Addendum 13

Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together

Connecticut State Department of Education

Guidance and Considerations for School Nutrition Programs for School Year 2020–21

September 3, 2020

School nutrition programs are a key component of the educational environment. Hungry children cannot focus on learning, and school meals protect the most vulnerable children against hunger. School meals boost learning and the research shows that students perform best academically when well nourished. Therefore, ensuring that children have access to healthy and appealing meals while in school is critical, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

As school food service operations prepare to serve meals in a blended learning school environment, school districts will need to consider federal, state, and local regulations, and health and safety guidelines. Districts should consider the resources and flexibilities necessary for transitioning food service operations to implement both on-site and off-site student meal delivery systems at the same time. It is essential that school leaders engage school child nutrition directors in district discussions regarding plans for reopening schools to ensure that students participating in any learning models (in-school, remote learning, or hybrid) have consistent access to healthy meals. Discussions should include:

- planning for space utilization, including outdoor dining space to the extent possible, and school-day scheduling to accommodate concurrent operations for on-site meal provision and consumption, and off-site meal delivery;
- updating school policies, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and trainings to ensure compliance with the federal and state requirements for Child Nutrition Programs;
- utilizing and deploying staff; and
- procuring equipment, supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE), and menu items necessary for meal service.

The guidance below provides additional information on the reopening requirements and considerations for planning school food service operations during school year 2020–21. For questions and technical assistance, please contact the district's assigned school nutrition consultant.

Requirements

Notwithstanding applicable U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) waivers, the following requirements, as outlined in Section 5: Operations Plan of the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together, apply to schools and institutions that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the NSLP, Afterschool Snack Program (ASP), and Special Milk Program (SMP).

- Schools and institutions must continue to determine eligibility for and make available free and reduced-price meals and snacks and free milk to all eligible students.

- Schools and institutions must comply with USDA regulations and policies for meals and milk served through the federal Child Nutrition Programs.
- Schools and institutions that participate in the federal Child Nutrition Programs are required to claim meals and milk provided to eligible students using accurate counting and claiming methods. Additionally, the number of free and reduced-price meals served and claimed for reimbursement must have adequate documentation on file to support the claim.

Considerations

Space Availability and Utilization

- Assess the need for the utilization of alternate buildings and schools for the preparation and provision of meals, due to changes in the alternate use of school classrooms and cafeterias.
- Research the availability of additional equipment necessary to transport food and meals while maintaining hot and cold holding temperatures.
- Consider access to cafeteria dining areas due to utilization of cafeteria space for classes or food preparation, as a result of social distancing for food service staff.
- Consider the use of outdoor dining spaces to the extent possible and as weather permits.

On-site Meal Service *(for students while in school)*

- Determine what meal service delivery model (or combination of models) will be implemented.
    1. **Cafeteria pick-up model:** Students rotate into the cafeteria to retrieve meals and return with meals to their classrooms, eat in the cafeteria, or eat in an outdoor dining space.
    2. **Classroom delivery model:** Meals are delivered directly to classrooms. Students eat in their classrooms.
    3. **Mixed delivery model:** Meal distribution occurs in strategic locations throughout the school. For example, tables with meals are set up in one hallway or outdoor space at a time for each lunch wave. Classes take turns retrieving meals and eating in the outdoor space or returning to their classrooms to consume the meals.
- Instruct students to maintain social distancing and wear masks on the way to the meal service location and while in line. Masks must remain in place until they are seated and begin eating and should be put back on as soon as they are finished eating (or when taking a break from eating).
- Ensure social distancing where feasible through increased spacing, small groups, and limited mixing between groups. Ensure social distancing in cafeteria seating arrangements and in the cafeteria lines. Students should always be facing the same direction in the lines, cafeteria or classrooms during mealtimes.
- Plan for changes due to the physical location of the kitchen facilities and movement of food to alternative serving areas (e.g., lack of elevators).
- Communicate with the local fire marshal regarding movement of food through hallways.
- Plan foot traffic to and from cafeterias and meal service locations, and in cafeteria service lines, for maintenance of social distancing where feasible.
- Utilize designated outdoor dining spaces to the extent possible and as weather permits.
- Schedule staggered meal times to allow for cleaning between meal services.
- Work with school leaders to plan for lunch waves scheduled to serve students in smaller groups.
- Consider options to allow for some meals (breakfast) to be served and consumed in the classroom and some meals (lunch) to be distributed in the cafeteria and/or consumed in other locations.
- Plan for increased table spacing, removing tables, or marking tables as closed to ensure social distancing.

- Identify additional spaces for meal delivery and/or consumption (e.g., outdoor spaces and hallways).
- Utilize single-use, disposable, unitized service items (e.g., prewrapped utensil packs and disposable trays).
- Coordinate vendor delivery schedules and availability of food products and supplies.
- Provide training for staff and teachers (e.g., classroom counting of meals served).
- Develop plans based on staffing availability.
- Ensure training and understanding of food safety (e.g., hot and cold holding temperatures and times).
- Plan for and ensure the provision of meal modifications for students with life-threatening food allergies and other special dietary needs.
- Ensure communication among teachers, staff, and school nurses regarding students with life-threatening food allergies (names, grades, classrooms, allergies, etc.) to inform plans for meal service and where students will consume meals. Structure the use of physical spaces and revise protocols and practices to ensure the safety of students with life-threatening food allergies throughout meal service and consumption.
- Provide access to free potable water during lunch and breakfast (if breakfast is served in the cafeteria).

Off-site Meal Service *(for days students are remote learning)*

- Determine what meal service delivery model (or combination of models) will be implemented.
    1. **Parent/student pick-up on remote learning days:** Continuing curbside pick-up of meals, as implemented for Emergency Meal Service during unanticipated school closures in school year 2019-20.
    2. **Dismissal time distribution:** Handing out meals for the next day or days to students when leaving school to provide meals for remote learning days.
    3. **School bus/school vehicle delivery:** Using bus routes to deliver meals to bus stops, apartment complexes, other centralized locations, and homes.
- Coordinate vendor delivery schedules and availability of food products and supplies.
- Assess and plan for the need for packaging containers for meals prepared for later consumption.
- Plan for necessary hot/cold holding equipment during distribution and delivery.
- Identify strategies to address the needs of students who are unable to access meal distribution sites.
- Consider the availability of buses and other school vehicles to distribute meals off-site.
- Utilize single-use, disposable, unitized service items (e.g., prewrapped utensil packs and disposable trays).
- Provide training for staff and teachers (e.g., classroom counting of meals served).
- Develop plans based on staffing availability.
- Provide households with menus and directions to indicate which food items and portion sizes should be used for each meal.
- Provide clear food preparation and food safety instructions to families, especially the appropriate temperatures for safely reheating foods. Consider providing these instructions via stickers on the containers, fact sheets, and with printed and online menus.
- When providing foods that require refrigeration or further preparation (such as reheating), provide cold-holding and storage instructions and consider whether households have access to the appropriate equipment to safely store foods and prepare meals.

- Plan for and ensure the provision of meal modifications for students with life-threatening food allergies and other special dietary needs.
- Ensure labelling to indicate the potential for the presence of all allergens in food items and meals (including the potential for cross-contamination of foods produced in a facility that may also produce foods containing allergens). For food items going into the home, consider that family members may have different allergies than students and that simple exposure may be life-threatening.

Simultaneous Operation of On-site and Off-site Meal Service

- Reorganize work stations to maintain social distancing, where feasible, for staff during simultaneous meal preparation and production.
- Plan and forecast to ensure the availability of food and supplies (e.g., disposables and transport equipment). Companies may have limited products available, which will impact how meals are provided.
- Plan for the use of space and facilities for simultaneous meal preparation and production for in-school and off-site meals.
- Plan for storage space for whole foods and completed meals (e.g., dry storage, freezers, and refrigerators).
- Consider additional needs for the production and packaging of bulk meals for multiple days.
- Ensure that equipment needed in dual locations for meal service and distribution is available (e.g., milk coolers).
- Assess the potential need for separate counting and claiming systems for on-site and off-site meal provision.
- Ensure meal pattern compliance (based on federal waivers and flexibilities).
- Consider flexible meal service times.
- Staffing
  - Plan for the need for additional staff to operate non-congregate and congregate meal service simultaneously.
  - Plan for ensuring the availability of food service staff to distribute the meals.
  - Schedule to accommodate fluctuations in staffing based on needs for congregate/non-congregate meal service on different days.
  - Consider implementing staggered staff hours and shifts to minimize staff in kitchens.
  - Consider requirements under collective bargaining agreements.
  - Consider how current school staff normally assigned to assist in the cafeteria (e.g., lunch aides and security officers) will be used to assist with the new meal service methods.

Financial Operations

- Budget for an increase in overall costs of operating the Child Nutrition Programs (e.g., increase in food and labor costs, and decreased revenue due to a potential decrease in meal counts and lack of catering and a la carte sales).
- Communicate with school leaders regarding the possible need for board of education subsidies due to losses of revenue sources for child nutrition programs.
- Budget costs for additional equipment for simultaneous meal production.
- Assess the costs for meal transport equipment (e.g., carts and coolers).
- Plan for additional costs associated with the use of single-use, disposable, unitized service items (e.g., prewrapped utensil packs and disposable trays).
- Prepare for increased costs resulting from high demand for packaging and supplies for non-congregate meals.

- Review procurement considerations per federal requirements.
- Assess costs and ensure an adequate supply of PPE.
- Work with contracted vendors to ensure guaranteed pricing on food contracts.
- Plan for the possible increase in food costs if schools cannot implement Offer Versus Serve (OVS).
- Plan for potential differences between prior USDA food orders and adjusted menu needs.

Health, Safety, Cleaning, and Sanitation

- Ensure instructions are provided to students and staff regarding all mitigation strategies (e.g., social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing, etc,)
- Consult with local directors of health for guidance and updates on safety protocols due to COVID-19.
- Determine the need for health permits for additional buildings that will be used for meal service.
- Update standard operating procedures (SOP) for cleaning and disinfecting school kitchens, cafeterias, food warehouses, and central production kitchens.
- Train all employees on health and safety protocols, including correct application of disinfectants and maintaining social distancing where feasible.
- Remove or suspend use of share tables and self-service buffets for food and condiments.
- Consider PPE and hand sanitizer for staff while using point of service (POS) touch pads and consider replacing touch pads with scanners.
- Install physical barriers, such as sneeze guards and partitions, at the POS and other areas where maintaining social distancing is more challenging.
- Ensure cleaning and disinfecting of all tables, chairs, and surfaces between groups of students and meal service times.

Communication with Households

- Notify parents, guardians, and the school community about the planned meal service, what options are available and how to access the meal service.
- Use a variety of communication methods such as social media, newsletters, and school websites.
- Provide households with menus and directions to indicate which food items and portion sizes should be used for each meal, both with the meal service and as part of the menus made available for remote learners.
- Provide clear food preparation and food safety instructions, especially the appropriate temperatures for safely reheating foods, both with the meal service and as part of the menus made available for remote learners.
- Ensure labelling to indicate the potential for the presence of all allergens in food items and meals (including the potential for cross-contamination of foods produced in a facility that may also produce foods containing allergens). For food items going into the home, consider that family members may have different allergies than students and that simple exposure may be life-threatening.

Links to CSDE Resources

CSDE Main Page: COVID-19 Resources for Families and Educators:
https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/COVID19/COVID-19-Resources-for-Families-and-Educators

Operation of Child Nutrition Programs during Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreaks:
https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Nutrition/Child-Nutrition-Programs#coronavirus.

Questions and Answers on Regulatory and Operational Guidance for Reopening School Meal Service in Fall 2020:
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Nutrition/COVID-19/QA_Meal_Service_Reopening_SNP.pdf

Connecticut Department of Public Health Guidance for School Lunch Programs for Local Directors of Health:
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/COVID-19/DPH%20Letter%202020-62%20School%20Food%20Service%20Guidance.pdf%20

Connecticut Department of Public Health Guidance for School Lunch Programs Infographic:
https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/COVID-19/DPH%20Letter%202020-62%20School%20Food%20Service%20Guidance%20Infographic.pdf

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For more information, contact the school nutrition programs staff in the CSDE's Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education, 450 Columbus Blvd., Suite 504, Hartford, CT 06103-1841.

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