



To: Governors

From: Bill McBride

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Subject: School Meals for Low-Income Students During COVID-19 Closures

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Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, states and localities are working to ensure continued access to meals for low-income students dependent on the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. This memo describes three emerging tools currently employed by states and districts across the country to distribute meals to low-income students: grab-and-go, school bus deliveries, and drive-thrus. It also highlights five key considerations for governors as they formalize these efforts in the coming days and weeks.

Emerging Models of Meal Distribution

As of March 17, 2020, states and districts that have closed schools have employed three main modes of meal distribution for low-income students: grab-and-go; school bus deliveries; and drive-thrus. These modes of distribution are designed to preserve access to meals and simultaneously ensure social-distancing as recommended by the CDC.

1. Grab-and-go (in-person) food distribution at school buildings or other community centers. Cities like [New York](#), [Chicago](#), and [Tacoma, WA](#) all are keeping their school buildings open for at least part of the day so that low-income students and families can pick up meals. Other jurisdictions, like [Clark County, NV](#), [Worcester, MA](#), and [York, ME](#), have also set up alternative distribution sites, allowing families to pick up meals at places like police stations, libraries, food banks, and hotels. In some cases, [food trucks](#) or tents have also been installed in public spaces to distribute meals.
2. School bus deliveries. Some districts have repurposed their school bus systems as food delivery services. In districts like [Fremont, MI](#), [Northshore, WA](#), and [Fayette County, KY](#), meals can be delivered to students' homes or to their neighborhood bus stops at set times. Additionally, some districts in [West Virginia](#) are using their bus drivers to shuttle food from centralized distribution hubs (e.g. local high schools) to more localized sites (e.g. feeder elementary and middle schools) to improve meal accessibility.
3. Drive-thru service at school sites or other community centers. While drive-thru options are relatively rare across the country, these options have the benefit of reducing crowding at in-person distribution sites. [Tacoma, WA](#), for example, offers drive-thru service at school sites to pick up meals if parents do not wish to leave their vehicle to pick up their meals.

Considerations for Governors

In deciding how to best ensure meal access for low-income students during the COVID-19 pandemic, governors offices should consider the following:

- Accessibility of the meal sites. Ensuring that the meal distribution locations are convenient to the population of needy students is of paramount importance, particularly if school buses are not running their usual schedule, alternative public transportation is not available, or parents are unable to travel to a school with their child due to work or other constraints. The most effective way to cut down on transportation barriers is to repurpose school bus operations as food delivery systems, which in turn brings food directly to students' homes and neighborhoods. Additionally, the hours of operation for meal distribution sites, which range from longer windows of time (e.g. 8am-1pm) to shorter windows of time (e.g. 11am-12n), can impact the accessibility of meals.
- Eligibility for meals. Districts that use grab-and-go distribution at school sites largely expect that students will go to their home school to get a meal, but this is not always the nearest school for students, particularly if they attend a charter school, magnet school, out-of-district school, or some other choice option. To ensure students have access to meals, it is recommended that students be able to obtain a meal at whatever school is closest to them, regardless of their enrollment status. In [Chicago](#), for example, families are permitted to pick up meals at their nearest school even if it is not the school that they attend.
- Number of meals to include in each food parcel. While virtually all states and districts have their meal distribution sites open Monday through Friday, not all parents and students can make the trip to get food every day. To overcome this challenge, some districts, like [Chicago](#), are distributing food bags that include 3 days' worth of breakfast and lunch items. Likewise, [Kokomo, IN](#) provides 5 days' worth of meals in each food bag and food bags are distributed once a week on Wednesdays. This cuts down on the number of trips needed to obtain the meals, reduces the risk of crowding at meal distribution sites, and ensures greater food security in the case of a student not being able to obtain a meal on a particular day.
- Scheduling meal pick-ups. Some districts, like [Northshore, WA](#), allow for school-site delivery options that require daily pre-ordering and pick-up during a 15-minute window later in the day. This allows families to schedule a meal delivery at their nearest school, and families that cannot pick up can schedule a home delivery. This has the benefit of keeping crowds to a minimum at meal pick-up sites.
- Potential community partners. As the USDA lifts regulations on school nutrition programming through its waiver process (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), more alternative meal distribution centers and organizations will be allowed to participate in the provision of grab-and-go meals for needy students. In this way, partnering with local restaurants, food banks, and catering services is one way to increase the availability of meals for needy families. Some states, like [Florida](#), [Michigan](#), and [Minnesota](#), are already experiencing this as local restaurants and food banks partner with school districts to provide free meals to K-12 students.

Supplemental Resources

1. The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) has compiled a spreadsheet describing the meal distribution models employed by over forty school districts across the country: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18r11KXwrDxExJ0dG7mqHuRrY7Nnk7SihBIqo84zLzsY/edit#gid=0>
2. USDA Proactive Flexibility to Feed Children When Schools Close
<https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/03/10/secretary-perdue-announces-proactive-flexibilities-feed-children>
3. [USDA Memo on Child Nutrition Program Meal Service during Novel Coronavirus Outbreaks](#)
4. Many states have issued formal guidance for districts about continuity in food service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some examples of state guidance are listed below:
 - Ohio: <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Coronavirus/Supporting-Whole-Child-Nutrition>
 - Pennsylvania: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/Food-Nutrition/programs/Pages/Child-Nutrition-Program-Meal-Service-During-Novel-Coronavirus-Outbreak.aspx>
 - New York:
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/schoolhealth/schoolhealthservices/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-second-guidance-3-13-20.pdf>
 - Washington: <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-osp/press-releases/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-resources/nutrition-meals-guidance>
 - Illinois: <https://www.isbe.net/nutrition>