



Issue Brief



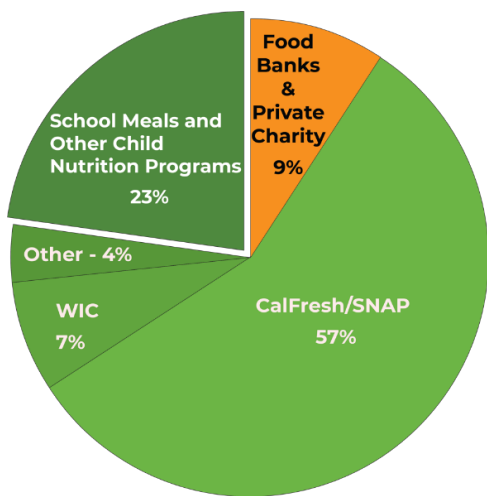
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California’s COVID-19 Response Must Include Specific Funding for School Nutrition Services

Issue

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds from the Families First Act¹ and CARES Act² have been made available to increase food security in San Diego County through the CalFresh (SNAP), senior meals, and federal food distribution programs. To date, however, little attention has been paid to funding school districts continuing to serve San Diego County’s 95,477 K-12 students who receive free and reduced-price meals.³ As schools struggle to transform their service delivery models to serve meals in a way that is efficient, effective and safe, state and federal investment is more critical than ever.

Child Nutrition Programs Comprise Almost 1/4 of All Nutrition Assistance in San Diego County (2017)



In San Diego County prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, free and reduced-price meals and other child nutrition programs made up almost a quarter (23%) of all nutrition assistance for all ages—more than double the amount of food provided by all our food banks and pantries combined. For the most vulnerable children, school meals can be the most reliable meals. For example, according to Vince Scimone, food service director at Grossmont Union High School District, some children do not eat on weekends.⁴ Given school meals’ central role in combatting childhood food insecurity, these meals must play a key part in keeping child hunger at bay during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Yet, school districts are reporting that under their current financial conditions, they may only be able to operate through the end of April or May, depending on the size of the district, and then would need to stop serving meals.

In terms of income and expenses, school districts’ nutrition service departments operate as isolated businesses with limited to no access to districts’ general funds.

“In many cases, nutrition service departments are not able to access money from the general fund. Meal programs are expected to be self-funded; many service directors have lost their jobs in past for digging too much into the general fund.” -Sally Spero, Child Nutrition Director, Lakeside Union School District

Recommendation

So that food insecure children can continue to access meals throughout the COVID-19 public emergency, the federal government and state of California should earmark funds to ensure that school districts’ nutrition service departments can maintain operations, transform service delivery models, and offer nutrition assistance including free and reduced-price meals, after-school supper, and summer feeding program meals.



Background

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, school nutrition services departments' ratio of income to expenses fell off a cliff.

Income has significantly dropped: Most districts are serving far fewer meals in the COVID environment than during normal operations, resulting in sharp declines in federal reimbursements.

"We're serving 5,400-5,600 [meals] on average, compared to 18,000 breakfast, lunch, and snacks on a regular school day. It will be difficult to operate comfortably past June 5."
Gail Gousha, Director of Nutrition Services, Escondido Union School District

Districts' meal and service costs have increased: The cost of providing a meal has significantly increased across San Diego County school districts for the following reasons:

1. Labor costs have held steady or risen due to the need to pay overtime as staff transform meal delivery models.
2. Districts have had to purchase new equipment to support "drive-thru" outdoor service.
3. Districts have had to invest in personal protective equipment to keep staff and volunteers safe.
4. The price of a meal has significantly increased as operating regulations require districts to provide more food than a child would regularly consume in a cafeteria setting.

The Cost of a Complete Meal: "Offer vs. Serve"

During normal operations, schools can "offer" students a variety of foods, with students taking and eating what they would like; the total food cost is lower than if all students were to eat a complete meal. Schools must now "serve" each student all meal components. This is a tremendous service to the student, who is sent home with a complete meal; however, the cost of the meal has increased substantially, in some cases by more than a third.

While philanthropic groups have stepped forward to offer nutrition service departments money to offset costs redesigning service delivery models, departments have stated that the level of support that charitable dollars can provide is "a drop in the bucket" compared to the money that they are losing on a daily basis.

Responding to COVID-19 Santee School District



Drive-thru meal service at
Santee School District's Central Kitchen

Santee School District has established two "drive thru" sites to provide free and reduced-price meals to students during the COVID pandemic. "Daily in school, we serve 2,800-3,000 students with free and reduced-price meals; now we are serving just 41% of students with a daily attendance of 1,200," says Cathy Abel, Director, Child Nutrition. "Due to less participation, the district is losing more than \$2,800 per day in reimbursement." While the district is committed to serving additional families, it has had to incur significant costs to purchase equipment to help it change the way it provides meals, while paying out full labor for staff working in the meals program. "The cost of the meals is also concerning now that 'offer vs. serve' is no longer allowed," says Abel. Local philanthropic funds have provided equipment support, but philanthropic dollars will not come close to closing the gap. Abel says she is "very concerned about the bottom line" and is unsure how long the school can operate its meal program without explicitly earmarked financial support for Nutrition Services Departments.

Facing the public health emergency, communities have come together and districts are proactively innovating in the face of the challenges; 38 of San Diego County's 42 school districts (90.5%) are offering meals to children, at more than 140 sites.⁵ Smaller districts have served 320 meals a day, and larger districts have served 30,000 per day; each meal served makes a critical difference to a child. We have seen incredible courage and innovation on the part of school district nutrition service directors countywide, who have sprung into action and are now distributing pre-bagged meals drive-thru style to parents in their cars, with no additional funding or guidance from the state and federal government. Some are creating volunteer webpages for community members to assist with handing out meals and provide food distributions; others are working with school bus contractors to deliver meals to neighborhoods on school bus routes, or using vans to reach rural areas.

The issues involved in distributing free and reduced-price meals in the COVID environment are not a matter of districts lacking motivation, innovation, or heart: to continue to operate, what districts need are new funds specifically earmarked for nutrition services.

¹ H.R. 6201 (Lowey), Families First Coronavirus Response Act, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6201/text>

² S. 3548 (McConnell) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3548/text>

³ CA Dept. of Education, "Unduplicated Student Poverty – Free or Reduced Price Meals Data 2018-19," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/files/sp.asp>

⁴ Jennifer Bowman, "San Diego County schools don't want kids going hungry but fear they're not always succeeding," inewssource, April 13, 2020, <https://inewssource.org/2020/04/13/san-diego-county-schools-dont-want-kids-going-hungry/>

⁵ San Diego County Office of Education, "Known Food Service Sites Open During School Closures/Sitios de Distribución de Alimentos Funcionando Durante el Cierre Escolar," April 10, 2020, <https://www.sdcoe.net/news/Pages/20-03-13-student-food-service-during-district-closures.aspx>