



## COVID-19 and School Meals

The National Education Association recognizes the vital role that public schools and child care centers play in providing healthy and nutritious meals to children throughout the school and program year. Some 30 million children across the country participate in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-funded school meal programs every year. A large majority of those kids rely heavily on these programs because of low household incomes: according to USDA data, nearly three-quarters of school lunches nationwide are provided for free or at a reduced price. The free lunch participation rate has gone up every year since 2001, standing at 20.2 million in 2018. And the CDC estimates that children consume as much as half of their daily calories at school, with kids from food-insecure households getting a larger proportion of their daily food and nutrition intake from school meals.

As the COVID-19 Pandemic continues to cause school closures, below is guidance for affiliates related to ensuring students continue to have access to meals.

### Continue Meal Service

The USDA recently took steps to authorize School Food Authorities (SFAs) and other eligible community organizations to continue to serve meals to students affected by school or child care closures through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or Seamless Summer Option (SSO).

### Allowable Activities\*

States may submit waiver requests to serve meals immediately by providing their Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Regional Office with the required waiver information. Information on how to submit a waiver request is available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/child-nutrition-program-waiver-request-guidance-and-protocol-revised>. Waivers may grant schools the flexibility to do the following:

- Provide meals in a non-congregate setting
- Offer additional distribution sites outside of eligible areas
- Provide students with multiple meals and meal supplements
- Serve meals at school sites and community sites Provide "grab and go" meal service

### Best Practices

Continuation of school meals programs is important part of maintaining the health and well-being of students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Communities that have closed schools have relied on a variety of approaches to distribute meals. Some best practices include:

- Providing information in multiple languages and formats.
- Distribute information on meal sites through multiple channels.
- Maximizing access by providing flexible hours.

- Offering multiple meals at the same time while practicing social distancing.
- Offering "grab and go" meals outside of buildings.
- Providing drive-thru options.
- Delivering meals to school bus stops.
- Delivering meals directly to students.
- Collaborating with local non-profits to ensure enough food for the entire household.

## **Other Considerations**

During this troubling time, students in need of meals may also need other services such as health care, mental health services, and social services. Be sure to virtually convene your specialized instructional support personnel, such as school social workers and school counselors, as well as local service providers to discuss addressing the entire range of student needs while schools are closed.

## **Resources**

- [NEA COVID-19 webpage](#)
- [FRAC: Ensuring Access to the Child Nutrition Programs in the Event of School Closures](#)
- [USDA Guidelines on Child Nutrition Program Meal Service During COVID-19 Outbreaks](#)
- [NEA - Education Votes: Child Nutrition](#)
- [USDA: Guidance on Human Pandemic Response](#)
- [Secretary Perdue Announces Proactive Flexibilities to Feed Children When Schools Close](#)
- [USDA's new guidance Q&A: COV-19 SFSP and SSO Meal Delivery Using Existing Authority](#)

\*As of this writing, legislators are currently considering a blanket waiver, so check the NEA COVID-19 webpage for the latest updates.

\*\* If your state has not applied for any of the waivers above, please let us know.