



FOSTERING HEALTH EQUITY THROUGH THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME MEAL PROGRAMS

Exploring Louisiana's integration of a Health in All Policies framework into out-of-school-time meal programs

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Introduction

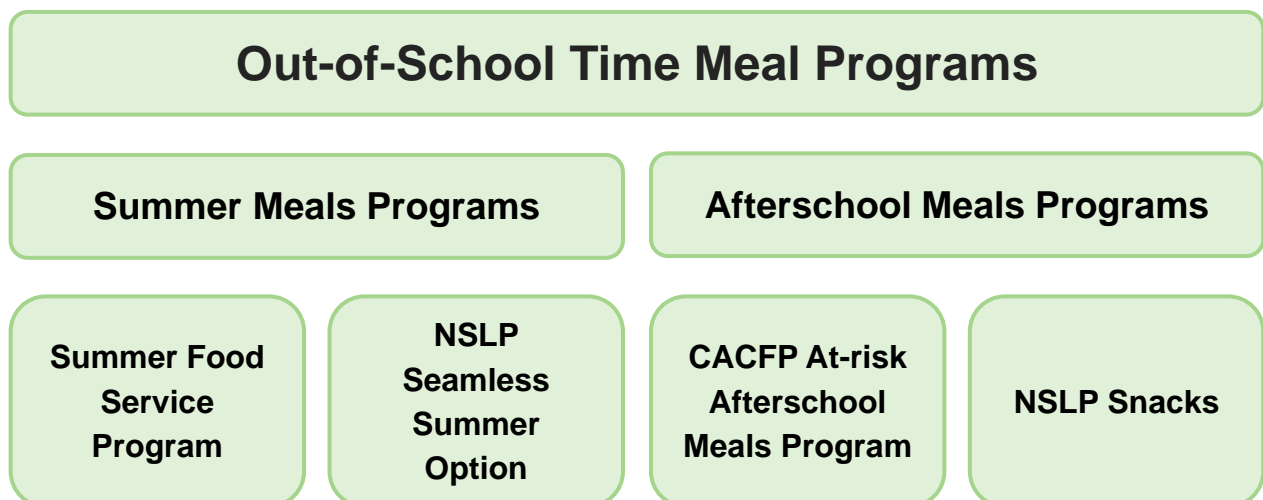
The out-of-school time (OST) meal programs provide healthy meals and snacks to children when school is out, and when implemented effectively, the programs can be a tool to improve health equity within communities. Policies and program changes that center equity and support the expansion and utilization of OST meal programs are critical to the health and wellness of those most impacted by hunger and food insecurity. By leaning into community-led conversations, stakeholders like state agencies and program providers that administer the OST meal programs can improve nutrition access and foster health equity in their communities.

This brief follows the experience of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), the administering state agency for the Child Nutrition Programs, and the Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families (LPCF), a state-wide advocacy organization, as they developed and implemented a health equity framework in Louisiana OST meal programs.

What are the Out-of-School Time Meal Programs?

Children need healthy food to fuel their growth, learning, and play – a requirement that extends beyond the school day. The out-of-school time (OST) meal programs provide nutritious snacks and meals to children when school is not in session – after school, on weekends, during holiday breaks, and over the summer . They also respond when schools unexpectedly close. During the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, the OST meal programs provided millions of meals to children who would have otherwise gone without. The OST meal programs include both the Summer and Afterschool Meals Programs. This report will refer to the suite of federal nutrition programs serving children outside the school day as the OST meal programs.

The OST meal programs are U.S. Department of Agriculture programs administered at the state level. Schools and nonprofit community-based organizations (CBOs) sponsor the programs and implement them at sites across communities nationwide. Meals and snacks are often paired with enrichment activities and are available to children at no cost.



OST Meal Programs' Impact on Health Equity

Food security has been defined by the World Health Organization as having access to sufficient food both physically and economically to meet dietary needs for a healthy and productive life. One major factor in ensuring food security are the social determinants of health, which are the conditions that individuals are born into; where they live, learn, work, and grow which affect individual health outcomes. Food insecurity has one of the most wide ranging impacts on the overall health of individuals in the form of negative health outcomes.¹

Participation in the OST meal programs reduces food insecurity and the risk of related adverse health outcomes while supporting positive academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral outcomes of children who participate. Households with children are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity when compared with households without children (14.8% compared to 8.8%). However, food insecurity does not impact families equally. Children of color are disproportionately impacted with 21.7% of Black and 17.2% of Hispanic households who experience food insecurity compared to just 7.1% of white households.² The impact of food insecurity can be long lasting. Household food insecurity is related to significantly worse general health and certain acute and chronic health problems later in life including asthma and depressive symptoms. Increasing access to nutritious meals outside school hours is integral to protecting children from the adverse impacts of food insecurity and to achieving health equity in communities.

Rates of food insecurity are much higher during the summer months when school breakfast and lunch are unavailable to students who depend on them. Studies have shown that higher summer meal availability or accessibility has beneficial effects on food insecurity, especially for children who experience the lowest level of food security.^{3,4}

While equitable OST meal programs are critical to serving families and communities, increasing access can be a challenge. Children and families often face barriers like availability of a nearby site, unreliable transportation, awareness of open sites, comfort with the program, and lack of culturally appropriate meals. However, organizations and state agencies can utilize key strategies to improve the access to OST meal programs.

One such example is the collaborative work of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families (LPCF). These organizations worked together to improve the availability and accessibility of OST meal programs for Louisiana children and families by centering health equity. This report highlights the promising practices emerging from this work.

Many Programs, One Goal – Meals for Kids

The OST meal programs include programs that operate during the summer and the school year, but all have a goal of feeding kids when school is not in session. They are part of a suite of federal programs, including the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, referred to as the Child Nutrition Programs – all with the goal of providing nutritious meals and snacks to kids and teens.

¹ The World Health Organization (2020). The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2020: Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/state-of-food-security-and-nutrition-in-the-world-2020#:~:text=It%20presents%20valuations%20of%20the,diets%20that%20include%20sustainability%20considerations>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Social determinants of health: Know what affects health. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/index.htm>

³ Food Research and Action Center. (2019). Summer Nutrition and Enrichment Programs: Effective Tools to Support Child Food Security, Health, and Learning During the Summertime. Retrieved from: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/summer-nutrition-and-enrichment-programs.pdf>.

⁴ US Dept. of Agriculture. (2020). Household Food Insecurity in the United States in 2020. *Economic Research Service*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=102075>.

Improving Health Equity through OST Meal Programs – Promising Practices

Centering Local and Community Expertise

Achieving equity requires listening to and understanding the needs of stakeholders, as well as sharing power and facilitating community-driven solutions. By centering local and community expertise, providers and state administrators can reach impactful solutions and achieve a greater degree of equity. Understanding the value of community-driven, collaborative solutions, LDOE and LPCF developed Child Nutrition Program workgroups in two high-poverty regions of Louisiana. The workgroups meet monthly to discuss service areas and identify gaps, opportunities, and resources available. Most importantly, they develop strategies and solutions at the local level to support children and families most impacted by food insecurity. Currently, LDOE facilitates workgroups in four regions and plans to expand this model further across the state.

In addition to creating space for community conversations, LDOE works with community leaders to prioritize access to nutritious meals through OST meal programs. They are engaging mayors across the state in discussions about the OST meal programs, strategies for getting involved, and opportunities for future engagement and support. By encouraging leaders to take action, the state agency can facilitate successful implementation of community-driven solutions while promoting buy-in and a sense of ownership over OST meal programs by community leaders.

Increasing Access to Information and Programs

Access leads to opportunity. Increasing the accessibility of information reduces barriers to participation and fosters inclusivity in programs. Language access is critical to equity and accessibility. LDOE has made intentional choices to expand both the translated resources on their website in addition to translation services. By increasing the availability of translated documents, LDOE is opening the OST meal programs to more community organizations and providers. In addition to language access, LDOE re-branded its website to improve navigability and usability, making information more accessible to visitors.

The Louisiana Department of Education and the Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families

The [Louisiana Department of Education’s \(LDOE\) Nutrition Support team](#) is the administering state agency for the Child Nutrition Programs (including the OST meal programs) with the mission of serving nutritious meals to Louisiana’s students. The [Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families \(LPCF\)](#) is a statewide advocacy organization dedicated to influencing public policy and educating parents and citizens to ensure services provided are the best for Louisiana children. In spring of 2021, LDOE partnered with LPCF on the Breaking Barriers to Better Health for All initiative. This initiative was supported by the [Health Impact Project](#), a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Through this initiative, LDOE and LPCF set goals, developed strategies, and executed an implementation plan to increase access to OST meal programs and improve health equity for Louisiana’s children. The team used a [Health in All Policies framework](#) in planning and implementation. Health in All Policies is “a collaborative approach to improving the health of all people by incorporating health considerations into decision-making across sectors and policy areas.”

From this work, promising strategies emerged. With the support of the Health Impact Project, Share Our Strength partnered with LDOE and LPCF to synthesize promising practices, highlight successes, and identify lessons learned so that this work could be leveraged and replicated nationwide.

Improving the accessibility of web-based resources is a step towards equitable information access; however, person-to-person conversations are critical to assessing the effectiveness of resources, answering questions, and identifying needs and gaps in OST meal programs. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, LDOE has called every program sponsor weekly to address needs and answer questions. The calls have created a culture of collaboration and collective action. Rather than program sponsors feeling LDOE is there strictly for program compliance, conversations and relationship-building have made LDOE a partner in feeding Louisiana's children. LDOE is also contracting with an outside agency to develop a communications strategy and calendar. This work aims to develop new relationships with historically under- or unserved communities by the OST meal programs.

Focusing on Collaboration, Inclusivity, and Intersectionality

Health equity is not achieved through the efforts of one person, one department, or one organization. It takes a collective and collaborative approach. By focusing on intersectionality and inclusivity, stakeholder voices can widen the perspectives and approaches of those contributing to the work. Convenings, conferences, and summits are great opportunities for collaboration. To ensure inclusivity and intersectionality, organizers should research and actively reach out to groups across sectors and from various sizes and communities. By doing so, a diversity of thought leaders share and inform the final outcome.

LDOE and LPCF used this model to plan a Healthy Eating Summit in February 2022. They invited individuals and groups from across sectors to discuss, strategize, and set actionable goals to improve nutrition access for Louisiana children. A focus of the Summit was increasing access to and utilization of OST meal programs. Stakeholders genuinely engaged in problem-solving with the state agency and exposed areas of opportunity for future work.

Moving Forward

In an effort to center equity, LDOE and LPCF elevated local expertise, increased access to information and programs and focused on collaboration, inclusivity, and intersectionality – which ultimately led to improved access to healthy meals for children. Some highlights include a Louisiana school district

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Intersectionality – Definitions⁷

Equity – The process of establishing systems, policies and behaviors that eliminate the unfair distribution of material and non-material access and opportunity resulting in outcome and experience differences that are predictable by race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, home language, sexual orientation, religion, and other dimensions of identity.

Diversity – All the differences between us based on which we experience advantages or encounter barriers to opportunities.

Inclusion – Nurturing a sense of belonging by centering, valuing, and amplifying the voices, perspectives and styles of those who experience more barriers based on their intersectional identities.

Intersectionality – The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

⁷ Adapted from EdChange, Equity Literacy Institute, Talking About Race (2013), J.E.D.I. Collaborative, and [Racial Equity Tools](#).

Moving Forward (continued)

starting Afterschool Meals in 15 schools across the parish, and one district supporting another when a district could no longer operate the Summer Meals Program. LDOE and LPCF plan to build upon their work – continuing to build relationships and communicating with a variety of stakeholders committed to providing meals to kids and families. They plan to expand regional discussions to other parts of the state and continue local check-in calls to keep lines of communication open. LDOE understands that connecting with local leaders and community members can inform resource development, increase transparency, and build trust. These efforts have improved their communications and relationships with partners while expanding the reach of OST meal programs.

Expanding organizational partnerships is another strategy that LDOE and LPCF are committed to and hope to grow. In addition to deepening their work with larger, well-known organizations, they plan to seek out lesser-known organizations serving small and rural communities. The most vulnerable areas often lack sufficient support and resources yet experience high rates of food insecurity. LDOE and LPCF understand the importance of having under-represented stakeholders at the decision-making table. By identifying and building relationships and trust with community leaders, LDOE and LPCF hope to ensure equitable and community-driven solutions that expand the reach of OST meal programs.

After a period of rapid response and growth, organizations must pause to reflect before moving forward. It affords opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas between programs and departments and is the chance to assess next steps based on successes and learnings. LDOE and LPCF plan to use lessons learned to grow projects, relationships, and trust with communities and community leaders. They hope to expand access to the OST meals programs to reach the children and families who are most vulnerable with nutritious meals when school is not in session. LDOE and LPCF's work is scalable and replicable. Improving the reach of OST meal programs by utilizing strategies that center health equity and build networks of support ensures children and families have access to the nutrition they need to thrive.

Culturally Appropriate Meals

Offering foods familiar to the community you serve is critical to achieving inclusion in the Child Nutrition Programs. Often referred to as culturally appropriate, meals that reflect communities' tastes, preferences, and cultures are more likely to be accepted and enjoyed. One strategy to provide culturally appropriate meals is incorporating recipes developed by communities using ingredients from the region. To achieve this, LDOE applied for a competitive USDA grant with a purpose of building State capacity and sustainable infrastructure to develop, standardize, prepare, test and menu recipes for School Meals Programs that utilized local agricultural products and engaged students and the school community to develop culturally appropriate recipes that meet USDA standards. Schools were encouraged to apply for sub-grants to develop two recipes that reflect Louisiana's tastes. Eight school systems received sub-grant funding, enabling recipe standardization and taste testing support. LDOE will celebrate the 16 final recipes (recipes must achieve an 85% student acceptance rate) state-wide. The grant has engaged schools across the state in thinking about what culturally appropriate meals mean for their students and community.

⁸ US Dept. of Agriculture. FY 2021 Cohort B Team Nutrition Training Grants for School Meal Recipe Development. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/2021-cohort-b-team-nutrition-training-grants>.