

Meeting Students' Nutritional Needs During a Pandemic

A Resource for School Superintendents

As more superintendents are making the difficult decision to close school due to COVID-19, a growing number of children are losing access to the school breakfasts and lunches that support their health and well-being. School administrators can mitigate the impact on families by serving meals through the Summer Nutrition Programs during unexpected school closures and working with community partners to ensure that the students' nutritional needs are being met.

Two options — the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option available through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) — are available to schools to receive funding to serve meals and snacks to children when schools are closed. A brief description of the two programs as well as things to consider before implementing are detailed below.

Summer Nutrition Programs: Opportunities

The Summer Nutrition Programs provide sponsors with a reimbursement for every breakfast, lunch, supper, and snack served at sites in eligible areas during unexpected school closures. Currently, eligible meal sites are limited to areas where at least half of the dismissed students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals according to school or census data.

The **Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)** is available to schools, local government agencies, and private nonprofit organizations to feed children during unexpected school closures. Additionally, schools have the option of providing meals through the **Seamless Summer Option through NSLP (SSO)**. This operates similar to SFSP, but with less administrative work. For example, schools may continue using the same meal pattern used during the school year. Schools that use SSO also are reimbursed at the slightly lower NSLP reimbursement rates. Find the current reimbursement rates for SFSP and SSO [here](#).

SFSP and SSO allow most sites to serve a maximum of two meals, or one meal and one snack, per child, per day, in any combination except lunch and supper. The state agency may approve a distribution approach that includes providing meals for multiple days. Schools operating either SSO or SFSP during school closures must still follow meal pattern and record keeping requirements. Schools should consult with their [state child nutrition agency](#) prior to serving meals in order to ensure that the meals are eligible to be reimbursed through SSO or SFSP.

Things to Consider

- USDA-FNS has approved waivers for all administering state agencies to allow sponsors to provide meal service in a non-congregate setting. This means schools may work with their state agency on plans that deliver or provide meals to-go to students.
- *If schools have not previously operated the Summer Nutrition Programs but want to start serving meals during school closures*, consider applying through SSO. As SSO operates through the National School Lunch Program and is aligned with normal school year operations, it is more likely that schools will be able to be approved quickly and begin providing meals.

- *If schools have operated either the SFSP or SSO previously*, and have an existing agreement with the state agency, they should consider implementing the same program during school closures.

Work Collaboratively to Develop a Plan of Action

School districts can work with key community stakeholders, such as summer food sponsors and food banks, to develop a plan to ensure that children’s nutritional needs are met when schools close. In most communities, there are a number of stakeholders who already are experienced with organized meal delivery and distribution (i.e. food banks, meals on wheels, summer meals mobile meals vehicles, food pantries) that can play an important role in the planning. Effective plans should maintain safety and social distancing and include:

- utilization of the Summer Nutrition Programs and other federal nutrition programs;
- the schools or other organizations that are providing meals and where and how those meals are provided to ensure that efforts are complementary. USDA has directed state agencies to ensure that efforts are not duplicative.

Model Programs

Many school districts have set up creative approaches to distribute meals. Some best practices include:

- Provide multiple meals at the same time. This will minimize the logistical challenge of students and/or parents coming to pick up food every day, and will minimize community transmissions.
- Set up meal sites strategically throughout the community (including at schools) to offer ‘grab and go’ meals. Schools have designated pick-up spots outside the school building, as well as drive-thru options. Hold as flexible hours as possible. This enables maximum access to food- insecure families while also improving social distancing.
- Deliver meals using school buses and their regular delivery routes so families can pick up meals at their regular bus stops.
- Deliver meals directly and mobile delivery.

Communications

Streamline messaging to let families know where and how they can access school meals. Schools should utilize all of their communications channels—websites, robocalls, robotexts, press releases, emails—to inform families about the availability of meals, including where and when meals are available. These communications should occur when the schools close and continue throughout the entire time that schools are closed. Schools can work with community partners that can amplify those messages through their distribution channels.

Resources

- USDA Q&A: [COVID-19 Summer Food Service Program \(SFSP\) and Seamless Summer Option \(SSO\) Meal Delivery Using Existing Authority](#)
- USDA Q&A: [Child Nutrition Program Meal Service During COVID-19 Outbreaks](#)
- [FRAC’s summary of school districts and program providers’ efforts to serve meals during school closings](#)

It is important to note that the situation is fluid. FRAC will continue to update this document as things evolve. For additional information on efforts and opportunities to ensure children have access to nutritious meals during COVID-19 school closures, visit [FRAC’s website](#).