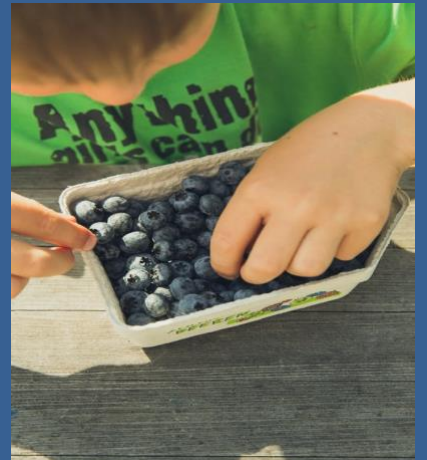


PERSEVERING THROUGH COVID-19

Schools Support Food Access in San Mateo County



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to school district Food Service Directors Anita King, Kaitlyn Busse, Fran Debost, June Richardson, Anna Lague, and Andrew Soliz for sharing their experiences in managing food service operations during COVID-19. We are grateful to Ashley Jowell, Janine Bruce, and Lauren Blacker from the Stanford University School of Medicine for their input on our interview guide. Thank you to Get Healthy San Mateo County for providing the resources and support to complete this study.

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Introduction

In March 2020, San Mateo County schools were forced to close school site operations with almost no notice and school food service directors and their staff were tasked with immediately re-tooling their operations to feed kids in new and rapidly changing conditions. Districts immediately developed pickup and delivery operations, innovating to meet community needs as the pandemic has stretched on.

For this project, we invited San Mateo County school districts with a high proportion of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals to participate in a one-hour phone interview about their experience providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 5 school districts participated in interviews, and a brief profile of each follows this summary.

We've summarized common experiences and take-aways below.

Participation

Maintaining meal participation has been challenging for all of the districts we interviewed. Most reported that they were feeding about half or less of eligible students, and significantly fewer students than they did during a normal school year. Declining or reduced participation has a significant impact on the financial health of the school meal program. Several districts mentioned that fluctuating waivers from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) dramatically affected

meal participation. For two weeks in the fall, districts were required to charge for meals based on eligibility, and while a universal feeding waiver was restored, districts reported that participation has still not recovered. One food service director speculated that a robust response from other parts of the charitable food assistance system (e.g. mobile food pantry and grocery distributions) may be providing an alternate means for families to meet their need for food.

Food service directors have tried a variety of strategies to increase participation with some success including:

- Operational changes, like changing meal distribution times, pairing pickups with school material distributions, and offering meal delivery (limited);
- Outreach using social media (Facebook groups for parents, neighborhood groups, etc) and other school communications (e.g., town halls, websites, messages from principals and superintendents); and
- Fostering partnerships with other community-based organizations (e.g., the YMCA, the Peninsula Library System) to offer meals at alternate locations.

Most districts reported that they were feeding about half or less of eligible students, and significantly fewer students than they did during a normal school year.

Several districts mentioned their efforts to maintain program integrity, to ensure families aren't accessing multiple sites per day while maintaining empathy for families' significant food security challenges. Districts developed a range of systems to identify families to speed pickups and maintain integrity, including providing families with a number to display on their dashboard, supporting a totally contactless pick-up.

Budget

School food service directors reported that they are facing massive budget shortfalls, as costs have remained similar to a normal year, but meal participation, and therefore income from reimbursements, is a fraction of normal. Factors affecting food service budgets include:

- Shifting USDA waivers, formal flexibilities in how meals can be served and how they must be tracked and reported for reimbursement within the National School Lunch Program governing school district child nutrition services;
- A need to maintain similar levels of staffing to meet operational needs;
- Increased food costs, in part due to the offer vs serve provision of the National School Lunch Program. Four meal components must be sent home, whereas students wouldn't usually take all (they are required to take at least 3); and
- New or increased costs for packaging to send meals home.

Some districts have been successful in securing outside support for their program, working with local non-profits and philanthropic organizations to support the meal program. Additional support has been solicited from:

- Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, who was named as a key supporter, both financially and programmatically;
- Local corporations and foundations, who also provided both funding and in-kind donations (e.g., packaging); and

- Several districts reported success linking to other federal and state programs, like the USDA Farm to Families Program, which supplemented food distributed with food boxes, and Federal Proposition 98 funding, which retroactively subsidized funds served by schools in spring and summer 2020.

Food service directors also expressed frustration with constantly changing waivers and directions from the USDA and California Department of Education, indicating it was often difficult to get questions answered, which impacted their ability to plan operations in advance.

Sourcing & Menu Offerings

Food service directors reported challenges with the food supply chain, and as result, indicated a need to be flexible with menu planning. Districts noted that it was especially challenging to source pre-portioned/pre-wrapped meal components, since this kind of product was in high demand across the state and country for school meals.

Several school districts expressed an interest and desire to source local food but found it challenging to do so because of the supply chain impacts and higher cost of local produce caused by COVID-19 and the fall wildfires in California. Two districts also cited a need to use up inventory of shelf-stable USDA / US Department of Defense commodities as an additional barrier in the current environment. However, all districts indicated an interest in local sourcing, cost and supply permitting.

All districts reported offering fewer choices than a regular year, a consequence of moving to the pick-up model. Several districts have been able to use their central kitchens to do some scratch or speed-scratch cooking, which has alleviated sourcing challenges. Several districts have experimented with available flexibilities to provide bulk portions of fruits and vegetables, and entrees. This approach may work better for families, as it may be easier to integrate these items into meals.

Staffing

Every district cited their staff as key to their success. Food service directors reported that staff is highly motivated by the desire to feed kids, and to feed the community. Several directors described their staff as motivated and flexible, willing to help solve problems and figure out how to provide meals in this new environment.

Increased communication between site staff, managers, and district leadership has been key to the success of staff. Several directors reported generally low absenteeism, while another reported that they were grateful for the opportunity to train staff on new skills (e.g. in support of a transition to scratch cooking) during this time.

Concerns about workplace transmission of the coronavirus came up in several interviews, and several directors remarked they were grateful there had been few, if any, workplace-related

cases. One food service director cited the lack of workplace transmission as a major achievement.

Directors also reported that staff got a boost from being recognized as frontline workers and essential to the community - some districts were successful in getting free meals or other recognition for their staff, which helped to boost morale.

Key Successes and Facilitators

Overall, food service directors identified a number of key factors that contributed to their success.

Every food service director cited their staff's ability to be resilient and flexible as critical to maintaining operations. They had a very short amount of time to transition their operations to a totally new, never been done, service model and they were all able to do so quickly, missing few (if any) meals before being ready for pickup. Food service and directors have learned to function in a continuously changing environment, adapting to various learning models, shifting regulations, inventory availability, etc. As one food service director said, "at the end of the day we met the challenge and met the needs of our families and made it seem as seamless as possible."

Next, home delivery was a solution cited by the food service directors surveyed. In partnership with district and contracted transportation services, delivering meals to families at home was a key success that increased participation and food access while minimizing safety concerns for staff and the community.

Another key factor was the recognition of the meal program as essential to the educational program and student success by other leaders (e.g. principals, superintendents) in the school district. Food service directors also stressed the importance of asking for help and of forming partnerships with local community organizations to support the meal program.

Food service directors expressed a desire to bring changes and innovations forward whenever students return to school, including specific operational changes (e.g. increased scratch cooking, more grab and go options for elementary students) and also more broadly speaking, their attitude and approach to feeding students, again stressing the importance of adaptability and resilience.

Recommendations

***Based on experiences of child nutrition programs in San Mateo County during COVID-19**

School food service directors surfaced a few recommendations for permanent changes and improvements to the school meal program. These recommendations included:

- Sustained support and promotion of child nutrition programs by the school district administrators to improve meal participation;

- The flexibility to do non-congregate feeding and to distribute multiple meals at once during future summers. These changes would enable districts to feed more children year-round and better meet community needs;
- Continued networking and collaboration among food service directors to provide support and share best practices;
- Simplified meal regulations, especially during disaster and emergency situations; and
- Universal free school meals for all children.

Case Studies

Ravenswood City School District Child Nutrition and Education: Leveraging Community Partnerships to Bolster School Food During COVID-19

Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) is located in East Palo Alto and has an enrollment of 3,700 students, 93% of whom are typically eligible for free or reduced meals. June Richardson, who leads menu and culinary development as a consultant for Sodexo for the RCSD Child Nutrition and Education Department (RCSDCNE), shared the district's experience.

At the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, when RCSD first shifted to distance learning, the Child Nutrition and Education team quickly transitioned to “grab and go” style breakfast and lunch distribution five days a week at all school sites, followed by receiving a USDA waiver to add supper meals to their distribution in April. Richardson surveyed families and found that they preferred distribution two days per week, with parking expressed as a major concern for families to drive to distribution sites every day in an urban area with limited parking. They also expanded pickup times and shifted to larger distribution on fewer days, which Richardson believed increased meal counts. Distributions included meals for all 7 days of the week, as well as serving students on site in “learning hubs” in which students attended in person. In addition, they expanded to more scratch cooked items in bulk for entire families, including fresh fruits and vegetables. RCSDCNE launched a program to deliver meals in partnership with their Transportation Department, now delivering 50% of meals that they distribute. Since March, they have served more than 500,000 free meals to families, including being allowed to serve free meals to adults through last summer. This number is especially high given the availability of free food distribution in the area, including the YMCA, Second Harvest Food Bank of Silicon Valley, and local libraries.

Richardson shared that collaboration, within RCSD and with community partners, have been key to offering the best service to students and the community. First, RCSDCNE coordinates with school principals to align school events, such as when families have to pick up materials, with meal distribution, helping to increase participation. This has also included supporting staff; RCSDCNE worked with local companies and restaurants, such as Facebook and Taverna, to help feed frontline staff. These donations supported staff appreciation and helped keep everyone motivated and safe. Donations have also included support from the Ravenswood Education Fund Midpeninsula COVID-19 Response Team, providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), staff gift cards and other supplies. When boxes were needed to support bulk food distribution, a local bookstore donated boxes. The Midpeninsula COVID-19 Response Team also helped them

distribute brochures to families. Richardson shared that social media was key, using an East Palo Alto Neighbors Group to get the message out to families that meals were available, and that the District's Town Hall meetings with parents have had increased attendance with the convenience of using Zoom during the pandemic. Richardson and the team at RCSDCNE took advantage of an opportunity to receive 4,000 food boxes from the USDA Farm to Families Box program in partnership with a local distributor. They are now working with Second Harvest Food Bank of Silicon Valley to distribute meals through school sites, allowing families to pick up meals at the same time and further increase participation and food access. Richardson's biggest takeaway from this experience was that networking and community partners were the biggest asset for the district, and encouraged other school district food service leaders to be willing to ask for help and donations, sharing that, "People are willing to help. People have money and things to give if you ask."

Jefferson Elementary School District Food Services: Resources for Community Needs During COVID-19

Jefferson Elementary School District Food Services (JESDFS) covers Daly City and has an enrollment of 7,347 students, 65% of whom are typically¹ eligible for free or reduced meals. Anita King, JESDFS General Manager, and Kaitlyn Busse, Sodexo General Manager, who lead operations, culinary development and procurement for the District, provided feedback on their experiences during COVID-19.

JESDFS provides breakfast, lunch and supper during three distribution days each week, packaging meals for families for the entire week. Meals are distributed through pickup four hours per day at eight sites, and are refrigerated and frozen for families to prepare at home. This is challenging from a cost perspective, as less than half of the normal amount of students participate while those that do receive all meals, increasing costs.

Making immediate, frequent shifts production to meet community needs has been the theme of COVID-19 meal distribution for JESDFS. King and Busse have been closely monitoring where participation is taking place, changing distribution sites and moving around staff and equipment based on where participation has been highest. They sought additional USDA waivers and flexibilities to expand operations and created an alternate meal serving plan to accommodate different learning paths of the district. They adjusted serving times to prevent conflicts with at-home learning and teachers' schedules. All of these operational shifts were done while helping staff to adapt to changes and protecting staff health by abiding by strict safety protocols during COVID-19. These changes require additional community outreach as well, communicating to and ensuring that families know where to pick up as changes have been made. They've also had to communicate with families about special orders, such as vegetarian meals and are made by request. In partnership with UC Cooperative Extension, JESDFS has been able to continue nutrition education with students through virtual nutrition education lessons. Above all, King and Busse shared their appreciation of their staff, who worked together and showed their passion for

¹ During COVID-19, under special USDA waivers, all students are served free of charge. The proportion of students that are eligible for Free and Reduced Meals during normal service outside of COVID-19 can be used as a measurement of how many students are more likely to utilize free meals based on income.

serving kids and families through their commitment to serve families' needs while still providing the seamless quality of service and experience that they provide during any other school year.

South San Francisco Unified School District Nutrition Services: Accelerating Scratch Cooking During COVID-19

South San Francisco Unified School District Nutrition Services (SSFUSDNS) covers most of the Southern Peninsula of San Francisco and has an enrollment of 7,771 students, 48% of whom are typically eligible for free or reduced meals. Fran Debost, Director of Nutrition Services and Distribution for SSFUSDNS.

SSFUSDNS distributes meals twice a week to provide breakfast and lunch for the students 7 days a week. Meal pick-ups occur at 3 different school sites in the afternoon from 4:00 pm to 5:15 pm. SSFUSDNS initially had meal distribution times around noon in March, but after receiving feedback from parents they shifted meal pick-ups to later in the day. Current meal participation rates are very low compared to during normal service and have decreased since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. In a standard school year, the Nutrition Services department serves approximately 3,000 lunches per day, compared to approximately 600 lunches per day during COVID-19.

SSFUSDNS has seen a drastic reduction in participation rates during COVID-19 that they have addressed by revamping their menu with more meals from scratch, reaching out to parents, and posting flyers and banners to promote their meal service. The department unfortunately saw no improvement from new advertising, and had difficulty reaching parents by email (text and calling were most effective). Meal service integrity proved to be another challenge seen by the department but was remedied with a "family pass" system to ensure families are at the correct site and receive the correct number of meals. This system has helped cut down on lines and meal pick-up wait times. Due to changes in product availability and difficulty planning for shifts in product purchasing across school food buyers, Debost joined a group of school Food Service Directors in the region to collectively approach industry representatives to increase industry support and awareness of the current school food landscape.

A silver lining to the adjustments that SSFUSDNS has had to make is that they now have enough staff capacity to develop scratch cooked meals that the staff has wanted to create for years. Some of the scratch meals that have been developed during COVID-19 school-closures include veggie bowls, sushi bowls, chili bowls, grab and grow salads, different styles of burritos. Also, the staff has now had the opportunity to cut fruits and vegetables in-house rather than buy precut products that sometimes lack freshness. According to Debost, "the kitchen is lively now," and the staff has been excited to create their own meal concepts, taste them, and add them to their menu. Moving forward, Debost is exploring how to continue scratch-cooking when standard meal service resumes at school, including recently purchasing new fruit and vegetable processing equipment to continue to make in-house scratch meals for the foreseeable future.

Redwood City School District Child Nutrition Services: Utilizing School District Transportation Services to Deliver Meals During COVID-19

Redwood City School District (RCSD) Child Nutrition Services (RCSDCNS or CNS) is based in Redwood City and has an enrollment of 8,530 students, nearly two-thirds of whom are eligible for free or reduced meals. The General Manager of Child Nutrition Services at RCSD is Anna Lague, Lague has been working with the CNS staff to continue to serve students meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, RCSD Child Nutrition Services distributes meals at seven schools on Mondays and Thursdays. Meal pick-ups provide breakfast, lunch, supper, and a snack. These meal pick-ups are served to approximately 800 students per day. In addition to meals being served for pick-up at school sites, meals are being delivered to the households of approximately 275 students.

The RCSD Child Nutrition Services department has seen a drastic reduction in meal participation due to COVID-19 that they have addressed by increasing advertising, making personal phone calls to households, conducting a survey of parents, expanding distribution times and meal offerings at all sites, however saw little increase in participation. They are implementing a new 7-day meal kit that will reduce the strain on families picking up multiple meals per week and provide new items, hoping this will increase participation. Due to issues around cost, availability, and the quality of accessible fresh fruits and vegetables during COVID-19, Redwood City CNS will be increasing the use of commodity canned and frozen fruits and vegetables to reduce purchasing expense and utilize more commodity products. Finally, financial constraints during this time have led RCSD to reduce local produce purchasing.

Lague shared that a challenge during COVID-19 has been that families do not have the time and energy to go to school sites and pick up meals. To address this, the Child Nutrition Services department has worked with the school bus line to deliver meals to 275 students' homes. The district sends 9 buses to go out to deliver meals, each with a driver and a CNS staff member. The drivers bring a CNS staff member on the bus and the staff member and drops the meals off at each home. Initially, the department had issues with deliveries because no adults were home to receive the meals. To address this issue, CNS would call the family the day before delivery to verify that they would like meals delivered and would be home to receive them. Lague emphasized that the ability to adapt is crucial and needs to be valued moving forward and that staff dedication has been a crucial factor in continuing to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

San Mateo-Foster City School District Child Nutrition Services: Staff Culture Creating Resilience During COVID-19

San Mateo-Foster City School District (SMFCSD) Child Nutrition Services (SMFCSDCNS or CNS) is based in the cities of San Mateo and Foster City and has an enrollment of 11,724 students, nearly a third of whom are eligible for free or reduced meals. The Director of Child Nutrition Services at SMFCSDCNS, Andrew Soliz, shared insights on the Child Nutrition Services Department's approach to meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SMFCSD initially closed schools for two weeks starting March 12, 2020, in which Child Nutrition Services paused meal service. When meal service resumed the SMFCSDCNS team felt that they needed to continue serving meals daily due to the needs of local families. Based on feedback from parents, SMFCSDCNS adjusted meal pick-up times to a one and a half-hour pick-up window Monday through Friday, where breakfast and lunch are picked up daily and 3 meals are provided on Fridays to cover weekend meals for students. Due to the inability of some families to pick up meals during the allotted times, Child Nutrition Services began delivering a week's worth of meals to 150 students weekly in partnership with the District's transportation services company. SMFCSDCNS is serving roughly 3,000 pick-up meals per weekday during COVID-19 compared to 6,000 meals per day during regular service.

SMFCSD Child Nutrition Services has faced new and unique challenges as a result of COVID-19 involving educating, menu options, and planning. The Child Nutrition services team recognizes the importance of educating families on the new meal plan, emphasizing that the meals are *free* and *accessible* to any student under 18 regardless of specific need. Due to staffing limitations, one central kitchen, and having to package several different menu options, the department has decided to reduce menu options to cut down on program difficulty. The team values the ability of the department to continuously pivot and change program planning as needed, all with the goal of bringing meal service back to where it was before COVID-19.

Soliz highlighted the resiliency of Child Nutrition Services staff and how a positive staff culture has been crucial to being able to continue operations during the Covid-19 pandemic. In regard to future operations, Soliz believes that Child Nutrition Services should always be ready to make adjustments as challenges arise, even on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis. Having been through COVID-19, the team will be more cognizant of being prepared for school closures, school reopenings, and making last-minute adjustments in the future. In addition to the SMFCSDCNS team changing their long-term perspectives on school meal service, Mr. Soliz hopes that parents picking up and seeing what meals their children are eating at school will change their perspectives on school meal service, not as a subsidiary to education, but as a component of education.