



RESEARCH BRIEF

SUSTAINING THE CHANGES THAT MATTER

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

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Share Our Strength Report. Project Officer: Panzera, A.D. January 2024.

BACKGROUND

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 operational waivers that would enable school meal programs to continue to operate. Local sponsors (LS), including organizations that administer school meal programs like public school districts, non-public private schools, summer sponsors, community organizations, and others, were responsible for implementing these waivers with guidance from state agencies. The implementation process in the initial year of pandemic has been well-described, including in prior Share Our Strength research that identified 16 best practices for future program operations. This follow-up report builds on those recommendations through perspectives of LS and state agency officials in school year 2021-2022. During that time, in-person school resumed, waivers expired, and policies continued to evolve.

METHODS

We conducted 15 semi-structured, Zoom-based interviews with diverse state agency and local sponsor representatives in 8 states, representing all 7 USDA regions. Interview guides focused on 4 best practice categories identified in prior work: communications, staffing, partnerships, and financial structures. Interviews were conducted between December 2021 to June 2022 and averaged 53 minutes. Qualitative interview data were analyzed through a hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach grounded in the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) taxonomy, which is a framework of strategies for embedding and implementing innovations within organizational settings. Findings are described as key concepts and salient examples for more applicable and practical guidance.

RESULTS

Substantial variability was identified in state-specific procurement policies, political will, culture, and infrastructure across states, making development of blanket implementation guidance challenging. Resulting recommendations consider state- or regional-level specific concepts. Key findings for each domain are summarized below.

Communication Structures. During COVID-19 school closures, communication across levels was more “regulated and regimented than ever before” and remained strong as LS settled into waiver operations and school resumed. New communication structures (e.g., weekly webinars, newsletters, technical support call lines) built out of necessity were robust, and warrants institutionalization.

Staffing. Kitchen staffing shortages resulting from burnout or lack of competitive wages were hindering operations as in-person school resumed, and LS described myriad strategies to recruit and retain staff. These strategies were largely facilitated by increased revenue and earmarked additional funds. Respondents were unsure whether strategies could be sustained beyond waiver operations.

Partnerships. External and district partners play key roles in school meals programs in the initial pandemic months. Many respondents identified partnerships that were longer-lasting and mutually beneficial (e.g., more local procurement to support economy and improve menu variety). LS noted having limited capacity to sustain these partnerships even as they viewed them as vital.

Financial Structures. Despite supply chain issues and rising food and labor costs, many LS were experiencing relative financial “self-sufficiency” for the first time 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). As waivers were expiring amid continued supply chain and cost challenges, most personnel advocated for legislation and policies to support no-cost healthy meals and to maintain financial stability, as well as re-assessment of the reimbursement formulae to reflect the current economic conditions and to accommodate rising food and labor costs.

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

²Powell 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

CONCLUSIONS

Study findings elaborate on implementation strategies that could translate pandemic-related innovations to sustained practice. We elicited perspectives of both state agency and local sponsor representatives, enabling multi-level guidance 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 build resources for state and local personnel to promote sustainability.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings identify recommendations geared toward state agencies and entities that support local sponsors. It is important to ensure that the program operators and administrators (e.g., Local Sponsors and state agency representatives) have a voice in how to ensure that policy changes align with their needs, resources, and local needs as they implement school meals programs.

- Facilitate a shift to hybridized, collaborative technical assistance for school meals program staff, including opportunities for peer learning.
- Continue investing in web-based, digital tools to streamline auditing, reporting, and general communication.
- Support local sponsors in institutionalizing staffing changes, such as streamlining roles and providing higher wages or incentives. This may require advocacy to school districts and state agencies to secure longitudinal funding for sustainability.
- Assist local sponsors with formalizing partnerships, particularly with local food vendors and child-serving organization, including creating templates for resource sharing or collaboration agreements and sharing best practices for ensuring mutually beneficial partnerships.
- Refine guidance across specific states and districts to be informed by contextual factors such as geography or state-level policy changes.
- Permit no-cost healthy meals for all students through state legislation.
- Revise federal school meal reimbursements formulas based on current economic conditions and revise formulae in frequent intervals (e.g., bi-annually).

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.</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.

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.
Partnerships			
1. Build a coalition/ Develop resource sharing agreements	<p>While district and external partners were most involved in the early months, some remained strong. LSs often wanted partnerships to continue, but sustainment 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.

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>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAs and LSs identify potential state-specific funding targets (e.g., personal investments of state leaders) that could address participation challenges. • 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.