



LET YOUR COMMUNITY SHAPE YOUR MEALS PROGRAM

Children and families are invaluable thought partners in designing school and out-of-school time meals programs. When families are brought in at every stage of program design and delivery – instead of a “top-down” approach that excludes community involvement – families are better able to access and are more excited about the meals served, and consequently, a greater number of children receive healthy and nutritious food.

The discussion questions and stories presented here are meant to serve as a resource for schools and nonprofit organizations looking to more meaningfully engage kids and their families in program design and delivery. Consider soliciting input from families and those working closest to families as you continue to discuss these questions and stories with your full team.

Have a story to share about how your community shapes your meals program? Email us at bestpractices@strength.org.

Questions to Consider

1. Who might your meals program be missing? Compare school enrollment to participation, and compare current participation to a normal school day or summer day. If demographic data is available, consider breaking down data by race, ethnicity, age, and geography to help you identify gaps in program access. If data is not available, consider bringing together a representative group of community stakeholders, including parents and caregivers, to explore ways you can collectively identify communities that your meals program may not be reaching.

2. How can you seek input from the kids, teens, and families you are trying to reach? If you have never asked kids or their families to provide feedback, start with informal conversations. Those that do participate likely have a hunch about why others may not be participating. Just asking a few simple questions can be a great way to assess how you might improve your program. If you’re looking for more formal feedback, think about administering a short survey or hosting a focus group. Make sure surveys and conversations are hosted in languages that families feel comfortable speaking, and if possible, appropriately compensate parents/caregivers for their time. If current staff cannot hold a conversation or translate a document into the languages that families speak, consider bringing local caregivers onto your team as staff, volunteers, or board members.

In practice: Edenton Chowan School District

Edenton Chowan School District in NC was struggling with low breakfast participation among high school students. Because the Superintendent’s Council of Students met regularly with Superintendent Rob Jackson, Dr. Jackson used this forum as an opportunity to ask students why they were not participating. Many shared that breakfast was served too early in the morning, and others found it inconvenient to get to the cafeteria and eat breakfast before the bell rang. Students thought a better model would be a “second chance breakfast,” which students could grab from stations in the hallways after their first class and eat in their next. Some teachers initially opposed the idea, so Dr. Jackson met with them separately to express the importance of breakfast to academic success and eventually won their support. With approval from all staff, high school students made a plan to design and build three breakfast carts themselves in their woodworking class. Students in the apparel class sewed the cart covers, and visual arts students designed flyers and digital promotion materials. The high level of student engagement and ownership over the new “second chance” breakfast program made breakfast a regular part of the school day and increased participation.



A breakfast cart made by Edenton Chowan high school students

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3. Do you have existing relationships with the families and within the communities you may not be reaching? If not, how can you authentically build new relationships? New community partnerships can be a great way to strengthen your work and improve your program. Relationships could be with community organizations, community leaders, or individual people. When reaching out, consider the work they are already doing, the ask that you are making, and the timing of your outreach. Some relationships may require ongoing communication, rather than just when you need something.



CMS staff delivering meals to families at curbside locations

In practice: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

At Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina, Child Nutrition Services works hand-in-hand with the district's Community Partnerships and Family Engagement department. During COVID-19 school closures, the Child Nutrition Services team quickly set up a grab-and-go meals program for their students at numerous school and community locations. Prior to COVID-19, CMS's Community Partnerships team had built a relationship with ourBRIDGE for Kids (ourBRIDGE), an afterschool program working with immigrant and refugee families in East Charlotte. When schools closed, ourBRIDGE knew that some families in East Charlotte were not able to access CMS meal sites due to transportation barriers. Because of their longstanding relationship, ourBRIDGE's Executive Director, Sil Ganzó, felt comfortable reaching out to CMS to ask if they could pick up meals and deliver them directly to families' homes. CMS quickly agreed, and the very next day, ourBRIDGE staff began delivering meals. ourBRIDGE continues to be the link between CMS's meals program and the East Charlotte families that ourBRIDGE works with, ensuring that students have continued access to meals delivered by trusted community members.

4. How can you work with trusted community partners and families to create a more accessible and inclusive environment where kids, teens and caregivers are excited to participate? After collectively identifying barriers that may restrict program access for families, teens, and younger children, how might you work together to minimize those barriers? To identify and implement possible improvements? Note that if you are asking someone to do work with you or for you, especially if it requires the labor of a person of color to leverage their personal experience and expertise, acknowledge their commitments and discuss fair compensation for their work.

In practice: Vaughn Next Century Learning Center

Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in CA knew it would be a challenge to reach every student with nutritious school meals during COVID-19 school closures. To accommodate each family's schedule for meal pick-up, the Food Services team hosted an online survey in English and Spanish to ask which days/times were most convenient. Vaughn designed their curbside distribution accordingly and made separate arrangements with any family that had a conflict. Then, the entire Vaughn staff, including principals and teachers, held four online "parent forums" via Zoom to answer families' questions about the meals program and solicit feedback. Now that the program is up and running, Vaughn staff continue to check in with families. The Food Services team shares with teachers which students are not picking up meals, and teachers reach out directly to ask if they may need any special accommodations. Teachers deliver any constructive feedback to the Food Services team, and they continue to tweak their program accordingly. To learn more about Vaughn's meals program, visit [this case study](#).



Vaughn staff delivering meals to families at drive-up site

5. Do staff represent the communities you hope to reach? The people serving meals can make a big difference for how comfortable kids, teens and their families feel at meal sites. Consider the relationships that staff have with the communities and food served. Do community members trust your team? Does your program serve culturally appropriate meals? If not, consider hiring staff who reflect the communities you are trying to reach, providing anti-racism and anti-bias training for staff, and retaining staff who are actually able to take the time to build authentic relationships with families.

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In practice: ourBRIDGE for Kids

Located in Charlotte, NC, ourBRIDGE for Kids (ourBRIDGE) is an afterschool program that works with K-7 students and their families, and they serve CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals. Almost all of the families ourBRIDGE works with are newly arrived to the U.S., collectively representing 22 cultures. Initially, ourBRIDGE staff only spoke English and Spanish, but they recognized that they needed staff who spoke Burmese to meaningfully engage the Burmese community in East Charlotte. Accordingly, ourBRIDGE hired Thin Thin, a Burmese parent whose children attend ourBRIDGE's afterschool programs. Thin Thin was able to deepen ourBRIDGE's connection to her community, and families shared with her feedback about the meals program that ourBRIDGE would not have otherwise received. For example, while families appreciated the pre-assembled meals, they told Thin Thin that they wished they could instead receive ingredients for meals to cook with their children. This feedback revolutionized ourBRIDGE's meal program. Thanks to Thin Thin and the families who shared their input, ourBRIDGE now purchases culturally relevant ingredients for families to prepare their own meals from the independently owned grocery stores in their communities.

6. What opportunities might there be to reach families with additional resources, besides food for kids? Are there community partners whom you can work with?

In conversations with your community, families may identify additional opportunities for support, beyond food for kids. Who can you partner with in your community to reach families with additional resources? How might you work with your local SNAP and WIC offices to help families apply for additional food assistance? Can you work with your local food bank to promote its services or integrate them into yours? If families are looking for support with housing, healthcare, or employment assistance, who in your community might be able to help, and how might you make them part of the conversation? Can you co-locate these services with your meal service for easier access?



The "Travelin' Table" mobile meals bus

In Practice: Moshannon Valley YMCA

The summer meals program at the Moshannon Valley YMCA in PA is so much more than food for kids. Because the program serves families in a rural area where access to basic health services is limited by geography and lower population density, the YMCA Anti-Hunger team consulted with their community about additional services they could offer alongside their summer mobile meals program. Through community partnerships, the YMCA's "Travelin' Table" now offers library books, a no-cost farmers market, cooking and nutrition classes, health screenings, and dental check-ups, in addition to summer meals for kids – all out of the converted bus!

7. How will you hold yourselves accountable to this work over time?

Good intentions do not ensure positive outcomes. Actively seek feedback from kids, teens, and families, and ask the above questions throughout the year. Through continued and open communication with your community, you'll be better able to assess the success of your collective efforts, identify opportunities for further improvement, and make sure kids, teens, and families have access to and are happy with your meals program.

In Practice: Chickasaw Nation

Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services in OK serves summer and afterschool meals to kids and teens in their community. Each year, Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services improves their programs according to feedback they actively seek from families and kids. "We stopped assuming, and started listening," says Gwendolyn Watson of Nutrition Services. "Just because a product is free, doesn't mean people will come." To continue improving their meals program year after year, Chickasaw hosts listening sessions with kids, teens, and families and consults with the community at various local happenings, including town halls, school events, and tribal meetings. Some examples of changes that Chickasaw Nation has made from community feedback include keeping staffing at sites consistent, adjusting site locations or adding new sites, and improving menus according to kids' and families' preferences.