Applying the Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community Model to District Food Service, Community Charitable Food Agencies, and District Priorities During COVID-19

Project Narrative
The aim of the present study is to amend the current project between the SDE and UConn to examine how school district food services adapted to the closing of their buildings due to COVID-19. As illustrated by the Whole Child, Whole Community (WSCC) model, the school nutrition environment and services are a critical component of student health. Further, the external orange “wings” of the model depict that schools exist within a community context. That includes other community-based non-profit and service agencies, such as food pantries.

When schools were closed in March 2020, food service authorities were required to adapt quickly to continue providing food, especially for low-income children. There are anecdotal reports around the country of innovative efforts between school food service and local charitable food agencies to provide a coordinated response that alleviated the burden on families. It is important for the CT SDE to understand what happened in CT during this crisis, and how schools and communities responded to the need to continue feeding low-income school children and their families during the final months of the 2019-2020 school year.

This amendment will be executed during the summer of 2020. A team of UConn researchers led by Dr. Marlene Schwartz and Dr. Sandra Chafouleas will collect data in order to (a) provide an overview of the strategies used by school district food services in CT when schools closed; (b) highlight approximately five districts through case studies of innovative practices that include working with community partners; and (c) describe how school administrators in the target districts have shifted their thinking about WSCC model priorities as a consequence of COVID-19.

Primary Tasks
1. Conduct online research to identify which CT school districts continued to provide meals to students and document the strategies used. Use SDE meal participation data as available.

2. Identify 5 school districts and conduct a detailed assessment of how meals were provided and whether there was coordination with local charitable food agencies, such as food banks/food pantries/meal programs. Data will be collected via interviews with food service directors and (if appropriate) local charitable food agencies. Questions will be asked about whether any of the USDA and/or CT SDE policy waivers allowed innovative approaches to feeding children and their families during this crisis.

3. Conduct interviews with district superintendents and principals to find out how their school health priorities, as organized around the WSCC model, are shifting as a consequence of COVID-19. We will specifically ask about community partners who would be helpful as they plan to meet student needs in the fall.

3. Compile the interview findings from the five districts and create a series of case studies.

University of Connecticut Partners

The current project brings together two groups at the University of Connecticut, the Collaboratory for School and Child Health (CSCH) and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity (Rudd Center). The Collaboratory for School and Child Health’s mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy,
and practice arenas relevant to school and child health. CSCH serves as a central resource to university and external partners engaged in efforts that inform healthy, safe, supportive, and engaging environments for all children. With over 120 community and university affiliates, the central focus of CSCH is to serve as an interdisciplinary nexus in transforming the way we serve the whole child through alignment across education, public health, and school health sectors.

The mission of the Rudd Center is to promote solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. At the Rudd Center, we believe that every child, regardless of who they are, where they live, and what they look like, deserves the opportunity to eat healthfully. This is not the reality today. We are committed to interrupting this cycle of inequity by: conducting research to inform advocacy and policy; supporting evidence-based solutions; and challenging the status quo. One of the Rudd Center’s free online tools is the WellSAT, which has been updated twice since 2006 and is the leading national written wellness policy assessment measure. The WellSAT is recommended as a resource for school districts by the CDC and USDA, and has been used by over 13,000 unique users in all 50 states.