



FEEDING CONNECTICUT CHILDREN DURING COVID-19: STORIES OF DEDICATION, INNOVATION, AND COLLABORATION FROM THE FIELD

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SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools had to quickly innovate and adapt in order to provide necessary services to students. When Connecticut schools closed the week of March 16, 2020, it was no longer possible to continue serving school meals in school building cafeterias. To compound the problem, school district leaders knew that food insecurity rates were climbing due to the pandemic, further increasing the importance of providing school meals to families. As a result, food service professionals throughout Connecticut and across the country quickly rose to the challenge of organizing and finding ways to continue to distribute meals.

PURPOSE

This report shares information about how Connecticut school districts continued serving meals to students and their families between March and June of 2020. The primary aims are to (1) document meal distribution practices implemented during the closures; (2) articulate the types of challenges encountered by food service directors; and (3) describe the innovations and best practices developed to overcome the challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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METHOD

A team of UConn researchers obtained a list of all of the school districts authorized to continue providing emergency meals in March 2020 from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). All district websites and online communications were reviewed to identify the frequency, location, and types of meals that continued to be served. Next, the researchers conducted nine one-hour interviews with eight food service directors and one superintendent from a diverse group of Connecticut school districts to document the challenges, strategies, and lessons learned during the weeks of emergency meal distribution. The questions addressed:

- 1. Planning and decision-making**
- 2. Distribution processes**
- 3. Staffing**
- 4. Reach**
- 5. Communication**
- 6. Collaboration with community partners**
- 7. Future planning**

RESULTS

In the spring of 2020, 128 districts in Connecticut established emergency meal programs in order to continue distributing meals to students after school buildings closed. Most school districts provided both breakfast and lunch, and the options included both cold entrees and items to be heated up at home. The majority of districts set up distribution sites where families came to pick up the food; however, some districts used buses to distribute meals to student homes. Initially, many districts provided meals daily, but over time many then decided it was more efficient and safer to distribute two or three times per week and provide multiple days' worth of food.



Food service directors and administrators developed strategies to address challenges in three main domains: overcoming staffing gaps; maintaining safety for staff and families; and communicating effectively with families. Key elements of successful programs included:

1. Maintaining daily, in-person communication between food service directors and their staff;
2. Ensuring distribution methods and sites were accessible for all families, including working families, low-income families, and families without transportation;
3. Practicing flexibility and creativity to meet the meal pattern requirements and ensure food safety;
4. Involving school personnel beyond food service staff to help the program run smoothly;
5. Creating a communal atmosphere at the distribution sites through community-based activities to increase engagement and provide information to further support families;
6. Maximizing the variety of communication strategies to reach families;
7. Including information beyond school meal distribution in family communications and at distribution sites; and
8. Collaborating with community organizations outside of the school system to ensure maximum reach and support.

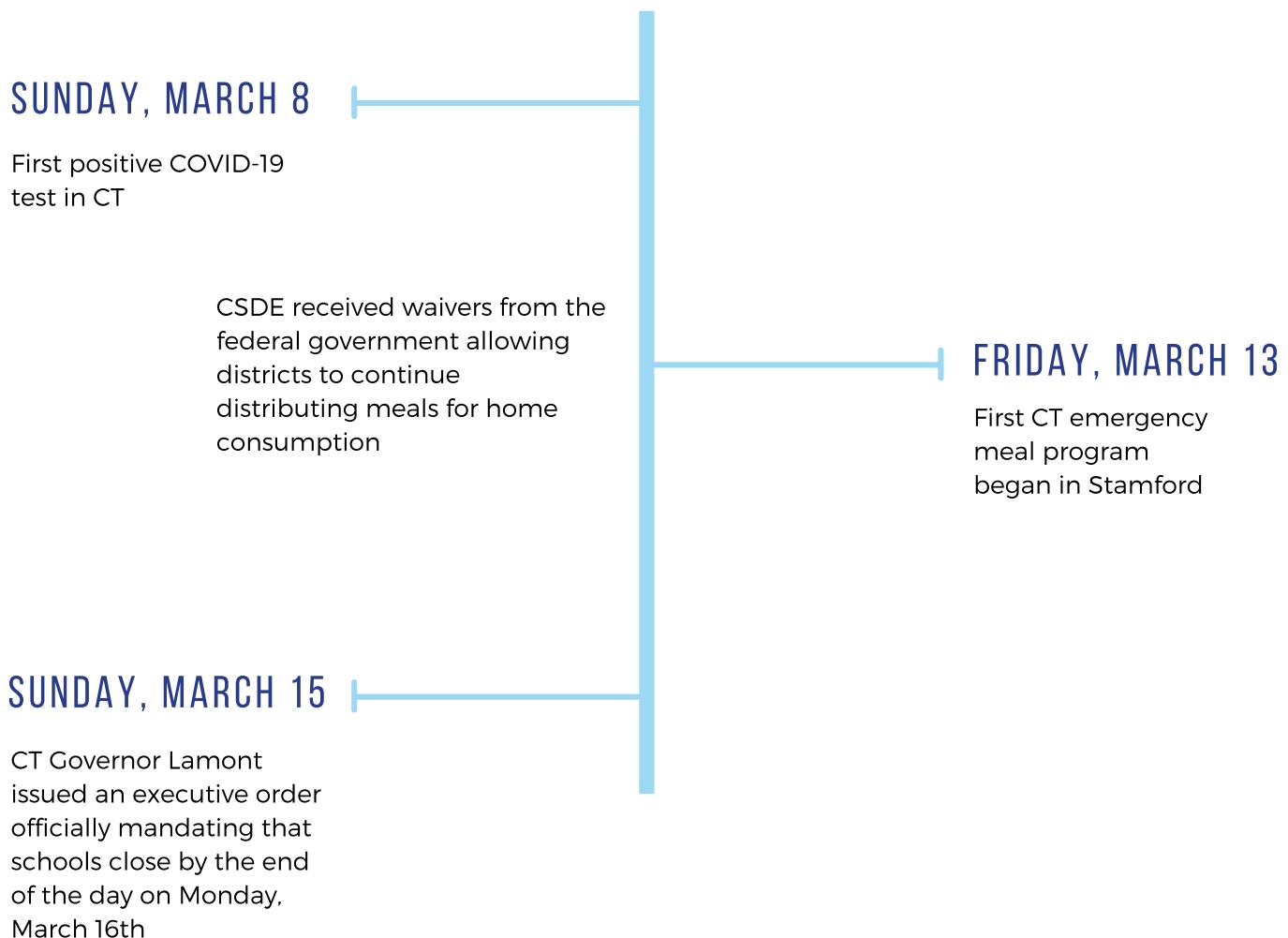
The strategies developed during the COVID-19 emergency closures provide a road map for best practices for the fall of 2020 and beyond.

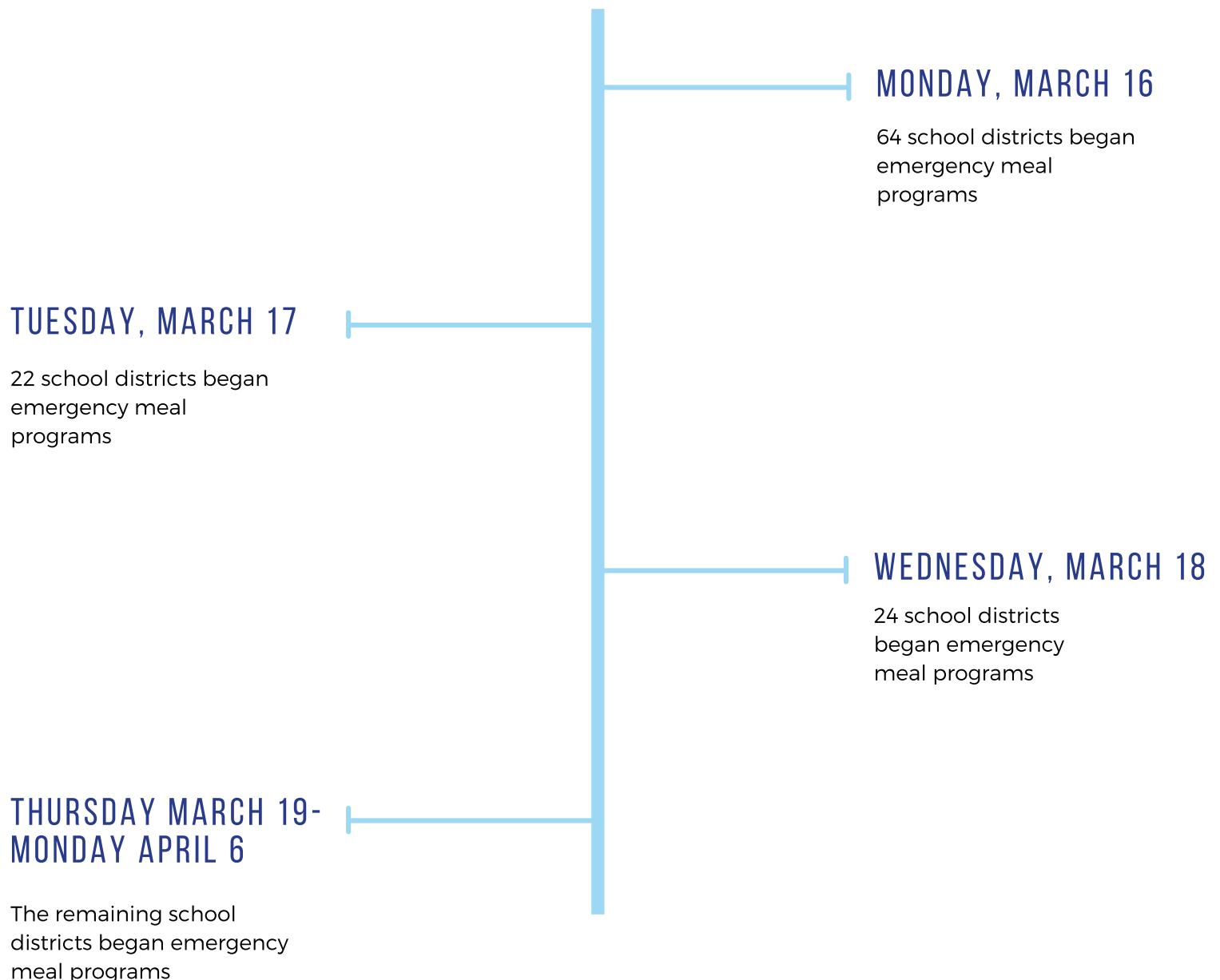


INTRODUCTION

When schools were forced to close due to safety concerns corresponding with the COVID-19 pandemic, school food service programs were tasked with shifting operations in order to continue providing meals to students. This shift occurred at a time when the number of children experiencing food insecurity was also rising due to the widespread negative economic impacts of the pandemic, further emphasizing the need to continue serving families.

As shown by the timeline below, the changes in operations occurred shortly after COVID-19 first reached Connecticut and, in most cases, immediately following the school closures and the provision of waivers to allow continued meal distribution.





The USDA released a number of nationwide waivers to allow increased flexibility in providing meals. The CSDE applied for these waivers to help the school districts (known as “sponsors” of the school meal programs) continue feeding their families. A list of the waivers can be found at:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Child-Nutrition-Programs#CSDEWaiversSubmitted>.

Some of the regulations that were waived included requirements for:

- Congregate feeding (i.e. feeding children together in one place)
- Serving at non-school sites
- Meal times
- Area eligibility
- Meal patterns
- Physical presence of the child
- Scheduled breaks and holidays
- Distribution of food from the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program

Waivers were also provided to extend the school closure operations until the end of June.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

As a result of the novel and unprecedented nature of the pandemic, and the rapid start of the emergency meal programs, districts were tasked with implementing these systems with limited opportunities for training and guidance. Therefore, the primary aims of this project are to:

- 1. Document meal distribution practices implemented during the closures;**
- 2. Articulate the types of challenges encountered by food service directors;**
- 3. Describe the innovations and best practices developed to overcome the challenges.**

The conclusions are designed to support districts in preparing for future emergency closures, as well as potentially improving their regular school meal programs.



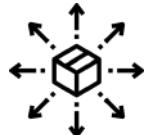
METHOD

In collaboration with the CSDE, the research team from the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity obtained information about school meal distribution programs across Connecticut using multiple methods. School websites and district communications were first reviewed for each district in the state, followed by interviews with food service directors (FSDs) from eight districts and one superintendent from another district. The CSDE also provided additional information related to participating districts and waiver applications.

The questions addressed:



PLANNING AND
DECISION MAKING



DISTRIBUTION
PROCESSES



STAFFING



REACH



COMMUNICATION



COLLABORATION
WITH COMMUNITY
PARTNERS



FUTURE PLANNING

RESULTS

Overall, the majority of Connecticut districts continued serving meals during the closures and used a variety of strategies to continue operations and reach their families.

SUMMARY OF EMERGENCY SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS IN CONNECTICUT

- 128 of the 165 school meal program sponsors provided meals during the emergency closures.
- Each participating district provided lunch to students. Most districts also provided breakfast, some provided dinner, and some provided snacks.
- Distribution of meals typically started on March 16th, 17th, or 18th.
- Most districts distributed meals using a "Grab-n-Go" system through which students and families visited one of their local schools, or another community location, to pick up meals.
- While all districts provided enough meals for each weekday, the number of days distribution sites were open ranged from daily to once per week.
- Some districts distributed extra meals on Friday to cover the weekend days.
- Various types of meals were provided, including hot meals, cold meals, and cold meals intended to be heated up at home.





PLANNING & DECISION MAKING

When planning and making decisions, many FSDs emphasized the importance of maintaining daily communication with their food service staff and including them in the problem-solving process. An FSD in a mid-sized suburb specifically focused on asking her staff what problems they were seeing; how they thought the processes could be made better; and what could be done to make their jobs easier and more efficient. She emphasized the importance of communicating with staff on-site and in-person each day. From these conversations, the team made a variety of improvements throughout the closures, such as buying equipment that seals bags to avoid individual wrapping; raising the height of production tables; and buying more sheet pans. (As a note, she now recommends buying fiberglass pans instead of sheet pans for cold food preparation because fiberglass is lighter and easier to wash). In addition to these conversations about potential improvements, she also added that fostering a positive attitude among staff was a priority.

"I would start the morning on the microphone and do a Weight Watchers type of thing. 'Tell me something good. Tell me something new. How are you feeling?' ... I think keeping the employees in a positive attitude is one of the most important things you could do. Everybody came in with a positive attitude."

- Madeleine Diker, Cheshire Food Service Director

The superintendent of a rural district anticipated the school closures and began conversations about school meal distribution in early March. These conversations incorporated key personnel in her district and addressed topics such as whether food service staff would work; how staffing gaps would be filled; how many days meals would be provided; and how meals would be distributed. As a result, some challenges were identified and addressed prior to the official closing of schools. In the case of this district, two of the schools did not have a hot lunch program, which raised the question of how meals would be provided to students who did not have older siblings in the regional high school. The solution involved collaborating with social services and a local foundation to identify the families who would most benefit from continued meals and then creating a meal distribution process. The district then further prepared for the closures by having the school's office staff call families one week prior to ask about their interest in continuing to receive meals. Through this interaction, the district was also able to communicate that the meals would not be limited to those receiving free or reduced priced meals, which was noted as a common misconception.

Spring Break & Holidays

Districts were tasked with deciding whether to supply meals over spring break and Memorial Day. A total of 39 sponsors continued providing meals throughout spring break, while others took the time off. For example, one district interviewed noted that they paused the meal program because they felt it was important to give the staff a break. Fortunately, through collaboration with social services and a local foundation, families in that district were given gift cards to cover food costs for that week.

Most districts decided not serve meals on Memorial Day. An exception was a district with a large military family population for which the FSD felt that it was appropriate to stay open because Memorial Day is a holiday honoring the military. Other sponsors reported providing extra meals on the last distribution day before the holiday.



BEST PRACTICES: PLANNING & DECISION MAKING

- School meal program supervisors spend time at the sites and/or frequently communicate to immediately identify challenges and problem-solve with their staff to improve the preparation and distribution process.
- Supervisors ask staff daily how their job could be made easier and work to keep a positive atmosphere.
- When planning ahead, the district addresses potential challenges before they arise and collaborates with other organizations to fill in gaps and further support families.



DISTRIBUTION PROCESS

The 128 sponsors that continued serving meals during the closures were tasked with deciding how to distribute meals to students. The majority (88%, n=113) established grab-and-go systems as the primary distribution method, while 12% (n=15) used bus delivery. A total of 49 sponsors obtained the household delivery waiver, which gave them the flexibility to deliver to a subset of households who could not come to pick up food due to illness or lack of transportation.

Grab-and-Go

The daily process on distribution days at grab-and-go settings typically involved food service staff preparing the meals, placing them into bags, transporting the bags to the distribution sites, and passing out the bags to families. Meals were either placed directly into the families' cars or on tables for families to retrieve.

Challenges included maintaining food safety and keeping the food cold. Several districts experienced difficulty with the constant need to transport coolers. One FSD noted that staff were overworked as they filled and transported heavy coolers twice a day. Purchasing additional coolers (which took time to arrive) helped reduce the physical toll on the staff.

"[The staff] would deliver meals in the mornings, fill those coolers, and then come back to get the second wave lunch meal. They were just going nonstop. So, it was pretty crazy I'd say for the first month and a half. Everybody was just working like mad to get this done and to keep the food safe and cold."

- Lisa Durand, Thompson Food Service Director

While many districts put the meal components in bags before giving them to families, one urban district decided to distribute meal components using a self-service buffet arrangement. The aim of process was to prioritize staff and family safety by eliminating staff contact with the public. Items were color coded depending on the type of meal, and staff informed families which food items to take. The meal components were available under tents located outside, specifically on pavement instead of grass to avoid challenges when it rained.



Grab-and-Go & Delivery

While most families received food from grab-and-go sites, some districts employed a combination of methods by delivering meals to the homes of children whose families were unable to pick up the food. The reasons why families were unable to pick up the food included a lack of transportation, health concerns, and conflicts with parent work schedules. In some cases, families could contact the school, explain their situation, and request home delivery. In addition to families reaching out, one FSD asked school administrators to nominate families whom they believed would benefit from delivery services.

A smaller number of districts created delivery systems for larger numbers of students. One urban district had 47 buses delivering to bus stops in addition to the district's 10 grab-and-go sites. The buses normally used for students receiving special education services were also used to supply meals to student homes. In that case, each bus was staffed with both a bus driver and food service staff member who distributed the meals.

Delivery

Some districts decided against using grab-and-go sites and instead delivered meals to all students using school buses. An administrator from a rural district reported that she decided on this method in consideration of the geographic and economic context of the district.

"We decided to use buses because we are 275 square miles from the Massachusetts border to the New York state border and then about a third of the way down the state of Connecticut. And we felt a lot of people would not want to leave their homes or that the families that really needed the help the most wouldn't come get the food. And we wanted to keep the bus drivers employed too."

- Dr. Pam Vogel, Superintendent at Regional School District No. 1

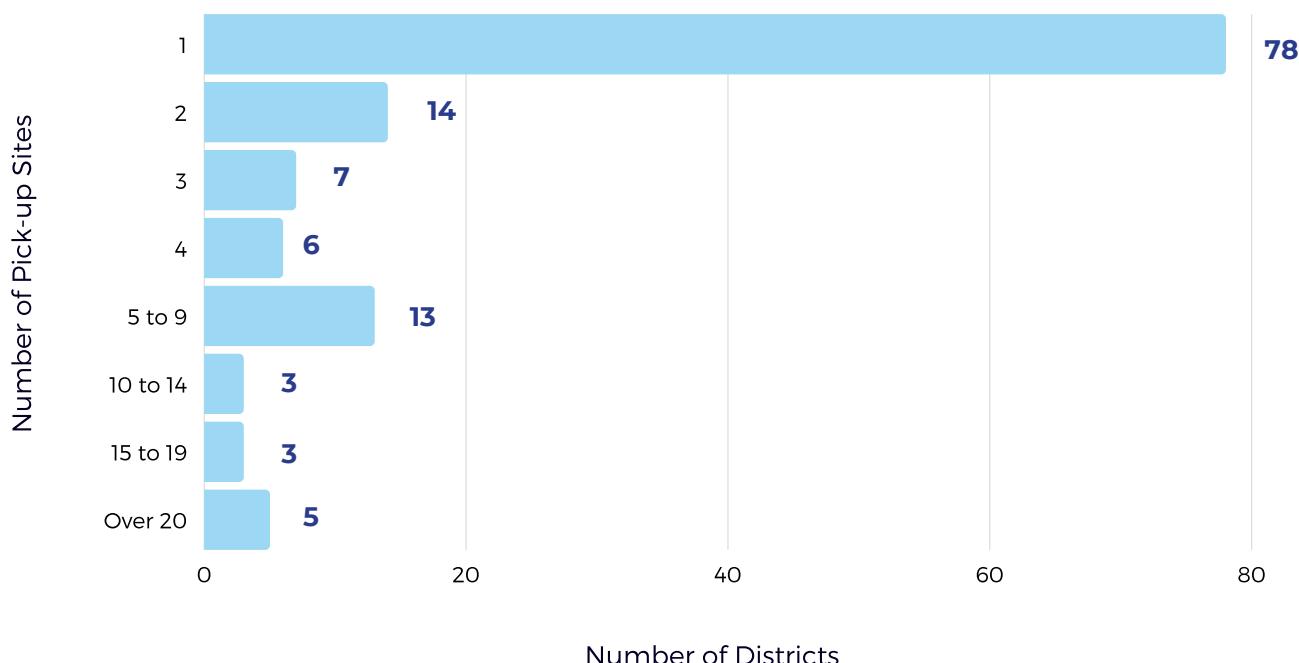
There were initial challenges in using this method. Some families forgot to take the meals that were left on their doorsteps and buses were unable to travel up long driveways. To address these challenges, families were encouraged to leave coolers by their mailboxes where the meals could be placed. Families were also sent frequent reminders about the time when their meals would arrive at their homes.

Distribution Sites

Number of Sites:

The number of grab-and-go distribution sites varied widely across districts, reflecting differences in population size and density, community needs, and school resources. For example, according to data provided by the CSDE, most districts (60%) opened one grab-and-go site, while some (6%) opened more than 15 sites for distribution. Large urban districts had more than 20 sites.

How Many Pick Up Sites Were in Each District?



Although the emergency meals were available for all students, districts with higher rates of students who qualify for free or reduced priced meals had more locations as a ratio of the total student population.

Location of Sites:

Grab-and-go sites were often established on school grounds, yet some districts established sites at other community locations. Several of the urban districts interviewed established sites based on the location of families in an effort to maximize access to those considered in the greatest need of school meals. Some specifically mentioned identifying site locations that would be within walking distance of families.

Similarly, one FSD collaborated with personnel from City Hall to look at income maps and identify the location of sites based on where they would reach the most families. As a result of this strategy, site locations were adjusted and the district saw a dramatic increase in participation.

"We laid down our 10 distribution sites over that map and saw that our sites were not in all of the most beneficial areas. So, we added five sites, based upon feeding kids in need, and our counts in May went up to 145,000 meals for the month.... We've specifically picked sites where we would get a lot of walkers, feeling that we would be serving people immediately in that community. The schools were built in the 60s, for the most part, and the Town of Norwalk has changed a great deal in the last 60 years. Schools aren't necessarily in the areas of need. So, we opened up two sites at community centers, two sites in Section 8 housing centers, and in one additional underserved neighborhood."

- Kevin McGinn, Norwalk Food Service Director



Some districts located in the suburban areas also used community sites for distribution. For example, an FSD at a rural district established sites at fire departments, a local library, and a town organization. An FSD in a suburban town also established a site at the local library and explained that it had easy access because it was in the center of the town. Along with changes to the locations of sites, many districts also adjusted the number of sites throughout the closures based on changes in participation.

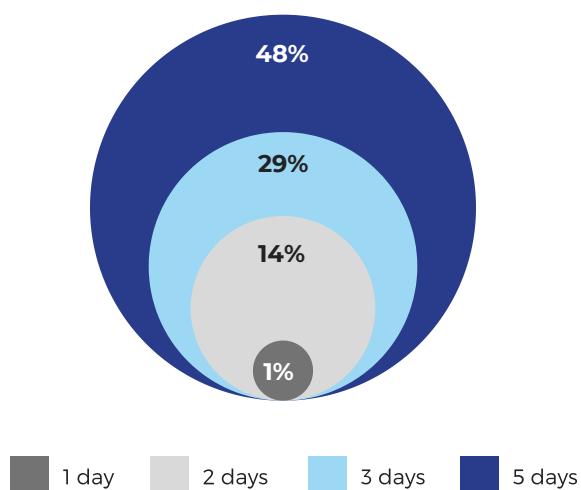
"We only had staffing for four [sites], so we tried to go out into areas first that were in greater need in our eyes - where we could reach the most families."

- Lisa Durand, Thompson Food Service Director

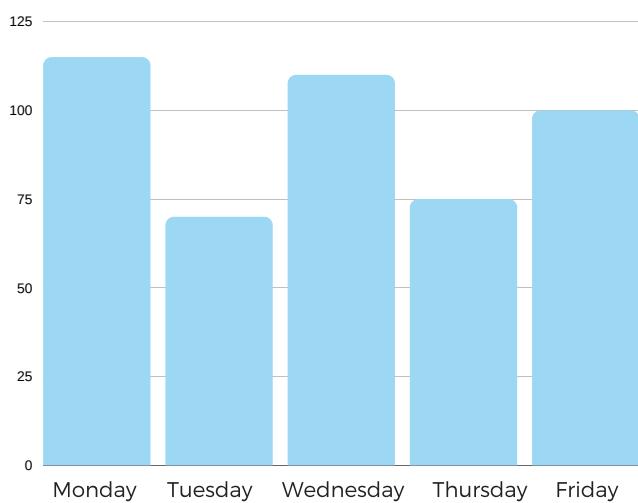
Days per Week for Distribution

Districts varied substantially in the number of days when meals were distributed to students. Based on the data obtained from district websites, almost half (48%) of districts distributed all five days of the school week; more than a quarter (29%) distributed three days per week; and some (14%) distributed two days a week. Only 1% distributed one day per week. The remaining districts (10%) did not include this information on their website. The days of the week meal distribution sites were open also varied, with district sites most often open on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Number of Pickup Days per Week



Number of Districts Serving Meals per Weekday



FSDs reported that reasons to distribute meals every weekday were: a desire to keep a schedule similar to the regular school year; keeping food as fresh as possible; and utilizing the staff they had available. Other districts chose to distribute two or three times per week in order to reduce the amount of interaction - and potential exposure to the virus - for families and staff. These districts provided multiple days worth of meals at once so that children would be covered for each day of the school week.

Weekend Meals:

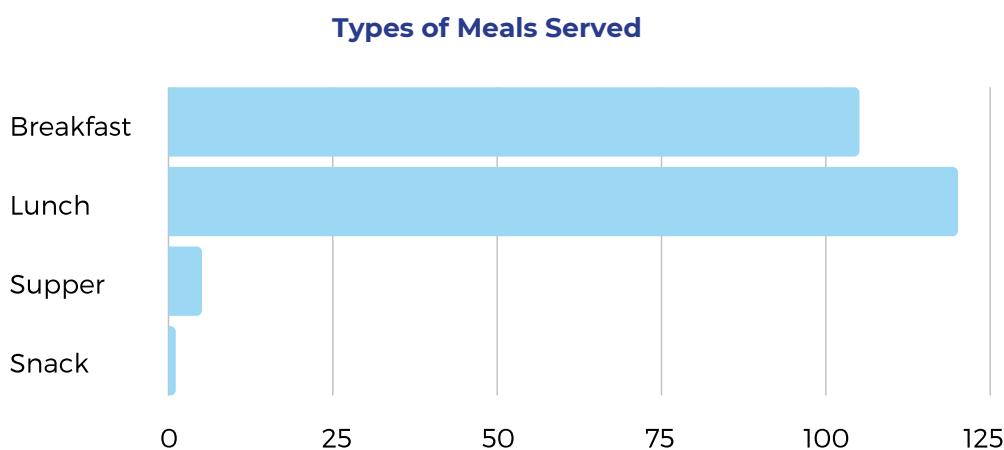
Some districts also decided to provide additional food to families at the end of the week to cover meals for the weekend. For example, three breakfasts and three lunches were provided on Friday to cover Friday, Saturday, and Sunday meals. Other districts included bulk items in their Friday bags that could be eaten by the family over the weekend. Although some districts provided weekend meals the first week of emergency meal distribution, other districts added weekend meals over the subsequent weeks.

Supper:

In an urban district, the FSD and his staff provided extra meals on Fridays to cover the weekend starting at the beginning of April. Additionally, shortly after closures, this district was one of the few in the state that started serving supper meals. The FSD stated that these additions were made to provide additional food to families through reimbursable meals, thus increasing the food service program's revenue. He noted that the district was "trying to generate revenue to keep us afloat."

Types of Meals

The meals provided by districts always included lunch. According to data obtained from the websites, the majority of districts (82%) also provided breakfast to their students. Further, a few districts provided supper (4%) and snack (1%).





Cold Meals:

Initially after the closures, many districts focused on using food already in their inventory to prepare cold meals to go. For example, an FSD in a town in Northwest Connecticut used existing inventory to make yogurt parfaits with homemade granola. This was a meal on their menu prior to the closures and it met the meal pattern. Other common menu items included sandwiches, salads, bagels, and muffins.

Meals to be Heated at Home:

As time went on, many FSDs changed the types of meals that were provided to account for the fact that multiple meals were being sent home at one time, with the intention that some meals would be eaten hours or days later. Therefore, they transitioned to meals that were designed to be heated at home. A variety of menu items were distributed using this strategy, including “make your own” pizzas; macaroni and cheese; nachos, tacos; chicken fajitas; cheeseburgers; pasta; chicken tenders; and mozzarella sticks. Heating instructions were often included on packaging. One FSD pointed out the importance of including information on the label indicating that the foods were fully cooked and safe to eat cold, in case families did not have access to heating appliances. Providing meals to heat at home allowed for some special treats. We learned that the food service staff in one district prepared a full turkey dinner, which included 36 roasted turkeys with gravy. The FSD noted that this was “the best turkey dinner that had been served in a long time.”

Bulk Milk:

Multiple districts mentioned that it was very helpful when they were able to shift away from providing milk individual cartons and instead provide milk to families in bulk containers. Both families and staff found that larger containers of milk were easier to manage, especially when families had multiple children receiving meals.

"We did get a waiver at the state level to distribute the milk in quarts. So that worked out really well. And we got really good, positive feedback from families about that because they didn't get all these little milk containers."

- Sandra Sullivan, New Milford Food Services Director

Use of Department of Defense (DoD) Funds:

Many districts also cited the importance of funds in their DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable account. These allowed them to provide fresh produce for their families. One FSD reported that she even received extra DoD funds that were reallocated from districts that were not offering meals, which was very helpful.

Alignment with USDA Meal Pattern Regulations:

The FSDs we spoke with were confident that they were able to stay within the USDA meal pattern regulations during the pandemic. The main reason they were confident was because the food service staff working during this time were the same staff who worked during the school year and were familiar with the regulations. However, multiple FSDs stated that they often needed to get creative when foods were not available from the distributor or when food orders did not arrive as quickly as usual. For example, we heard about the shortage of individually wrapped products, such as packages of baby carrots, from several FSDs. To overcome this problem, districts started individually wrapping items by hand, and in one case, the district bought a device that tied individually wrapped bags. Another strategy was to stock up on emergency fruit and vegetable components to easily swap in as a substitute if necessary.

"We were able to follow the meal patterns. The people who were cooking the meals are the ones who are cooking the meals all year long. So, they know what those standards are and...could adhere to those."

- Dr. Pam Vogel, Superintendent of Regional School District No. 1

"We'd run out of fresh fruit and luckily we had raisins and craisins at other schools. So, in anticipation that we would run out of fruit, we always had a stash. We started ordering raisins and craisins. In anticipation of running out of a grain, we had graham crackers... So, we started getting emergency food components to make sure that, if we run out of something or if we have to make meals, we always have fruit and we always have vegetables... Sometimes it was tricky."

- Madeleine Diker, Cheshire Food Service Director

Packaging:

In addition to preparing for meal component shortages, another challenge was finding ways to pack up the meals for distribution. Due to the novelty of the situation and distributor shortages, FSDs needed to get creative. As an example, one FSD mentioned that when he was no longer able to obtain microwavable containers and had to switch to non-microwavable ones, he was very concerned that children might place these containers in the microwave when parents were not home. To address this, he printed out instructions to put on the container with directions on how to safely reheat each meal. Other FSDs described needing to think about which containers would stay together in the bag on the drive home. In terms of bagging, many districts used brown paper bags; however, one FSD specifically mentioned how the district used plastic bags so that staff and families could see which meals were inside.

Changes in Distribution Methods

Districts made several changes in their distribution practices throughout the closures to increase efficiency; adjust for changes in participation; and ensure safety of both families and staff.

"You know, you had to make quick decisions. And you had to go with it. And then if it didn't work, you had to change it on the fly. I think the most important thing is not to be married to a decision. Sometimes, when you plan for something in advance, and maybe it's turning out to be a bad idea, you feel married to the idea. You feel like, well, you spent all this time, you better not change, maybe you've even spent money on this idea. This was not like that."

- Madeleine Diker, Cheshire Food Service Director

Examples of changes in meal distribution practices:

Most Common Changes:

- Increasing the number distribution sites
- Decreasing the number of distribution days to minimize human contact, while increasing the number of meals provided each day
- Decreasing the amount of time distribution sites were open
- Consolidating distribution times to provide breakfast and lunch at once, instead of at two separate distribution times

Additional Changes:

- Adding breakfast
- Adding dinner
- Adding snack
- Adding weekend meals
- Switching from delivery to grab-and-go
- Switching from grab-and-go to delivery
- Decreasing the number of distribution sites



BEST PRACTICES: DISTRIBUTION PROCESS

- Be creative and strategic in order to ensure an accessible distribution method. Strategies can include delivering meals directly to student homes; setting up walkable grab-and-go sites at schools and community locations, especially in low income areas; and ensuring that a delivery option is available for families that lack transportation.
- When meal planning, focus on using freezer inventory first; consider providing meals to be heated at home; supply milk in bulk if possible; and stock up on meal components that can be used if problems arise with suppliers.
- Be open to making continuous changes in distribution methods to improve efficiency and reach.



STAFFING

Districts were tasked with identifying how to staff their production and distribution sites. A common concern across many districts related to staff not coming to work. FSDs reported that some staff elected to stay home due to safety concerns or dependent children. Other staff reportedly lacked incentive because they continued to be paid, whether or not they worked. To plan for these potential staffing problems, some FSDs asked their staff whether they planned to continue working and made decisions based on the responses. In other cases, doctor's notes were required if staff requested to stay home. Multiple FSDs mentioned their hope that some type of incentive, such as hazard pay, could be provided to those who worked.

Addition of Other School Personnel:

At the sites, some districts only involved food service staff due to safety concerns, while others used the help of other school personnel or volunteers. In particular, multiple districts reported that paraprofessionals were extremely valuable throughout the closures because they filled staffing gaps. One suburban district also had nurses at the production sites, whose main jobs were to keep staff safe by helping with social distancing, taking temperatures, and providing reminders to wash hands. Maintenance and custodial staff were also reported to be essential to the distribution process; they helped with tasks such as cleaning, disinfecting, transporting meals, and relocating heavy items.

Maintaining Safety:

Although only one district interviewed reported involving nurses, many mentioned their concerns related to their staff becoming sick. To help maintain social distancing, one district used chalk to outline where people should stand and walk when picking up the meals. This district also divided staff into teams that then worked on a rotating basis. Each team worked for two weeks and then had two weeks off. If someone from one team became sick, there would still be a second team to distribute meals. As an example of the importance of knowing your staff well, one food service director made a point of coordinating her food service teams with the custodial teams, since several of her staff were married, or in relationships with, members of the custodial staff.

"I have the same stump speech every day with folks in all the tents, and that is: 'Our first priority is to keep you safe. Our second priority is to serve food.'"

- Kevin McGinn, Norwalk Food Service Director

Staying Consistent

Some FSDs noted the importance of having the same staff consistently working at the same distribution sites. The benefit was that food service staff were able to recognize families and know them by name, and families in turn, were able to see familiar faces when they came to pick up their meals. In addition, we heard how many staff members appreciated the opportunity to continue working because it gave them a sense of normalcy and purpose. In many cases, a sense of community was established between staff members and families, which was beneficial for the overall well-being of all involved.

"It worked really well because we had the same people there with the distribution. The families coming through were seeing the same people, and I think that was really reassuring to them.... people were driving up and they were getting to know them by names. And it was like, 'Hey, how are you?'... it was a constant in their day, I think."

- Sandra Sullivan, New Milford Food Service Director



BEST PRACTICES: STAFFING

- Consider adding other school personnel (e.g., paraprofessionals, nurses) to the emergency food services staff to fill staffing shortages and maintain safety.
- Ensure safety is the first priority and rotate teams of staff, if possible.
- Create a positive and communal atmosphere for staff and families.



Participation

Most districts reported low participation numbers at the start of the closure. Many districts continued to have relatively low numbers, especially compared to participation during the typical school year, while others reported significant increases as the weeks went on. A few reported participation rates at levels comparable to those prior to the closures.

Some FSDs also reported distributing meals to families that may not typically participate in the school meal programs. Specifically, FSDs noted that it was not only families who qualify for free or reduced priced meals that were coming to pick up meals.

"I don't care what walk of life you are, or what you do, or what financial status you are, we saw everything from A to Z and we still do."

- Ernie Koschmieder, Groton Food Service Director

Sign-Up Forms:

Some districts chose to ask families to sign-up before picking up meals. Although the sign-up numbers were not entirely accurate compared to the number of families who actually came, FSDs from these districts found the estimates to be helpful in providing ballpark numbers. The allowed them to estimate the number of staff and the time needed to prepare the meals. Some districts also used this information to improve communication and outreach. One FSD in a suburban district specifically started calling the families who qualify for free or reduced priced meals and were not participating in the program. This led to increased participation in the following weeks.

Reasons for Changes in Participation:

Multiple reasons were identified to explain why participation was lower during this time. These included: a lack of awareness about the program; safety concerns; conflicts with work schedules; a lack of transportation; and the misconception that the program was limited to those qualifying for free or reduced priced meals. Some FSDs also noted fluctuations in participation corresponding with changes in government programs, such as the availability of the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer Program (P-EBT) cards and the monthly cycle of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.



Clarity About Identification Requirements:

Of particular importance, an FSD in an urban district found that several families were not participating in the program for fear of needing to show identification. He reported that meal counts increased considerably when the district clarified in their communications that identification was not needed and families would not be asked about immigration status. He also ensured that a Spanish speaker was present at all sites.

"We had several sites where we didn't have Spanish speakers. Took me a couple of weeks to understand that. We got Spanish speakers on those sites...One day [one of the Spanish speaking staff] said, 'Mr. Kevin, on Monday, a woman came up and wanted to know, did she need show identification or corporation papers in order to pick up food? Because her husband told her, 'Don't go there and pick up that food, you're going to get us deported.' And [the staff member] explained to her, 'The only thing I'm allowed to ask you is how many children you are picking up meals for. Please let all your neighbors know.' And this lady knew a lot of people. So that communicated that one of the reasons people in need weren't coming was because they were undocumented. So now, the meal plan flyers that we use ... say that you don't need to show any proof of immigration in order to pick up a meal. So that was a hurdle to get over."

- Kevin McGinn, Norwalk Food Service Director

More Information about the Food

One FSD sent a survey to all families and found that the primary reason families were not participating was because they did not know the type of food that was available. To address this, the FSD began including more details about the types of meals in their communications, specifically posting menus and indicating that alternate options were available for those with dietary restrictions.

Adding Incentives and Activities

Some districts included creative incentives and activities at the distribution sites in an effort to increase participation. For example, an FSD said that in his district, the staff “try to turn it into a fun experience” by dressing up in “funky” clothes, and ensuring that everyone involved is friendly. Friday was pizza day before school closures, so the district continued to serve pizza on Fridays to help give students a sense of normalcy.

Another strategy was distributing weekend meals prepared by a local restaurant, which “seemed to really get some people to come” because “it was a different type of food.” The FSD who used this strategy also distributed activities that she received from the SNA and CSDE to make meal distribution more fun and engaging. In another district, participation improved on days that other materials were being distributed at the schools, such as face masks or educational packets for remote learning.



BEST PRACTICES: REACH

- Consider the potential benefits of asking families to sign up for meals.
- Be sure that communications:
 - (1) clarify exactly what type of identification (if any) is required and that proof of immigration status will not be requested,
 - (2) describe the types of meals provided,
 - (3) note the availability of meals for those with dietary restrictions,
 - (4) explain that meals are for all students, not only those eligible for free or reduced price meals.,
 - (5) provide information in multiple languages (i.e., Spanish, Portuguese) depending on district demographics.
- Incorporate fun activities and/or school or community initiatives at distribution sites to engage families.



COMMUNICATION

Communication strategies were a critical factor in determining how many families participated in the emergency meal programs. A variety of strategies were used across districts, as described below.

Websites and Emails

Most schools provided information about the meal program on their district and school websites and in emails. Superintendents and many principals sent emails about the meals.

Phone Calls and Text Messages

Phone calls were also used as a communication method in some districts. In some cases, the superintendent had weekly robocalls, and in others the school principals rotated making the calls to provide a familiar voice for the families.

Individual families were also called in some districts. In an urban district, the FSD reported that staff of the English Language Learner programs called their participating families to ensure that they knew about the meals. Similarly, the FSD in a suburban district found success in calling individual families of students that typically receive free or reduced priced meals. She explained that she and her staff decided to start calling families because they had recently been successful in communicating with families by phone on another matter prior to the closures. Specifically, her staff had called families prior to the closures about their students' negative account balances, and this helped them recover the funds. She noted that parents often miss important emails due to flooded inboxes. This was also the case during the closures because when called, many families replied that they were unaware of the emergency meal program.

One district also noted that text messages were sent to all parents to help inform them about details related to the program. This provided a direct communication alternative that did not include phone calls or emails.



The image shows a flyer for the Groton Public Schools Child Nutrition Program. At the top left is the school's logo. To the right, the text reads "Groton Public Schools Child Nutrition Program" and "May 26". Below this is a quote from Dolly Parton: "Storms make trees take deeper roots." followed by "We will fortify your roots so you can thrive." and credit to "GPS Student Nutrition Program". There are small icons of apples and a tree. The main body of the flyer is titled "Free Grab and Go Meals - Breakfast & Lunch for children 18 and under". It specifies "Monday - Thursday 9-9:30am (meals for one day)" and "Friday 9am-10am (meals for three days)". It lists locations: "■ Groton Public Library", "■ West Side Middle School", and "■ Mary Morrison Elementary School". A note of thanks follows, mentioning sharing posts and the assist. Hashtags at the bottom include #free #freemeals #grotonfam #familiesfirst #fuelingminds #fighthunger #besafe #COVID19 #SNA #SNACT. The bottom half of the flyer features two columns: "FREE GRAB & GO MEALS" and "COMIDAS GRATIS", both listing meal times and locations. A central blue cloud contains the library and school addresses. The "STUDENT NUTRITION PROGRAM" logo is at the bottom right.

Social Media

Social media was also a common method of communication. One FSD discussed how she believed posting on social media influenced participation. She posted menus daily on multiple Facebook pages: each of the schools in the district; the town No Kid Hungry page; the town mobile food pantry page; and the pages of neighboring towns that had closed their meal programs.

Including pictures along with the distribution information had a positive impact on perceptions of school meals and corresponding participation. For example, an FSD shared that when she posted images of their meals on social media, there were many positive comments from parents. She noted that parents often hold negative perceptions about school meals; therefore seeing images of the high-quality meals distributed by the school helped counter these negative stereotypes and increase participation.

"I started posting pictures with my menu and saying, "This is last week. We did grilled chicken caesar salad." And I took a picture of the actual table, full... and parents were commenting like, 'Oh my God, that looks so good.' Like in their minds, it's still school lunch. That's not what we're serving. So, I think that's key. I don't know how you communicate it any better, except for what we're doing."

- Kate Murphy, Naugatuck Food Service Director



Naugatuck High School

June 19 ·

...

Friday June 19th

Meals are only for kids 18 years of age and under
1 meal bag per day.

Reminder of new hours : 11:30 - 12:30

Breakfast is a bagel & cream cheese, juice, fresh fruit and milk

Lunch is cheese pizza (fully cooked eat cold or reheat), fresh fruit, fresh veggies and milk

Please wear a mask 😊 when picking up meals

Menu is subject to change



Flyers

Flyers about the school meal program were handed out in many districts. In one, each time families came to pick up food, they were asked if they had neighbors with children, and if they could take a flyer for them. In this case, flyers were in both Spanish and English and provided information about who could participate; what paperwork would not be required; what would be served; when and where distribution sites were open; how food would be distributed; and who to contact with questions. The FSD noted that they “drove a lot of their increase in meal counts with this method” of distributing flyers. Other districts included information on the flyers related to ingredients lists, heating instructions, and reminders about bulk food pick up.

Signs and Banners

Some districts also created signs and banners and posted them around the community, specifically in areas that were most likely to benefit from the program. Ensuring that the information was visible in physical community locations was particularly important for those families not easily reached by electronic means.



FREE SUMMER MEALS FOR CHILDREN

Free meals for all children are available for pick up at locations throughout the city this summer, June 10 to August 30. Additional locations may be added; check the NPS website for the most up-to-date information.

WHO:

All Norwalk children, ages 2-18.

Children do not have to attend Norwalk Public Schools to receive meals. No paperwork or proof of immigration status is needed for meal pick up.

WHAT:

"Grab & Go" breakfast and lunch.

Meals for the weekend will be available on Fridays.

WHEN:

Monday through Friday, 12 noon to 2 pm

HOW:

Students or families can drive through or walk up.

Meals are distributed by foodservice staff trained in health and safety procedures.

Questions?

Call NPS Foodservice

English Assistance: 203-899-2990

Spanish Assistance: 203-939-0656



LOCATIONS

Ben Franklin Community Center
165 Flax Hill Road

Brien McMahon High School
300 Highland Avenue

Carver Community Center
7 Academy Street

Colonial Villages
146 West Cedar Street

Columbus Magnet School
46 Concord Street

East Norwalk Library
51 Van Zant Street

Jefferson Elementary School
75 Van Buren Avenue

Kendall Elementary School
57 Willow Street

Marylin Elementary School
15 Cal Pasture Beach Road

Nathan Hale Middle School
176 Strawberry Hill Avenue

Katharine Dwyer Maritime Odyssey
11 Ingalls Avenue

Parking Lot (Former Bank)
Starting 07/06
93 Winfield Street

Ponus Ridge Middle School
21 Hunters Lane

The SoLo Collection
Starting 07/06
Pine Street Extension

Tracey Magnet School
10 Camp Street

West Rocks Middle School
81 West Rocks Road

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Word of Mouth

Word of mouth was an influential means of communication, with one FSD stating that this was likely the most effective method in her district. Many districts were creative in reaching out to community services to help spread the word about the program. For example, an FSD reached out to religious leaders, library staff, and early childcare centers to ask for help with informing their network of families about the meal program. Housing communities, police departments, and military liaisons also helped spread the word in another district. Information was also included in newspapers, and announcements were made both by the mayor and on radio stations in some districts. Some also cited the importance of teachers and student support personnel relaying the information.

Summary

Overall, communication success varied widely throughout districts. While some districts cited that they most likely reached every family that would have liked to participate, other districts noted that communication was the program's greatest weakness. Ultimately, districts that used the widest variety of communication methods—such as spreading the word through existing town networks (i.e., religious centers and libraries) as well as using non-electronic methods, such as physical banners and flyers—appeared to reach the most families.



BEST PRACTICES: COMMUNICATION

- Use creative communication methods in addition to sending emails and posting on the district website. These methods may include:
 - (1) communicating through existing community networks,
 - (2) calling the homes of families, particularly those who qualify for free or reduced priced meals,
 - (3) sending text messages,
 - (4) posting information and pictures on multiple social media accounts,
 - (5) distributing and posting flyers,
 - (6) hanging signs and banners in public spaces, and
 - (7) encouraging information to be spread via word of mouth.



COLLABORATION WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

As some districts collaborated with community services to communicate about meal distribution, many also collaborated during the meal distribution process itself.

Food Pantries

There were examples of districts working with food pantries in a variety of ways. Some donated any undistributed meals to their local food pantry. Districts also provided information to families when they were picking up their meals about the location of local food pantries nearby. An FSD from one district discussed how a school-based food pantry was created along with the grab-and-go meal service at the beginning of the closures. By establishing this pantry, the district was able to provide a bag of nonperishable foods along with the school meals. At the time, other families within the town could provide monetary or food donations to contribute to the pantry. Another district continued serving from the school-based food pantry that had been established prior to the pandemic. This FSD also oversaw the town's mobile food pantry.

Local Restaurants

Districts also reported collaborating with local restaurants. In one case, a local restaurant in a rural district provided food to a school population that did not have a hot meals program. In addition, with funding from a local nonprofit organization, a restaurant in another district helped provide weekend meals. In the same district, a local apple orchard donated 12 to 16 cases of apples to be distributed. A local restaurant in an urban district donated chips and snacks for distribution to the working employees.



Local Organizations

The interviewees cited several supportive actions by local organizations. In an urban district, the Council of Churches distributed adult meals from a food truck a few days per week at one of the school sites. A local sport team also donated their end of year banquet money to the food service. In a suburban district, a child care program delivered meals to the families they served. Organizations in a rural district helped provide monetary support to families during spring break. An organization in an urban district distributed weekend meals at sites, and two church youth groups picked up extra school meals at the end of the day to distribute. An organization in a large suburban district allowed the meal program to use their building as a distribution site and provided volunteers to help distribute meals during the summer.

Local Stores

There were examples of local retailers lending support. A shoe store in one district donated sneakers to food service employees. Two grocery stores in another district donated plastic bags that were used for weekend meals.

Social Services and Town/City Hall

Some districts corresponded with social service agencies in their area. In a large rural district, social services helped the district reach a greater number of families and identify the families that might benefit the most from the emergency school meal program. Similarly, an urban district worked with City Hall to integrate the meal program with other services in the community, ensuring that the district was working in tandem with the town and was reaching every family.

"We made sure that we got integrated in with [the city's services] and weren't working as a separate entity... It's critical. You get so much more done.... And once you find the right people within City Hall, you can get a lot more accomplished, a lot easier."

- Kevin McGinn, Norwalk Food Service Director

Community Information Hubs

In an urban district, the school meal distribution tents became "Community Information Hubs." These distribution sites provided various opportunities and information alongside the school meals. For example, in July, they distributed materials for End Hunger Connecticut! to help enroll families for SNAP. In August, families were provided the opportunity to enroll their students for free and reduced priced meals. In addition, city officials were present at the sites for census enrollment, and another city official used the sites to distribute flyers about enrolling in Kindergarten. The public library also had a pop-up truck that drove to different sites to distribute books to children. These community information hubs have connected the town's services and increased meal program participation.

NEW INFORMATION HUBS AT FOOD SITES

Kindergarten Registration Library Book Giveaway Register to Vote

FREE FAMILY RESOURCES

Noggin is FREE for 90 days!

Basics Insights

TIPS TO HELP PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR SCHOOL AND LIFE

Census

 United States Census 2020
Shape your future START HERE >

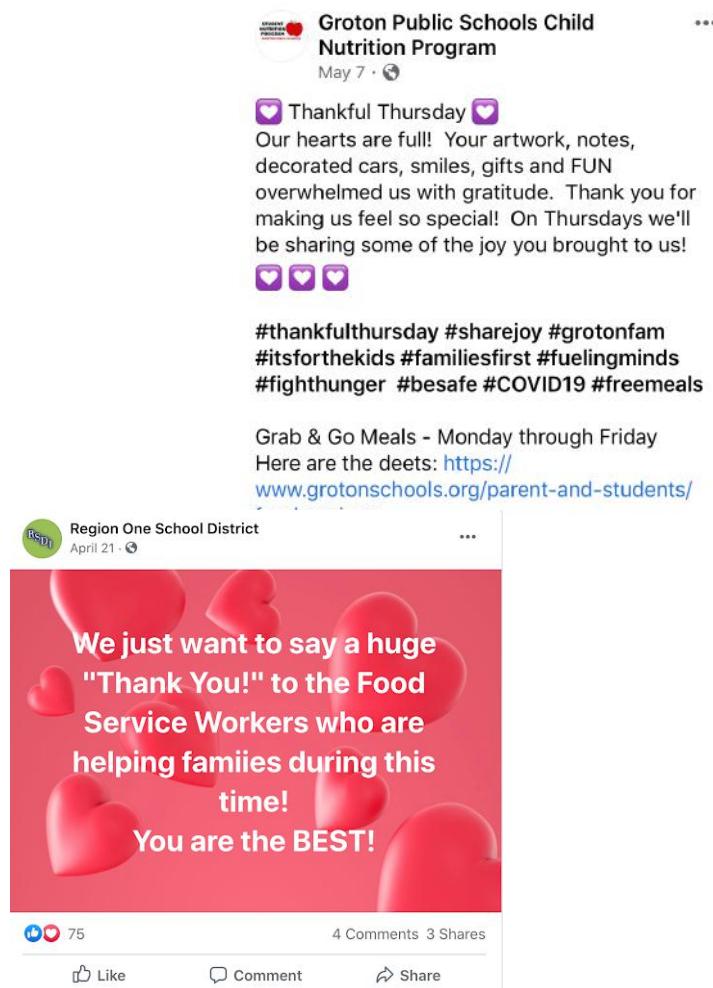


Collaboration to Provide Services, Activities, and Information

In addition to meals, many community partners collaborated with grab-and-go sites to provide services, activities, and information. In a suburban district, community organizations dropped off craft kits and activities for students when families picked up meals. A YMCA program also reached out to provide families with information about their counseling services, specifically for abuse victims. One district's local Parks and Recreation Department provided information at the sites about staying active, and the local Police Department provided information about staying safe during the pandemic.

Feedback

Throughout the emergency meal programs, districts received overwhelmingly positive feedback from families. Although one district reported occasional negative comments when meals did not directly correspond with the posted menu, several districts described an atmosphere of gratitude. For example, districts reported that families sent the food service staff thank you notes, posted positive comments on social media, and even painted "thank you food service" on their cars.



Groton Public Schools Child Nutrition Program May 7 · [View on Facebook](#)

Thankful Thursday

Our hearts are full! Your artwork, notes, decorated cars, smiles, gifts and FUN overwhelmed us with gratitude. Thank you for making us feel so special! On Thursdays we'll be sharing some of the joy you brought to us!

#thankfulthursday #sharejoy #grotonfam #itsforthekids #familiesfirst #fuelingminds #fighthunger #besafe #COVID19 #freemeals

Grab & Go Meals - Monday through Friday Here are the deets: <https://www.grotonschools.org/parent-and-students/>

We just want to say a huge "Thank You!" to the Food Service Workers who are helping families during this time! You are the BEST!

Region One School District April 21 · [View on Facebook](#)

75 4 Comments 3 Shares

Like Comment Share



BEST PRACTICES: COLLABORATION WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Collaborate with community organizations to expand reach; strengthen community; and ensure that town services are working in alignment. This may include:
 - Establishing school-based food pantries or aligning efforts with community food pantries.
 - Working with social services, city hall, and other institutions and organizations that understand which neighborhoods and families may benefit the most from the meal program.
 - Collaborating with local restaurants and farms to diversify food options.
 - Transforming grab-and-go sites into "Community Information Hubs" to provide families with a range of information and opportunities, such as SNAP enrollment, kindergarten registration, voter registration, free or reduced priced meal plan enrollment, and library book check-out.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Changing Perceptions of the School Meal Program

Although school closures posed several challenges, many FSDs believed that the closures had some hidden benefits. One of these was changing families' perceptions of school meal programs. The emergency meal program gave parents an opportunity to see that school meals today are nutritious and complex, countering the negative perceptions of school lunches based on parents' previous experiences. In fact, some noted that parents even posted about the meals on social media pages, and shared how they were pleasantly surprised to see the different components included in school meals.

"We looked at it as an opportunity to showcase our meals for parents who maybe never had their kids pick up meals."

– Madeleine Diker, Cheshire Food Service Director

"There are a couple people who posted pictures [with the caption], 'My kids were so excited they got school pizza today, and I'm jealous because it looks delicious.' So, they would send me little notes. And I think this was a great opportunity for families to really see what we do as school nutrition."

- Kate Murphy, Naugatuck Food Service Director

When considering how they can use their emergency meal program experience to improve school meal programs in general, several FSDs indicated that increasing parent awareness about the quality and nutritional content of school meals was a priority. For example, one FSD had an idea to showcase the meal service at school open houses, setting up the food service line so parents could walk through and see the fruits, vegetables, and other healthy components that are offered daily.

"I don't think families know what the school lunch program offers... [school lunch] has come so far, and you really want to get that information out to families."

- Sandra Sullivan, New Milford Food Service Director

Several FSDs also hope that the increased exposure to school meals during COVID can help with a larger shift to create a school culture where eating school meals is not stigmatized. Some expressed the desire for universal free meals for all children who attend school.

"I just want [school meals] to be a culture for everybody, no matter what...it should be the same everywhere. No matter what level financially you're at, that it's okay to eat at school."

- Kate Murphy, Naugatuck Food Service Director



CONCLUSION

Connecticut school districts have demonstrated considerable flexibility and creativity throughout the emergency closures. In the face of logistical challenges and safety concerns, food service and administrative teams successfully created systems and adapted their methods in order to continue serving their families. Collaboration and communication among all stakeholders were associated with successful program implementation. Connections with community partners, families, and among food services staff allowed problems and solutions to be identified effectively and efficiently. The specific ideas from FSDs and administrators from across the state provide strategies and practices that can support school food service programs in the future.

NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES

**SOME WEAR
APRONS!**

