

**Nourishing Learners:  
A Report on School Meals and Education during COVID-19**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced almost every school building nationwide to shut its doors in spring 2020, the entire US public education system—and the school food system along with it—pivoted to ensure that its kids continued to be cared for by the institutions they have historically relied on. During the 2020–21 school year, FoodCorps set out to learn how school district education and school nutrition leaders were working together to feed and teach students amid the quickly evolving landscape. This report is a culmination of that learning, which we hope will be useful to school districts, school communities, and support organizations as we move through the pandemic and build toward a new normal together.

## Who We Learned From

**44** school district leaders (primarily superintendents and school nutrition directors as well as other district administrative leaders)

representing a diverse profile of **22** school districts

from **16** states nationwide.

## What We Heard

Over **3,500** individual comments

covering **21** subject areas

through **55** hours of candid conversation.

### Subject Areas *(in order of most comments to least)*

Food  
Team  
Foodservice model  
Communication  
Decision-making  
Budget  
Participation rates  
Learning model  
School Meals for All (also referred to as “Universal Free”)  
Location  
Food and staff safety  
Education  
Support  
Food insecurity  
Providing meals

USDA regulations  
Partnerships  
Wellness  
Nutrition  
School community  
Organizational structure

### What We're Sharing

**10 key insights:** core findings synthesized based on what we heard from district leaders, framed within political, social, and historical contexts

#### Other pandemic-specific key takeaways

District voices reflecting on **silver linings** from the pandemic, **permanent changes** they would like to make moving forward, and what they would do with a **magic wand**

Next steps to building on what we learned about school nutrition and education during the pandemic in the form of **conversation starters for district leaders** and **recommendations for all school community members**

### Key Insights

1. Beyond education, schools provide critical community services.
2. The pandemic forced school nutrition staff to prioritize meal service over meal quality.
3. “Quality food” is subjective.
4. Everyone recognizes that food is critical to learning—but the education system does not currently prioritize school meals.
5. The nature of school nutrition as a separate and siloed entity in the district leads to most disconnects.
6. Public education—and therefore school nutrition—is chronically underfunded.
7. Schools and school districts are a microcosm of their communities and society at large.
8. School nutrition departments demonstrated their ability to be remarkably innovative, collaborative, and responsive.
9. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to prototype School Meals for All for the entire US public school system.
10. The next few years will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for transformation in school nutrition operations at school and district levels.

### Pandemic-Specific Key Takeaway Topics

Breakfast in the Classroom  
School nutrition staffing shortages  
USDA COVID-19 school nutrition waivers

Food insecurity  
Staff teamwork and commitment  
Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)  
Packaging and sustainability, district disparities

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The pandemic has clarified the many strengths and assets of school nutrition programs nationwide, while also revealing structural challenges school foodservice departments have been facing since long before COVID-19. In many ways, our country has woefully underinvested in our national school meal programs. Some of these—like our National School Lunch Program—have been around for more than 75 years but have not been supported in evolving to meet changing times. As we emerge from this pivotal period of rapid innovation, learning, and reflection, we have an opportunity to either go back to “normal” or to leverage the moment to both double down on what’s been working all along and invest in promising new ideas where change is needed.

# INTRODUCTION

## Project Overview

*“Our foodservice [staff] basically flipped their model in less than a week. They went from serving in schools to serving outside of school; they couldn’t touch anybody. It was really scary. They had to do it, and they did it.”* —Superintendent

In early spring 2020, the unimaginable happened: nearly every school in the United States closed its doors, forcing the entire public school system to reconfigure operations. The pandemic drove administrators, educators, and school nutrition staff to find new ways of teaching and getting meals to students.

With 30 million kids relying on school meals in a typical school year, those who provide school meals knew that the closures could have devastating impacts for kids.<sup>1</sup> Over a matter of weeks, and in some cases only days, school nutrition teams pivoted to a pickup-and-delivery model that supported kids as they learned from home.

As an organization that works at the intersection of education and school nutrition, FoodCorps saw the remarkable feats leaders from both sectors accomplished during an unprecedented year and a half. In 2019, FoodCorps had just started a project that explored how to help strengthen the existing relationship between education and school nutrition; as the pandemic set in, and we witnessed district leader courage and collaboration in the face of COVID-19, we decided to focus our work on the partnership between education and school nutrition leaders at the district level. So during the 2020–21 school year, FoodCorps set out to learn how these teams were working together to feed and teach students during a global pandemic.

To gather input, we conducted more than 55 hours of candid conversations with 44 school district leaders, primarily superintendents and school nutrition directors. After synthesizing the learnings from over 3,500 individual comments, we identified 10 key insights, which you’ll find in this report.

Interestingly, many of the insights that rose to the top are broad and long-standing statements about education and school meals rather than themes explicitly tied to COVID-19, despite our questions focusing mostly on the pandemic. In our findings, we have also considered the historical and systemic contexts underlying the conversations.

The insights—or our interpretations of what we have learned—reveal that school administrators and nutrition teams intersect in critical ways, and their work affects our society in ways beyond the scope of schools. They have also revealed that although the pandemic has indisputably disrupted and harmed our lives over this past year and a half, it has also shined a light on the

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, “National School Lunch - Participation and Meals Served”, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.

successes, challenges, and opportunities that were already there. As we begin to emerge into a new normal, we have an opportunity to take a closer look at what has been in front of us all along and cocreate the path forward.

This report closes with inspiration and action steps for school community members and the public to consider. We invite you to join us in reflecting on this unparalleled year and a half and reimagining the future together.

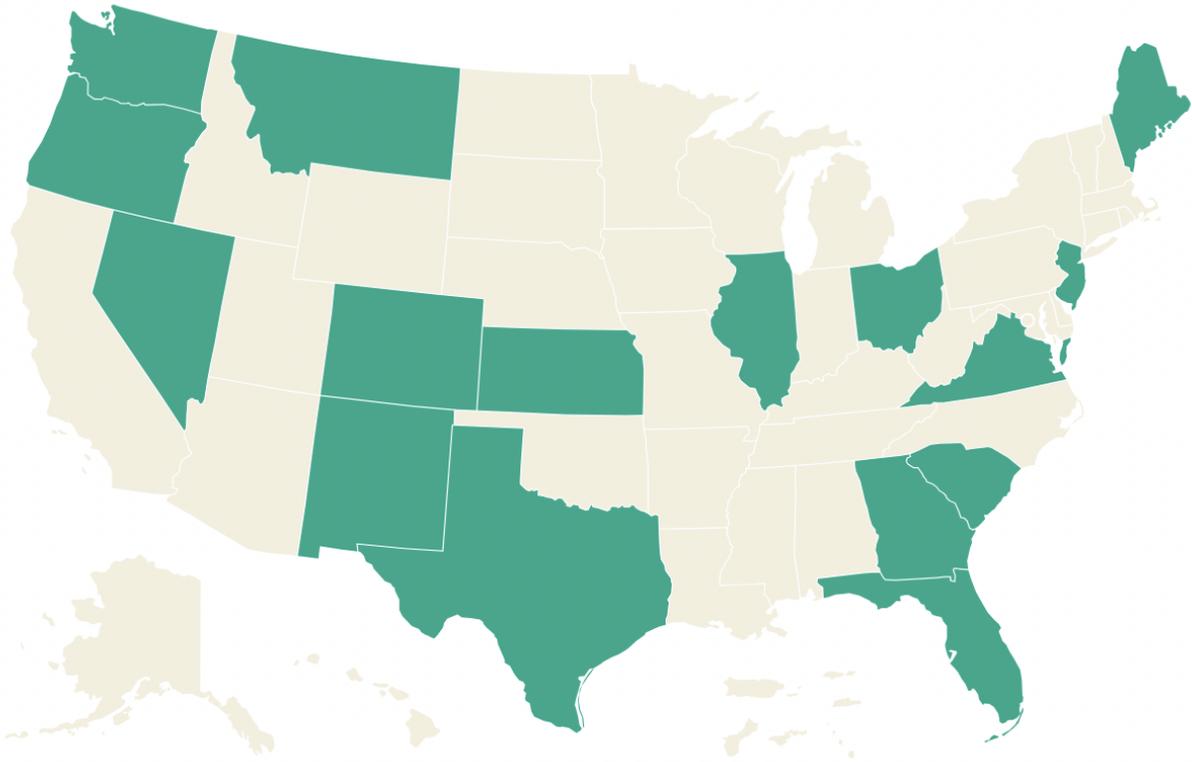
## District and Stakeholder Selection

During the 2020–21 school year, FoodCorps held conversations with 44 school district leaders (primarily superintendents and school nutrition directors—including leaders from three foodservice management companies—as well as other district administrative leaders) from 22 school districts in 16 states across the United States. We selected school districts, which are kept anonymous in this report, to ensure diversity across several criteria:

- Student population size (including very small, small, medium, large, and extra-large district sizes\*)
- Federal free/reduced-price meal eligibility percentage (37–97%)
- Geography (representation from 16 states in the contiguous United States, across all four major regions\*)
- Locale (including districts in rural, town, suburb, and city locales\*)
- Student population racial demographics

*\*Definition based on National Center for Education Statistics data*

It is important to note that although participating leaders represent a diversity of districts, the leaders' districts are not representative of all districts nationwide. Moreover, districts were not randomly selected to participate; leaders self-selected into this learning project and therefore may share similar opinions and reflections as a result.



*The 16 US states where participant districts are located*

## Methodology

FoodCorps hosted a series of 77 conversations, each 45 minutes in length, with each of the 44 district leaders. We spoke to most leaders twice during the year: once in the fall/winter and once again in the spring. Areas of inquiry we explored during these conversations included the following:

- COVID-19 and school meals
  - Approaches to ensuring students receive school meals during the 2020–21 school year
  - Successful strategies, adjustments to date, and areas of concern
  - Reflections on participation rates, budget, team/staffing, menus, distribution, and other aspects of school meals this year
- Communication and decision-making
  - Ways district administrators and school nutrition operators coordinate and share key decisions related to students’ access to meals
  - Communication between nutrition and education staff and teams
- Connections between school nutrition and education
- Future visions

FoodCorps synthesized what district leaders shared and summarized what we learned from those areas of inquiry into 21 subject areas, listed in the following section. We then distilled those findings, our own observations, and broader historical and societal contexts into 10 insights or deeper understandings about the intersection of education and school nutrition.

## Topic Categories

In our conversations with district leaders, we heard over 3,500 individual comments about the areas of inquiry noted in the Methodology section. We clustered those into 21 different subject areas:

- Food** (429 comments)
- Team** (412 comments)
- Foodservice model** (374 comments)
- Communication** (300 comments)
- Decision-making** (289 comments)
- Budget** (208 comments)
- Participation rates** (198 comments)
- Learning model** (191 comments)
- School Meals for All** (also referred to as “Universal Free” [130 comments])
- Location** (121 comments)
- Food and staff safety** (110 comments)
- Education** (105 comments)
- Support** (99 comments)
- Food insecurity** (81 comments)
- Providing meals** (81 comments)
- USDA regulations** (77 comments)
- Partnerships** (70 comments)
- Wellness** (68 comments)
- Nutrition** (60 comments)
- School community** (57 comments)
- Organizational structure** (32 comments)

# KEY INSIGHTS

## 1. Beyond education, schools provide critical community services.

Schools have been continually providing meals to their communities' students and families since the beginning of COVID-19, and the pandemic has demonstrated the role schools play as providers of essential community services and assistance. USDA COVID-19 school nutrition waivers allowed districts to distribute meals more easily and innovatively, and many districts found creative ways to ensure they were meeting their communities' needs. Despite the heroic efforts of their leaders, public acknowledgement of district leaders' hard work has waned as the pandemic drags on. Moreover, even though districts demonstrated the crucial support school meals provide, school meals are not universally considered a public or necessary good.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Primary Meal Providers***

In some communities, school districts have been providing meals seven days a week to families since March 2020.

#### ***Hunger***

The pandemic opened many community members' eyes to the extent of hunger and need in their communities. Some district leaders were surprised by how many community members took advantage of free meals, indicating how essential the food was for their families.

#### ***Compassion Over Compliance***

Many districts took a "compassion-over-compliance" approach, recognizing that it was more important to feed families than worry about regulations.

#### ***Whole Child***

There is awareness of the need for a "whole-child" approach to schooling. Schools are more than just a place for academic learning; they provide support for students' social and emotional needs.

#### ***Partnerships***

Districts partnered with various government and nongovernment entities, such as local food banks, to help support their communities throughout the pandemic. Additionally, school meals regularly provide a valuable opportunity for local farmers, processors, and other area food suppliers to showcase their products.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we expand our partnerships and support for providing meals to those in need throughout our community and better address the challenges of hunger and food insecurity?
- How might we be prepared for the next pandemic or natural disaster?
- How might we continue to celebrate the role schools and school meals have played in meeting community need, even after the pandemic?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*“Our folks are running back into a burning building because they know there are students that can’t be successful without them.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“All the curriculum and testing and what not is far less important than making sure students are physically, socially, and emotionally cared for—looking at individual students’ needs and their family, no matter where they are on the continuum.”*—Superintendent

*“It’s been not unexpected, but unsettling, just to see that what we’re doing is possibly not enough. And it’s hard to figure out what to do next and how to continue to evolve that program.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“And from a nutritional lens, when we can’t see students, how do we know they’re being taken care of? Do we need to make references to social services? Are they picking up meals?”*—Superintendent

*“When kids go on the school bus, they don’t ask if the kids have a car, and if they say yes we don’t say they can’t get on the bus. So why are we doing this with school lunch?”*—School Nutrition Director

*“I learned we have to take care of the whole child. Health and well-being is a huge part of this, and healthy food is a big part of that too.”*—Superintendent

## 2. The pandemic forced school nutrition staff to prioritize meal service over meal quality.

In March 2020 almost every district nationwide had to pivot overnight to a remote learning model. One of the top priorities was ensuring that students continued to receive meals, and school nutrition departments were heroic in their efforts to achieve this priority. However, as a result of both new and well-established safety requirements and precautions, supply chain issues, and other limitations the pandemic caused, school nutrition departments were also forced to provide meals that did not always meet their definitions of high-quality. This dynamic continued into the 2020–21 school year, when many school nutrition and education leaders lamented that meal quality, along with packaging sustainability, was forced to take a significant step backwards during the pandemic. They looked forward to fall 2021 with the hopes that they could offer fresher, more high-quality meals again as life looks toward a new normal.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs***

COVID-19 shined a light on hunger and food insecurity, and almost all participants we spoke with highlighted food as a top-three foundational need in psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (i.e., food, shelter, and clothing), recognizing that hungry students can't learn. Additionally, Breakfast in the Classroom is widely seen as important to prepare students for the day.

#### ***"Backsliding" During the Pandemic***

Many districts have made strides in improving their foodservice programs over the years, but there was the sense that the pandemic has been a period of "backsliding" (on food quality and packaging sustainability) because most districts were forced to serve more prepackaged meals, often with more processed foods, instead of the fresher meals they usually serve.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we capitalize on the increased visibility of the importance of school meals during the pandemic, as well as the challenges of hunger and food insecurity, to make real and long-lasting improvements to our foodservice program?
- How might we put in place systems and partnerships now so that we're well-prepared to continue serving high-quality meals even if another pandemic or other extreme situation arises?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*"And I will tell you everybody was worried about food. Everybody. Everybody was worried about how to keep kids fed."*—Superintendent

*“We want to get away from individually wrapped foods so badly. We were doing so much scratch cooking like dressings, etc., and we’ve dropped all of that.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“It’s such an essential thing to have food and feed our kids—the number one most essential thing. It continues to be one of the most essential things.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“We were all lamenting that lunch kind of sucks right now; it’s not joyful. It’s not salads and spice bars and build-your-own bars, it’s all back to prepackage.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“It’s Maslow [hierarchy of needs] and then Bloom [learning objectives]. That’s critical, and the superintendent says it all the time.”* — School Nutrition Director

### 3. “Quality food” is subjective.

“Quality food” is important to everyone—and nobody defines it the exact same way. Although the USDA has established federal nutrition standards for meal programs, nutritional content is only one way of defining meal quality. Community members—including district leaders, staff, students, and caretakers—have varying preferences, values, cultural backgrounds and foodways, and other personal experiences related to food, resulting in diverse perspectives on what good food is and should be in schools. Finding meaningful ways to recognize and celebrate these different definitions of “quality food” is an enormous opportunity and challenge for district and school communities.

#### Interview Highlights

##### ***Culturally Affirming Meals***

Several district leaders expressed a desire to serve a greater variety of culturally affirming foods that reflect the diversity of their student communities. One leader specifically noted interest in exploring customization options that would allow different schools to provide different options based on local preferences.

##### ***Community Feedback***

School community members can be highly vocal about their opinions on school meals. During the pandemic, some districts observed that parent and teacher opinions would override the perspectives and expertise of district administrators, including school nutrition operators.

##### ***Trade-Offs of Choice***

During the pandemic many districts reduced choice to simplify menus, which led to reduced participation in some places. Many districts noted the importance of giving students more food variety and choice, while also acknowledging challenges that come with offering more options. And it can be difficult to add more options without increased budgets and regulatory flexibility.

##### ***Magic Wand***

We closed our conversations by asking every participating district leader the same question: If you could wave a magic wand, what would your district’s school meal experience look like five to 10 years in the future? The majority of responses were related to the food itself, with almost all districts describing future visions of food that is procured, served, and enjoyed. The specific visions were varied but reflected the diversity of ideas about what ideal quality food looks like.

#### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we collaborate with our community to create a more expansive definition of quality meals?
- How might we offer more meals that reflect the cultural diversity of all students within our district?

## Quotes from District Leaders

*“You’ll get feedback one way or another.”* —Superintendent

*“That’s an easy one. We talk about it all the time. We’re pretty clear on our dream. Every kid coming to school [with] the assumption that they are going to get something they want to eat from school lunch.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“I’d like to be able to look at customization . . . to do different menus for different regions of the city because they eat differently.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“I’d like to see more ethnic [foods] and different cultures . . . a wide variety of cultural food available to students.”* —Superintendent

*“And those [school meals] are culturally representative of the kids, so the food is not just nourishing, but it feels comfortable and provides dignity, and there is ownership in knowing what this food is and that it is sourced locally and made with love.”* —School Nutrition Director

## 4. Everyone recognizes that food is critical to learning—but the education system does not currently prioritize school meals.

Within the education system, school meals are generally not seen as critical ingredients for learning but more as a support service like transportation or custodial services. A few leaders mentioned school gardens and meals being useful vehicles for teaching science and math, but generally this area is underdeveloped and under-resourced. Although all leaders we spoke to have personal values that support healthy and nutritious meals, we heard that it is often difficult to prioritize and invest in foodservice over education needs. It is our team's perspective that without compelling evidence linking healthy school meals to education outcomes, such as a landmark study, it will be difficult to build momentum toward greater investment in school meals as foundational to students' education.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Food as Fuel***

There's a general consensus on the educational importance of food and calories as evidenced by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, often based on and accompanied by vague references to "the evidence" from uncited studies.

#### ***Time is Short***

Some school nutrition leaders expressed a desire for longer lunch periods for students to relax, enjoy their meals, and socialize, which is at odds with educational priorities around instructional time.

#### ***Untapped Potential***

There are many aspirations, but mostly untapped potential, for school meals and school gardens as educational opportunities. They are, however, chronically underfunded.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we better understand the links between food, nutrition, and education outcomes within our district?
- How might we have conversations with teachers to learn about the links they see between nutrition and education and what types of data would be persuasive evidence within our district?
- How might we increase investment in the health and development of the whole student, providing meals and mealtime experiences that fuel lifelong health?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*“Everyone in my district knows kids need to have breakfast to pass algebra.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“I really think child nutrition is really one of the most underfunded areas, and that’s frustrating to me.”* —Superintendent

*“[Lunch] is not seen as academic time, and that’s why we are seen as an inconvenience”* —  
School Nutrition Director

*“That is time taken away from language arts, math, science, social studies. You have to take instructional time from core content to allot time for this.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“Education only works if kids feel safe, secure, and ready to learn.”* —Superintendent

## 5. The nature of school nutrition as a separate and siloed entity in the district leads to most disconnects.

During the pandemic, because of the essential nature of providing meals to students, many foodservice directors enjoyed better and more frequent communication with district leadership as well as more participation in district decision-making. Some commented that they now had a “seat at the table” for the first time, while others always had strong involvement but appreciated the increased trust in and visibility for their program and their team. These gains stand in relief to a backdrop where foodservice departments are often siloed within districts, operating on their own budget and expected to be completely self-supporting. With this dual structure as the standard of district organization, it is little wonder why foodservice staff often feel disconnected from peers both within the district and within schools. This disconnect is systemic and is mirrored all the way up to the national level, where school nutrition falls under the USDA, and every other school district department falls under the US Department of Education.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Increased District Support During the Pandemic***

In spring 2020, school nutrition departments enjoyed unparalleled support because of COVID-19, with some hearing the phrase “whatever you need” from district leadership for the first time.

#### ***Access to General Funds During the Pandemic***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some school nutrition programs were forced to draw on the district general fund to balance their budgets, instead of having to be fully self-supporting.

#### ***Zoom-Enabled Engagement***

New communication tools like Zoom increased visibility and involvement in decision-making, both within school nutrition teams and within district leadership “cabinets” or committees.

#### ***School Nutrition Rarely in Strategic Plans***

District decisions are often guided by their strategic plan, but the majority of participating districts with publicly available strategic plans did not include or mention school nutrition or school meals.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we build on the coordination and alignment between foodservice and district leadership during the pandemic as well as the increased collaboration between foodservice and other departments both at the district and the site level?
- How might we leverage the experience of COVID-19 and the increased communication and coordination between foodservice and the district both at the department and the site level?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*“I’m an inconvenience for a lot of people because they think school is for education, and we’re not education. But the pandemic has shown that we are an education intervention, and we should be seen as such.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“No doubt that new opportunities for meeting more regularly through Zoom will continue. It’s been a really good thing for our staff.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“The engagement from my superintendent is critical. I have a small group of . . . nutrition director friends . . . those without a seat at the table with the superintendent are so frustrated and challenged.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“Somehow we always get put as the afterthought. The first thing after we went to remote learning was ‘how do we feed them?’ [so we] became one of the first priorities. Now, we are getting left off emails again.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“Right now, the most important thing throughout this experience is having a seat at the table and a voice in the room when we’re trying to figure out what to do.”* —School Nutrition Director

## 6. Public education—and therefore school nutrition—is chronically underfunded.

In some conversations, district administrative and nutrition leaders alike alluded to a tension between foodservice and education, with some acknowledging that they can feel at odds over similar resources rather than on the same team. This scarcity is complicated by the fact that although education and foodservice typically operate under separate budgets and revenue streams, the overall vision and priorities for the district are set during strategic planning, and school nutrition is usually not included in this process. Moreover, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing school nutrition staffing shortages, which we are seeing across fields including education, and many district leaders worry about how they will manage to attract candidates and fill open positions moving forward.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Limited Resources***

Education and school nutrition departments are often vying for similar limited resources (e.g., time during the school day, part-time staff). Some nutrition leaders shared their perception that some education staff, such as teachers, do not recognize why foodservice should earn district-level investment, especially because there are so many unmet education-related needs. Moreover, many school nutrition departments are suffering from staffing shortages as they struggle to compete with nearby retailers and other employers who are able to offer higher pay.

#### ***Nutrition Services is Undervalued***

There is a perception that being a school nutrition employee does not garner respect, and many staff feel undervalued and like they are not treated as professionals.

#### ***Staff Burnout***

School nutrition staff are experiencing extreme burnout after the stress and heavy workload of the 2020–21 school year.

#### ***Budget and Organizational Uncertainty***

Many school nutrition leaders expressed uncertainty regarding their budgets leading into the next school year. Some wonder about the implications of transportation, custodial, and other staff no longer being able to provide extra assistance to school nutrition departments.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we celebrate and elevate school nutrition staff as valued professional peers?
- How might we better organize our district foodservice structure and staffing to best meet our needs going forward?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*“I think this work needs to be tied to a district strategy. Rather than engaging at the school level and hoping that it’ll be so good that it’ll catch on like wildfire is not a strategy.”* —Superintendent

*“I’m working hard to reconcile a budget that stays competitive . . . that means I need to beat the wages of McDonalds and Walmart, and I need to make sure they [our staff] know they are more valuable than an entry level-job [elsewhere].”* —School Nutrition Director

*“People say you should be giving raises and doing more for staff, but the big river that fuels us [the money] is not there.”* —Superintendent

*“The staff are very burnt out. I’ll be perfectly honest. They have countdowns going every day to when they get off [on a break]. And it’s usually what I hear them talking about when I go into any kitchen.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“The custodians didn’t have anything to clean on-site. So they actually helped in child nutrition. And that was honestly what saved our budget. They’re funded through the general fund, not the child nutrition fund.”* —School Nutrition Director

## 7. Schools and school districts are a microcosm of their communities and society at large.

US public schools and school districts are reflective and representative of the communities they serve. They also reflect our broader societal values, systems, and tensions, playing out the political, economic, and social dynamics we see and experience locally and nationwide. In this way, they offer opportunity: as a mirror for us to reflect upon and learn from and as local ecosystems that can demonstrate what's possible at a larger scale.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Community Dynamics***

Many leaders discussed the spectrum of community dynamics during the pandemic. On the positive side, many district leaders described the generosity of members of the community who stepped up with donations, volunteered their time, and offered other types of critical support during a difficult year. They also described the sense of meaning and satisfaction of having community acknowledgement of the important role schools were playing, stepping up to provide critical services during a time of need. On the other hand, some education leaders were worn out by a year of protesting, angry calls and messages, and other public outcries against decisions being made in the name of safety for students and staff. Some leaders felt caught between complying with state and local regulations and addressing politicized responses from parents and other stakeholders.

#### ***The Hero-to-Villain Narrative***

Many leaders expressed gratitude for the overdue national and widespread recognition of the critical roles schools and staff play in feeding, serving, and supporting students and families early on in the pandemic. Some also noted how the tone shifted during the course of the year, with the appreciation of school staff fading over time. This change in tone was notably reflected in the national media and public dialogue as the pandemic became increasingly politicized, with school lunch staff hailed as “heroes” on the cover of *Time* magazine in April 2020<sup>2</sup> and, almost a year later, the debate over school reopenings reaching a fever pitch and pitting “parents against teachers”<sup>3</sup> in February 2021.

#### ***School Meals Stigma***

School meals stigma is an outcome of broader societal classism that looks negatively upon community members experiencing financial and food insecurity, instead of looking critically at the systems and policies that create that insecurity in the first place. During the pandemic, some districts witnessed a decrease in school meals stigma, attributing that cultural shift to increased community need, USDA waivers that allowed free meals to all students regardless of income eligibility, increases in participation, and the creation of more accessible food service models.

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<sup>2</sup> “Heroes of the Front Lines,” *Time*, April 8, 2020. <https://time.com/collection/coronavirus-heroes/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kris Maher and Jennifer Calfas, “School Reopening Pits Parents Against Teachers: ‘Is There a Word Beyond Frustrating?’” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-reopening-covid-classroom-cdc-parents-teachers-union-students-11613512932>

## Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we continue the unified spirit of the past year and come together as a community to meet challenges and serve our kids?
- How might we model within our district and our community the type of society we would like to live in?
- How might we reduce the stigma of eating school meals?

## Quotes from District Leaders

*“This last century, anytime there was a social issue, it was, ‘Let’s have schools fix it.’ When things have happened, it was us who stepped up and made sure those things happened.”*  
—Superintendent

*“I’d love to see the recognition and celebration of school nutrition as one of the essential parts of a school district continue. We’ve already seen it fade off. At one point we were seen as essential, and I’d love to see that carry on.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“It wasn’t always rainbows and lollipops. I remember having to walk through picket lines and having a teacher hit me in the head with her picket sign. So it wasn’t always unanimous.”*  
—District Administrative Leader

*“When I think about one of our yuckiest cultural issues here is that the only kids who choose to eat school meals are kids on the free and reduced meal schedule, it turns into a daily illustration of families’ socioeconomic status.”* —District Administrative Leader

## 8. School nutrition departments demonstrated their ability to be remarkably innovative, collaborative, and responsive.

School nutrition departments and their staff were forced to pivot on a dime over the past year and to push themselves harder than any time in recent memory—and they rose to the challenge. Through long hours and weeks, deferred vacations and extended overtime, food service teams took on the herculean task of providing consistent food to students and their families in a highly inconsistent context. For many districts, the past 18 months forced teams to adapt around flexibility, innovative thinking, and the need to take a problem-solving, “yes, and” attitude to projects large and small. Programs like collaborations with bussing to provide meal deliveries, seven-day commodity meal packs, meal kiosks and creative dining locations, new packaging concepts, and many others attest to this capacity for creative problem-solving and ongoing evolution.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***An Evolving Focus on Customer Service***

Some districts mentioned a shift in attitude on the part of staff to a more “customer-service” mindset when staff began distributing meals to parents and caretakers instead of students.

#### ***A Leapfrog on Tech Literacy***

Most districts mentioned the radical increase in staff tech literacy necessitated by remote work during the pandemic, which has allowed for a significantly higher frequency of internal communication within food service departments. The use of short YouTube video demos, video conferencing, and a higher reliance on social media have all been helpful at increasing the communication both within staff groups and between staff and families.

#### ***Deep Exhaustion, Deep Meaning***

The staff burnout going into the 2021–22 school year is high—but, in many cases, so is the sense of achievement. Many districts discussed the exhaustion on the part of staff; some districts declined requests for additional services this summer to give staff time to reset. Some staff, however, also reported high levels of accomplishment and a deep sense of meaning in their jobs during the pandemic.

#### ***Strengthened Partnerships***

Many districts developed or deepened partnerships with other district departments (e.g., working with transportation to deliver meals) or with local nonprofits and businesses (e.g., partnering with food banks or restaurants).

#### ***Balancing Standardization and Responsiveness***

Many districts struggled to balance the competing interests of standardization of policies to create efficiency on one hand and site-specific responsiveness to meet the needs of individual principals/teachers on the other hand.

## Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we continue to try new ideas and foster a culture of innovation within the district and within foodservice?
- How might we “rebrand” or reposition foodservice and school meals within the district to improve the perception of the department for students?
- How might we remake foodservice in the district into students’ favorite restaurant?

## Quotes from District Leaders

*“People are feeling good because they pulled off something amazing this year, and they had to rework, refigure out, problem solve, and be creative like they have never had to do before in such a short amount of time.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“We have weekly Zoom meetings with our department. Before we got together [about] once a year. But now we meet weekly, and that’s extremely important to keep our staff connected on what’s going on and opportunities.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“Pre-COVID, people were not resistant to change, but it was hard to make big changes in a big district like ours for all the normal change-management reasons.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“Last year it was more of an instant, ‘No, I’m not going to do that,’ but now people are more willing and saying they think they can do things.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“Next year I’ve already picked up three local growers. Going to get all produce from the beginning of school until it runs out. It helps the local economy and gets fresh food on the table and helps the kids eat better.”* —School Nutrition Director

## 9. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to prototype school meals for all for the entire US public school system.

The 2020–21 academic year was the first year in what will prove to be a two-year nationwide prototype of School Meals for All (also referred to by many leaders as “Universal Free”) but also a constantly shifting landscape of food service models, with a predominance of remote service and delivery. In contrast, the 2021–22 school year, will be a rare chance to understand the effects of school meals for all nationwide with the likelihood of more in-person learning. With the continuation of USDA COVID-19 school nutrition waivers, including higher reimbursement rates, some districts are expecting higher participation rates during the 2021–22 school year compared to the previous school year as most students return to brick-and-mortar schools. Some districts are even planning for participation rates to meet or exceed pre-COVID levels, but other districts, however, still have fears about reduced participation rates continuing this coming year. Certainly, the school nutrition community will be closely watching to see the outcomes of this national experiment on participation rates, menu options, and many other aspects of school foodservice.

### Interview Highlights

#### **Equitable Ease of Access**

Many leaders expressed frustration with the typical application system, citing the issue of income thresholds that do not always accurately capture a family’s financial situation. The School Meals for All waivers mean that, during a period when need is particularly high, families whose incomes may previously have put them just above the threshold for free or reduced meal eligibility will still be able to benefit from the program.

#### **Reduced Stigma**

Many leaders felt that the stigma around who is eating school meals has been reduced this year with school meals for all. Districts expect this reduction of stigma to continue this coming year with the extension of the waiver.

#### **Anticipation of Higher Participation Rates**

Many districts are hoping for, and anticipating, higher participation rates this coming fall 2021 than they saw during spring 2021, as students reenter in-person learning. The big question around the country will be how much rates increase under the school meals for all waiver.

#### **Fear of Return to Free and Reduced-Price School Meal Applications**

Many districts have a palpable fear of the consequences of returning to the traditional application system for the Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) program. Some districts anticipate a drop in participation rates and a rise in school meal stigma if or when the School Meals for All waiver ends.

### Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .

- How might we leverage the rapid innovation of the past year to make critical investments and bold changes within the foodservice program?

### Quotes from District Leaders

*“The extension of waivers through June 2022 is game changing. It gives us two years’ worth of data to policymakers that access to meals for all students is critical to the academic success of students. We were doing that with breakfast in the classroom and we can do that with all meals.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“[School meals for all] changes culture, so you assume kids are eating together. It takes out any sort of classist inequities. It allows us to look at equity in food. [It] allows us to build community around food.”*—District Administrative Leader

*“Not knowing if this [School Meals for All] will continue beyond next year, we know we need to be cautious and not just start extending contracts but pay close attention to how our needs align with participation.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“There’s nothing else we do in education where we would divide kids up that way [by socioeconomic status]. We would never offer a math class based on how much money a kid’s parents made.”*—District Administrative Leader

*“It cuts out a lot of stereotyping with not completing an application for free meals.”*—District Administrative Leader

## 10. The next few years will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for transformation in school nutrition operations at school and district levels.

With this past year's push into new levels of innovative change mindsets comes a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for transformation. The National School Lunch Act of 1946 formalized the program that exists today, and 75 years later, the program looks broadly the same, having evolved little to meet the changing times. In the coming years, as we emerge from the pandemic, districts can either go "back to normal" or can leverage the moment to create lasting change, creating a "new" normal based on promising new ideas and a propensity for innovation. Some leaders have been inspired to seize the moment to introduce new initiatives or maintain popular ones that were piloted during the pandemic. These tend to focus on making mealtime a more joyful, healthful, welcoming experience for students by rethinking the cafeteria environment, the location of mealtimes, the menu options and the presentation of meals, and the timing of meal periods.

### Interview Highlights

#### ***Breakfast in the Classroom***

Many schools have either piloted or expanded Breakfast in the Classroom programs. For some schools, the pandemic provided an opportunity to pilot a program that had received pushback in previous years because of fears around messiness, additional work for teachers, and distracted learning, among others. Most schools found that these issues were negligible or manageable and that these programs created immense benefit to students.

#### ***Alternative Lunch Locations***

Some schools piloted classroom, outdoor, and other alternative eating locations during this past year and found that classroom eating, especially, created a more joyful eating experience. Some leaders discussed the desire or plan to maintain and even expand these ideas.

#### ***Longer Lunch Periods***

Because of the spatial requirements around social distancing, schools with smaller cafeterias have had to be creative to find ways to accommodate students during mealtimes. Some schools have tried staggering lunch periods in new ways, and some have been able to incorporate longer lunch periods as a result. A few leaders discussed the positive outcome from these longer eating periods on student well-being.

#### ***Return to Sustainability***

Several districts are prioritizing a return to their higher commitment to sustainability (which went through a period of regression during the pandemic), hoping to focus on sustainable packaging and a reduction in food waste.

### ***Fear of Deprioritization***

Some districts mentioned a fear that school nutrition programs will be deprioritized again as the societal conversation moves on once the level of food insecurity is no longer so visible. Some mentioned that food service has already been deprioritized again in public discourse compared to earlier in the pandemic, showing the short-term memory of contemporary society.

### **Now what? Conversation starters for district nutrition and education leaders . . .**

- No matter what happens at the federal level, how might we continue to ensure all students have access to nourishing school meals, free from stigma?
- If the USDA waivers go away, how might we reintroduce the FRL program to our parents and families and the broader school community in a way that reduces the stigma of eating school meals?

### **Quotes from District Leaders**

*“Look at all changes we made when we had to and how quickly we made the changes. On the other side of this, I hope we remember we don’t need to be afraid of change, and we can make change; that’s a great lesson.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“It’s hard to entice kids with something in a Styrofoam bowl and paper bag. Food is a sensory experience for colors, smells, aromas. A lot of that is lost right now, and I want to bring back that sensory experience next year.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“Breaking bread to me is a very communal thing. I know schools are little industrial machines sometimes, things going in and out, but we have to find a way to make food experiences better.”* —Superintendent

*“Change doesn’t happen quickly in school; we’ve been doing the same thing for 100 years.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“I hope we don’t [act as though] this was just a bad dream and move on, and people remember how vital it is that food programs are there to provide that safety net for folks with food security issues.”* —District Administrative Leader

# OTHER KEY TAKEAWAYS

Within the broader insights and major topic categories shared in this report, there were some additional takeaways specific to the pandemic that we heard from district leaders.

## Breakfast in the Classroom

Many district leaders agree that Breakfast in the Classroom has tangible benefits for students. Among them are higher participation rates, a more communal feel, and the greater ability for teachers to ensure that students have eaten prior to beginning instruction. Several district leaders mentioned an unexpected benefit during the pandemic: that schools and teachers who had previously pushed back on Breakfast in the Classroom were forced to try it and generally saw better-than-expected results. Several districts mentioned a hope and desire to continue Breakfast in the Classroom after COVID-19 protocols have subsided, now that a year of testing has already been completed, with positive outcomes.

*“Breakfast in the Classroom . . . all the myths that administration and teachers pushed back on for years don’t exist. They had Breakfast in the Classroom all year, and it’s been fine.”*

—School Nutrition Director

*“We love the Breakfast in the Classroom, and I think we’ll continue to do that.”* —Superintendent

## School Nutrition Staffing Shortages

Many district leaders view staffing in general as the biggest challenge looking into the 2021–22 school year. Although some districts needed to make staffing cuts mid-year because of budgetary constraints, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing school nutrition staffing shortages for many districts, and those leaders worry about how they will manage to attract candidates and fill open positions moving forward, especially given competition from other employers who can often pay higher wages. Additionally, during the 2020–21 school year, many school nutrition programs received staffing support through other departments (e.g., custodial, transportation) that are paid through the general fund. Those school nutrition leaders are concerned about losing that coverage once staff positions return to their regular work in the new year.

*“Our biggest pain point next year is going to come in on staffing. Hands down, it’s staffing.”*

—School Nutrition Director

## USDA COVID-19 School Nutrition Waivers

There seemed to be almost universal consensus among leaders that the USDA COVID-19 school nutrition waivers, including School Meals for All (also referred to by many leaders as “Universal Free”), have benefited their districts. The increased reimbursement rates not only allowed districts to try out new and innovative ways of distributing meals during the pandemic but also enabled many districts to experience an increase in participation. Some district leaders worry about the drop in participation that will occur if families have to fill out paperwork and apply for meals again. Moreover, leaders have concerns about the reemergence of school-meal-related stigma, which many said seemed to decrease alongside implementation of school meals for all.

*“Universal meals is the first thing I would like to keep forever.”* —School Nutrition Director

## Food Insecurity

For many communities, the pandemic has underscored the critical role schools play as both nutrition providers and community hubs. It has created more recognition of the role schools play in addressing food insecurity, with school food filling a need some didn't even know existed. Many leaders were alarmed by the high level of need in their community this past year. Some school leaders commented that, at times during this crisis, they have had to forget about finances and budget and just feed kids and families.

*“We've been astounded by the food scarcity and the need for food. It's been far greater than we anticipated.”* —Superintendent

## Staff Teamwork and Commitment

The level of foodservice teamwork and commitment has been extraordinary, even as the logistical and emotional challenges throughout the school year have been, at times, overwhelming. Staff have demonstrated flexibility, resiliency, and patience at every turn. Their unwavering dedication to ensuring their students receive meals has been a unifying and motivating force throughout it all.

*“You've got a lot of dedicated, dedicated people who realize the mission of the district, and whether you're driving a bus or teaching in a classroom, you're really doing something that's for the community good and generations to come.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“Teamwork is critical—this year and moving forward. Without teamwork every department would have sunk.”* —School Nutrition Director

## Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)

In response to rising food insecurity and unemployment brought on by COVID-19, the USDA created the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program to help low-income families buy groceries. Although many district leaders discussed how P-EBT benefits provide important financial support to families in need, several school nutrition directors observed drops in school meal participation during monthly P-EBT replenishment periods. This was not a critique of the benefit itself but a question of how school nutrition programs can consistently remain financially viable while pandemic safety net programs also continue to directly support families.

*“When money is put on these [P-EBT] cards, you can tell because our numbers dropped. We are trying to feed the same kids in the programs.”* —School Nutrition Director

## Packaging and Sustainability

As a result of COVID-19 safety precautions and meal distribution logistics, districts were forced to increase usage of food packaging, which has resulted in more waste. Many school nutrition and education leaders lamented that in addition to meal quality, packaging sustainability was forced to take a significant step backwards during the pandemic. There is a broad desire to return to more sustainable options in the coming years.

*“Biggest shift has come in the amount of prepackaged and individual serving packages. Traditionally [we do] a lot of scratch cooking with very little prepackaged [meals].”*  
—Superintendent

## **District Disparities**

The pandemic has also highlighted disparities among districts’ food services departments. USDA waivers provided higher reimbursement rates to districts as well as allowed them to serve additional meals typically only offered during the summer (such as suppers and weekend meals). For some districts, these waivers resulted in increased participation rates; however, in other districts this was not the case. Additionally, some districts began the school year on the precipice of needing additional funds to support the school meal program in their district but ended the year with excess funds that required spend-down plans to ensure that money wasn’t wasted. Thus, the pandemic created a dichotomy in which some districts are struggling to make ends meet, and others have a surplus of funds.

*“I have friends in [one district] who are saying ‘This is the best thing ever, I don’t know what I’m going to do with all this money.’ But I have friends in [another district] who are taking out debt loans who have been self-sufficient for years.”* —School Nutrition Director

# DISTRICT VOICES

At the end of our conversations with district leaders, we asked the same set of three questions as a final reflection while closing out the 2020–21 school year: What silver linings have you seen? What new things did you try during the pandemic that you would like to make permanent? And if you had a magic wand, what about school food would you make a reality five to 10 years from now?

You will find a selection of answers to these questions below. Please note that these are not summaries of what we heard across multiple districts and should not be extrapolated to reflect broad themes. Rather, they are examples from a variety of district voices.

## Silver Linings

Most education and nutrition leaders agreed that, although the past 18 months have been incredibly difficult, there have been significant silver linings and unexpected benefits that have grown out of this trying time. Common themes were around an increased level of collaboration between departments, a more significant inclusion of food service in district-level decision-making, increased technology literacy and a more flexible attitude toward new ideas among staff, the national prototype of School Meals for All, and the opportunity to test various programs that might have been difficult to green-light in a typical year.

District leaders shared silver linings that fell under the following categories:

- Team (31 comments)
- Support (18 comments)
- School community (6 comments)
- USDA regulations and School Meals for All (5 comments)
- Foodservice model (5 comments)
- Providing meals (5 comments)
- Food (4 comments)
- Wellness (3 comments)
- Partnerships (3 comments)
- Food insecurity (2 comments)
- Location (of meals served and eaten [2 comments])
- Education (2 comments)
- Learning model (2 comments)
- Food and staff safety (2 comments)
- Budget (2 comments)

*“No other industry was able to pivot on a dime like we have—all the things we’ve addressed while keeping people safe. I can’t think of another profession that’s done this more than teachers and educators.”*—Superintendent

*“It’s almost daily—in fact, it’s daily—that there is a national media story about school meals being provided to the community and the difference that it’s made. That’s been such a silver lining of this.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“When the schools closed down, what a controversy it was. People couldn’t work; kids were at home. I don’t think there was ever agreement before that schools were an essential function, but this brought it to light.”* —District Administrative Leader

*“It took a pandemic to get there, but before they saw us as an inconvenience, and now they see us as a value-added service.”* —School Nutrition Director

## Permanent Changes

Education, school nutrition, and other district leaders recognized numerous changes that they needed to make in response to COVID-19 that worked well, and they expect many of them will be permanent changes going forward. By far the most common was continuing to utilize digital communication tools, both within teams and within the district. Changes in meal location and school meals for all were two other large areas that many commented on.

Permanent changes shared by district leaders fell under the following categories:

- Communication (45 comments)
- Location (of meals served and eaten [35 comments])
- School Meals for All (25 comments)
- Food (12 comments)
- Foodservice model (12 comments)
- Team (12 comments)
- USDA regulations (8 comments)
- Food and staff safety (6 comments)
- Learning model (5 comments)
- Decision-making (4 comments)
- Partnerships (4 comments)
- Support (3 comments)
- Participation rates (2 comments)

*“We have weekly Zoom meetings with our department. Before we got together [about] once a year. But now we meet weekly, and that’s extremely important to keep our staff connected on what’s going on and opportunities.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“If you ask our elementary school leaders, they’d like to keep school nutrition in the classroom. They’ve said they don’t care if they ever go back to the cafeteria. They feel like there’s community in the classroom.”* —Superintendent

*“And maybe I thought this was a given, so let me say this explicitly: the single greatest silver lining, new thing, pandemic-born benefit that we must keep is free meals, access to all, and no cost to students.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“By law kids have to go to school, but we don’t feed every kid. Our government should be feeding every kid for free if we’re forcing kids to go to school.”* —School Nutrition Director

## Magic Wand

Finally, we asked every participating leader the same closing question: If you had a magic wand, what about school meals would you make a reality five to 10 years from now?

District leaders shared magic-wand responses that fell under the following categories:

- Food (66 comments)
- Foodservice (25 comments)
- School Meals for All (18 comments)
- Education (17 comments)
- Team (12 comments)
- Wellness (9 comments)
- Location (of meals served and eaten [7 comments])
- Org structure (2 comments)
- Participation rates (2 comments)
- Food insecurity (2 comments)
- School community (2 comments)
- Support (2 comments)
- Partnerships (2 comments)
- Budget (2 comments)
- USDA regulations (2 comments)
- Decision-making (1 comment)
- Nutrition (2 comments)

*“Empowering children with the power to make their own meal [with lots of choices] allows them to experiment and learn. I hope to have that for all students.”* —School Nutrition Director

*“I’d also love to have a garden at each of my schools.”* —Superintendent

*“. . . we all know the importance of food and nutrition and learning, but sometimes when you look at the schools, their concentration is academia, so we’ve got to somehow get the administrators to look at [food].”* —School Nutrition Director

*“If we were able to do more cooking experiences—whether in the classroom or afterschool with parent engagement—that would be a big deal to me. It’s not that hard to do if you did it once a month or once every two months.”* —Superintendent

*“Put trust back in the professionals running the programs. Let them do their job.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“I’d love to eliminate competitive foods—not just crap in vending machines. That goes for everything. I don’t think I should be able to sell chips and ice cream and all the à la carte items.”*  
—School Nutrition Director

*“I would like them to have more than 30 minutes for lunch.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“I’d like to do a Monday–Thursday dinner program open to families.”*—Superintendent

*“I would love to see—one of my big goals for years—80–90% scratch cooking. We’ve never gotten to that point yet. I’m actually enrolled in classes to get to that point, so when we see the opportunity to go in that direction we can.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“Valued workforce should exist not only with the people producing the food but our staff preparing it. I’d love to see a sense of respect through wages like any other professional.”*  
—School Nutrition Director

*“I would like us to see a more automated system like you’d see in [a fast casual restaurant] where you go up and preorder on a screen. You could go up and wave IDs and make things go faster. Make things up to date technology-wise.”*—School Nutrition Director

*“With all the money we spend in this country, feeding kids should be a priority. I would like to see all kids eat for free.”*—School Nutrition Director

# What You Can Do

Although we have not emerged from the pandemic yet, virtually every sector nationwide is reflecting on learnings from the past 18 months and reenvisioning what the future could look like. As we consider what we heard and learned from school district leaders, it's clear that school communities also have an extraordinary opportunity to choose both outstanding existing elements of education and school nutrition to carry forward—and what they would like to do differently.

In the following pages, we have provided a variety of action steps that school community members and the greater public can take during this unique moment of evolution for education and school nutrition.

First, we offer a series of conversation starters connected to each insight for education/administrative leaders and school nutrition leaders at the district level. We have seen many district leader relationships strengthened as a result of the pandemic, and these prompts build on that partnership to encourage even more collaboration as it relates to school meals.

Then we share suggested actions that other community members can take. There is a role for everyone—students, education and school nutrition staff, parents and caregivers, and other community members—and at every level of these systems that is foundational to our community health and resilience.

## Recap: Insights and Conversation Starters

These “how might we” questions are intended to be conversation starters in discussions between education leaders and nutrition leaders at the district level as they explore how to take advantage of opportunities that they see and prioritize.

**INSIGHT #1:** Beyond education, schools provide critical community services.

**How might we . . .**

- expand our partnerships and support for providing meals to those in need throughout our community, and better address the challenges of hunger and food insecurity?
  - be prepared for the next pandemic or natural disaster?
  - continue to celebrate the role schools and school meals have played in meeting community need, even after the pandemic?
- 

**INSIGHT #2:** The pandemic forced school nutrition staff to prioritize meal service over meal quality.

**How might we . . .**

- capitalize on the increased visibility of the importance of school meals during the pandemic, as well as the challenges of hunger and food insecurity, to make real and long-lasting improvements to our foodservice program?
  - put in place systems and partnerships now so that we’re well-prepared to continue serving high-quality meals even if another pandemic or other extreme situation arises?
- 

**INSIGHT #3:** “Quality food” is subjective.

**How might we . . .**

- collaborate with our community to create a more expansive definition of quality meals?
  - offer more meals that reflect the cultural diversity of all students within our district?
- 

**INSIGHT #4:** Everyone recognizes that food is critical to learning—but the education system does not currently prioritize school meals.

**How might we . . .**

- better understand the links between food, nutrition, and education outcomes within our district?

- have conversations with teachers to learn about the links they see between nutrition and education and what types of data that would be persuasive evidence within our district?
  - increase investment in the health and development of the whole student, providing meals and mealtime experiences that fuel lifelong health?
- 

**INSIGHT #5:** The nature of school nutrition as a separate and siloed entity in the district leads to most disconnects.

**How might we . . .**

- build on the coordination and alignment between foodservice and district leadership during the pandemic as well as the increased collaboration between foodservice and other departments . . . both at the district and the site level?
  - leverage the experience of COVID-19 and the increased communication and coordination between foodservice and the district, both at the department and the site level?
- 

**INSIGHT #6:** Public education—and therefore school nutrition—is chronically underfunded.

**How might we . . .**

- celebrate and elevate school nutrition staff as valued professional peers?
  - better organize our district foodservice structure and staffing to best meet our needs going forward?
- 

**INSIGHT #7:** Schools and school districts are a microcosm of their communities and society at large.

**How might we . . .**

- continue the unified spirit of the past year and come together as a community to meet challenges and serve our kids?
  - model within our district and our community the type of society we would like to live in?
  - reduce the stigma of eating school meals?
- 

**INSIGHT #8:** School nutrition departments demonstrated their ability to be remarkably innovative, collaborative, and responsive.

**How might we . . .**

- continue to try new ideas and foster a culture of innovation within the district and within foodservice?
  - “rebrand” or reposition foodservice and school meals within the district to improve the perception of the department for students?
  - remake foodservice in the district into students’ favorite restaurant?
- 

**INSIGHT #9:** This is a once-in-a-generation chance to prototype school meals for all for the entire US public school system.

**How might we . . .**

- leverage the rapid innovation of the past year to make critical investments and bold changes within the foodservice program?
- 

**INSIGHT #10:** The next few years will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for transformation in school nutrition operations at school and district levels.

**How might we . . .**

- continue to ensure all students have access to nourishing school meals, free from stigma, no matter what happens at the federal level?
- reintroduce the FRL program to our parents and families and the broader school community in a way that reduces the stigma of eating school meals, if the USDA waivers go away?

# Recommendations

## Teachers, Principals, and School Staff

- Get to know your school's nutrition staff, and build relationships with them as valued and essential members of the community.
- Include school nutrition staff in decision-making processes that impact school meals, the cafeteria, or their experience as school community members (e.g., class and lunch scheduling and emergency drill plans).
- Speak positively to students about school meals and mealtimes as important aspects of the school day for students to nourish themselves and socialize.
- Look for ways to bridge curriculum and food. How might certain lesson plans benefit from an exploration of fruits and vegetables, cooking, or gardening concepts? Is there a way to cocreate a collaborative project with school nutrition staff?

## Cafeteria Staff

- Get to know teachers and other school staff, and build relationships with them as partners in helping students succeed.
- Host a welcome breakfast (when it is safe to do so) at teacher or principal in-service to help them understand how school nutrition directly supports educational goals.

## District Education/Administrative Leaders

- Celebrate the critical role school meals play in supporting education through communications to your school staff, and recognize school nutrition staff as professional partners in helping students succeed.
- Involve school nutrition leadership in discussions about district decisions that impact school meals (e.g., pandemic-related scheduling changes).
- Consider how school nutrition supports the district's strategic goals, and work with the school nutrition team as key partners in achieving those goals.
- Consider how the school nutrition team could assist with district social and emotional learning goals as critical team members who see students daily. Include them in relevant professional development opportunities for these skills, and proactively seek out their feedback.

## School Nutrition Directors

- Meet with a group of principals to understand their priorities and challenges as they relate to school meals, and collaboratively discuss how school nutrition and education staff can work together toward the same goals.

- Strengthen relationships with other district leaders, and discuss how school nutrition does and can contribute to district goals and how district leadership can support the school nutrition department as well.
- Reach out to the community to raise awareness about the importance of school meals through social media and other district-wide communication channels.

### Parents/Caregivers

- Meet with school cafeteria staff to learn how parents can support them. Parents can be powerful allies to school nutrition staff in elevating the importance of school meals during the school day.
- Connect with your school's PTO or PTA to share your priorities and ideas to support joyful, inclusive school meal experiences and to encourage partnership between education and school nutrition sides of the building.
- Meet with your district's superintendent, or attend a school board meeting, and share your enthusiasm for the importance of school meals as an integral part of the school day.

### Students

- If you have ideas to share about what you would like to see in your school meal experience, raise them with your school community leaders: student council, principal, or cafeteria manager.
- Share your ideas with your district's school nutrition director, superintendent, and school board.

Don't know how to get in touch? Ask your teacher or another school staff member for support. You could say something like, "I want to share my feedback about \_\_\_\_\_. I care because \_\_\_\_\_."

### Everyone

The pandemic has highlighted the fact that US public schools are a critical resource for all communities. Whether you are deeply involved in education and school food or haven't stepped inside a cafeteria in decades, you can still have an impact on the future of food in schools.

- Take action to advocate for key policy priorities that impact how students experience school meals. We have a first-in-a-decade opportunity to strengthen school meal programs, and your voice makes a difference. Join FoodCorps in taking action at [foodcorps.org/action](https://www.foodcorps.org/action).
- Share your stories about how nutrition, school meals, or food education has positively impacted your family's life during COVID-19 and beyond.