

Shut down by coronavirus, schools scramble to feed students

By Corey Mitchell, Education Week on 03.16.20

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All Northshore public schools closed up to two weeks in response to the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, on March 5, 2020, in Bothell, Washington. The district is operating a remote learning program to continue instruction and is distributing meals daily at several sites around the district. Photo: Karen Ducey/Getty Images

With school closures stemming from the novel coronavirus escalating, school leaders across the country must wrestle with another dilemma: if schools shut down, their students may not have access to meals.

Millions of students, in school districts big and small, rely on the free or discounted meals they eat at school. Advocates worry that as more schools close their doors, more children will go hungry.

"These meals are a very big deal," said Joel Berg, chief executive officer of Hunger Free America, a New York-based nonprofit. "Almost 30 million kids a day rely on government-subsidized school meals. If schools are shut down for weeks at a time, we're going to have a serious child hunger crisis."

As of March 9, 507 schools throughout the United States have been closed or are scheduled to close, affecting 363,357 students, according to Education Week's tracking of coronavirus-related

shutdowns.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the federal agency that oversees the nation's school meal programs, has issued guidance instructing schools on how to feed students during unanticipated school closures.

But that doesn't mean school districts have contingency plans or that federal regulations make it easy to get meals to students amid a public health crisis.

Access To Food

In Fremont, Nebraska, the district decided to shut down schools for the week because of a local resident who may have been exposed to the virus. That means roughly 4,300 students are out of school for at least five days, and about 60 percent of the families in the school district are eligible for free or reduced lunch, state data shows.

While the school district does not currently have plans to distribute meals to students, officials are coordinating with the local United Way and food pantries in the region to ensure children in need are not missing meals in case the closure stretches beyond one week.

"Many families rely on the breakfast and lunch that's provided at school," said Christy Fiala, the executive director of the Fremont Area United Way. "Making sure that when schools close unexpectedly close that [families have] access to food is important."

An Agriculture Department memorandum issued in November allows some districts to offer meals using programs created to feed low-income children during the summer. But both programs require "congregate feeding," which provides meals to children in group settings. One practice for preventing the spread of the virus is to reduce large group gatherings.

"Well, if the whole point of closing schools or closing workplaces or campuses is to prevent people from congregating, that really defeats the purpose if people all have to go to a centralized location to get food," Berg said.

In a March 5 letter to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, the School Nutrition Association asked the agency to waive the requirements for congregate feeding and allow meals to be served at closed schools and community sites.

The group also urged the Agriculture Department to allow districts to deliver meals to multiple locations, "minimizing families' dependence on public transportation to access meals."

"Expanding opportunities for school food authorities to serve students during anticipated school closures would help combat food insecurity, prevent massive amounts of food waste and spoilage in school cafeterias nationwide," the letter read, in part.

The Agriculture Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment from Education Week.

In response to the coronavirus, interim guidance developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that schools consider ways to distribute food, such as offering "grab-and-go" bagged lunches or meal delivery, to avoid having students gather in groups.

Over the weekend, the Agriculture Department approved requests by California and Washington state to allow meal services during school closures.

"Schools have become such a hub of nutrition," said Chris Reykdal, the Washington state superintendent of public instruction. "In many of our communities, if the school isn't providing lunch — and sometimes breakfast and lunch — there's a real probability that students will lack nutrition."

"A Basic Need"

Lori Uscher-Pines, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, was among the researchers that led a CDC-backed study on "social distancing" during influenza pandemics, but said the work has relevance to the current outbreak.

The research team explored how practices such as shutting down lunch rooms and mandating that students eat in classrooms or issuing prepacked lunches could slow the spread of the flu. The research team explored the role food plays in public schools.

"Schools have an educational mission, they're not public health organizations," Uscher-Pines said. "Now they're supposed to be in the business of meal delivery. The schools seem to be under pressure to take on a lot of roles."

Coronavirus has caused the most disruptions to schooling in Washington state, where education officials said they've had to grapple with keeping meals flowing to students amid closures.

"We've got to find a model for distribution in a very tough time," Reykdal said. "Districts are trying to figure out how to do that well in an unusual moment where the school itself might be closed for instruction."

In Bothell, Washington, the Northshore School District closed all of its schools on March 5 for up to 14 days. The district began online classes for its students on Monday and provided lunches to students, offering "grab-and-go" meals at 17 school sites.

"We're still servicing students as far as education goes," said Juliana Fisher, the district's food services director. "Food is a basic need and everyone knows that students can't learn if they don't have the nutrition that they need. So we needed to find a way to make that available."

The district has 23,500 students and about 13.5 percent of them — more than 3,000 — qualify for free or reduced lunch, Fisher said. One of the first challenges to making meals available was having staff members in place to prepare and deliver them. She said staff members who felt they were at high-risk for getting the virus could opt out of work.

"One of our biggest concerns was making sure that our staff and our community stay safe," Fisher said. "We also had to determine what staff was available. And so those were the two big things. And then once we had those, we could kind of organize people into groups and work with our transportation team for doing meal delivery."

The district offered two meals options on March 9: orange chicken with rice and steamed carrots or yogurt with sunflower seeds and granola and a side salad of kale for vegetarians.

Students did not have to pre-order. If they showed up, they received a meal, Fisher said.

"Situations like this really show how important it is and how much some families depend on those meals at school," she said.

Quiz

1 Read the following selection from the section "Access To Food."

An Agriculture Department memorandum issued in November allows some districts to offer meals using programs created to feed low-income children during the summer. But both programs require "congregate feeding," which provides meals to children in group settings. One practice for preventing the spread of the virus is to reduce large group gatherings.

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selection above?

- (A) Summer meal programs that focus on congregate feeding are the most efficient way to stop the virus from spreading.
- (B) Summer meal programs that focus on congregate feeding go against guidelines for limiting the spread of the virus.
- (C) Congregate feeding is the only school meals program that has successfully fed students during the school closures.
- (D) Congregate feeding is the only school meals program that has not been tried by the Agriculture Department yet.

2 Which of the following claims does the author support the LEAST?

- (A) Districts are closing down schools in order to limit the spread of coronavirus.
- (B) Districts are implementing different programs to get meals to students during school closures.
- (C) School closures are causing major problems for students who rely on school lunches.
- (D) School closures can lead to extreme amounts of food waste and spoilage.

3 Which sentence BEST explains how the U.S. Department of Agriculture has affected school meal programs during school closures?

- (A) They have made suggestions about best practices but school districts are left to deal with the logistics.
- (B) They have ordered schools to implement "grab-and-go" bagged lunches and meal delivery programs.
- (C) They have advised school districts on how to effectively use public transportation to get meals to students.
- (D) They have denied requests from several states that asked to continue meal services during the closures.

4 What role does the RAND Corporation study play in how school districts are approaching the recent coronavirus outbreak?

- (A) It is a study about how districts are handling the coronavirus outbreak but it has not affected their approach to the problem.
- (B) It is a study about how districts are handling the coronavirus outbreak and it has made schools act more swiftly in their approach to the problem.
- (C) It is a study about social distancing in schools during pandemics that could be applicable to the way schools approach the coronavirus outbreak.
- (D) It is a study about social distancing in schools during pandemics that has caused most school districts to reconsider their approach to the coronavirus outbreak.