?

In terms of the future, what, if any, permanent changes to funding structures do you anticipate seeing due to COVID-19? What are your thoughts on these changes (e.g., considerations, facilitators, barriers)? What kinds of financial support do you need?

What changes to financial structures would you like to see? What barriers and facilitators do you see and what supports are needed?

Let's move on to the COVID-19 waivers, most of which have been in place since March 2020. What was your familiarity with the waivers before COVID-19?

Probe: We talked about communication already, but do you have anything to add about how your state agency communicated with you about the waivers, or how communicate about them with staff/parents?

Probe: Has the pandemic changed your opinion of any of these waivers?

Similar to the question above, which, if any, of the waivers do you anticipate becoming permanent either for the school year or for the summer? Which would you like to see become permanent for the school year and/or summer?

Staffing and Partners

Another big change that we saw for programs during COVID-19 were adjustments to staffing. What staffing changes were made in your program (e.g., training, hiring, numbers, hours)? What staffing challenges did you face? What worked well in terms of staffing?

What changes were made in terms of partnerships and volunteers? What challenges did you face? What worked well?

Moving forward, what permanent staffing changes do you anticipate? What about partnership models? What changes would you like to see?

Innovations and Best Practices

Okay, for this last bit we want to focus on addressing any topics we haven't discussed thus far, and hearing about some new practices or "best practices" that have been happening. What are some practices that happened within your program during this time that you've been proud of? What facilitated your success?

Overall, how do you anticipate seeing your meal program operations changing as a result of COVID?

Apart from anything you've already talked about, what changes would you like to see at the state, sponsor, and site levels?

Probes: What supports/resources are needed?

Okay last question, it's more big picture. In your opinion, what do we need to do to ensure that school meals programs meet child food security needs?

