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Food Services in a Pandemic— Remote Feeding to Scratch Cooking

School district food services departments around the country turned on a dime to ensure students are receiving nutritious meals throughout the summer and into the fall.

By Allison Ildefonso



Sharon Schaefer, director of nutrition services for Gretna Public Schools in Nebraska, prepares for family meal pickup.

There's no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of school food. When schools across America closed their doors in March, food service teams stepped up to make sure children—and in some cases, communities—were fed.

As many districts were gearing up for spring break, others, within 24–48 hours, turned around an emergency feeding plan. Few anticipated the long-term effects of a virus that had shut down the nation in a matter of days.

Quick Turnaround and Complex Considerations

One of the biggest challenges that districts faced at the start of the pandemic was discovering how to quickly

transition their food program to remote feeding. This situation was a first for everyone and available resources were limited at the time. Many food service directors believed the closures would last for two or three weeks,

with the possibility of an extension.

“This has to be the most stressful situation I have ever endured due to the unknowns,” says Lori Danella, food service director at Lee’s Summit R7 School District in Kansas City, Missouri. “So many families and students rely on us for food, and we are going to do whatever it takes to get them fed.”



Lori Danella

For Danella and her team at Lee’s Summit, strict health and safety protocols were already in place, but what they didn’t anticipate when schools closed was the amount of work and strategizing it would take to configure a new plan for remote feeding—factoring in transportation, inventory, available labor, dispersed poverty in the community, and more.

Fortunately, with support from the School Nutrition Association and fellow school food professionals, Danella was able to implement an operation that ensured Kansas City kids were fed.

Navigating Summer Feeding and National Unrest



Omar Guevara-Soto

Omar Guevara-Soto was serving over 20,000 students breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, for a total of about 55,000 meals a day before the pandemic hit. At Minnesota’s Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), where Guevara-Soto serves as assistant director of culinary and wellness services, 38 of 68 schools participate in Community Eligibility

Provision (CEP), a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas.

Guevara-Soto says that food insecurity grew quickly as closures extended through the end of the school year and into summer. By June, they were handing out 44,000–45,000 meals a day with 50 food pick-up sites and direct transportation to 10 different areas in Minneapolis.

“The first day [in March] we did maybe a thousand meals. By week two, we were already over 20,000,” he says. “You would see entire families coming to pick up the food. Many of them were in the first industries that got hit—the service industry, the hospitality industry—and they didn’t know when their next paycheck was going to come.”

For its *Hero Highlights* series (see sidebar on page 10), The Chef Ann Foundation (CAF), an organization dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient scratch cooking in schools, spoke to Guevara-Soto about his experience tackling the area’s hunger crisis with the addition of national unrest following George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis.

“Minneapolis became the epicenter of despair,” he says. “But we still needed to go out and be there for the community.”

Guevara-Soto found that the staff at MPS wanted to have conversations about racial issues and food equity. When protests started, they recognized that certain areas of the city became food deserts overnight.

“It’s super important that there’s a consistent source

of food access to everyone,” Guevara-Soto says. “Right away, we increased the number of sites within the south-east area—the most affected area of the city.”

Fortunately, MPS is one of the districts in the United States with the resources and background to continue serving high-quality food despite the challenges of COVID-19. The district serves “True Food,” which means all of their meals are cooked without high-fructose corn syrup, trans fats, artificial colors, or preservatives, and much of their produce comes from small sustainable farms in the region. For Guevara-Soto, food quality is just as important as access.

“We’re really proud of what we do, and I hope once we are back in school, we can keep up with this and work on ending that stigma of school lunch,” he says. “We serve good food in schools, and people need to know that.”

A New School Year with Uncertainties—and Potential

In March, the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service approved waivers enabling districts to operate under the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO). This allowed school districts to serve free meals in non-congregate settings, or “remote,” and at school sites as the coronavirus situation unfolded.

By the end of summer, school food teams across the country were standing by for any news or guidance on planning and managing their operation for the forthcoming school year. Many districts were mapping out multiple “what-ifs,” ready to execute one of their varying operational plans dependent on the decision to start the year with in-person learning, home learning, or a hybrid model.

In addition to these unknowns, most school food departments were under stress due to the biggest uncertainty of all: funding. On August 31, they got their answer. The USDA announced that free meals would be extended for all students through as late as December 31, 2020, enabling districts to carry out their plans with some financial reassurance.



Isaiah Ruffin

At Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) in Virginia, Executive Chef **Isaiah Ruffin** has taken time to try out new dishes—particularly from scratch—in preparation for the district’s “Virtual PLUS+” home learning model.

“I’ve been a chef for maybe a dozen years or so. And every position I take, I want to have the biggest impact possible,” Ruffin says. He saw school food work as a way to influence future generations, “not just

from a consumption standpoint, but also as a great way to help [the] local food system.”

Ruffin was the first executive chef in ACPS history. Before the pandemic, he said his goal was to eliminate pre-packaged food from the menu entirely. In response to this year’s unexpected changes and the future of the program, Ruffin is still confident.

“I definitely think it’s possible and something we’re still striving for,” he says. “I’m currently working on a three-year plan to start equipment renovations, staff training, and new menu developments.”

CAF learned about Ruffin’s efforts to transform the district’s food program to incorporate scratch-cooked recipes and sought to find out more about his experience feeding the Alexandria City community during COVID-19.

“Even with the pandemic, a lot of our programs that we were planning are not going to stop,” Ruffin says. “We have a program called Around the World Wednesday. Once a month, I did samples of a dish that was globally inspired, but a plant-based version. That’s something we’ll continue to do throughout the year, even if it’s grab-n-go style.”

Ruffin says that food literacy is just as important as food consumption: “I want people to get smarter with every bite they take.”

Is Scratch Cooking More Important than Ever?

According to Marion Nestle, who studies food and nutrition as a professor at New York University, scratch cooking in schools can improve food quality and gives employees authority in the workplace.

But organizations and communities across the country, including parents and families, are concerned about the pandemic’s effect on the quality and sustainability of school food production.

Since March, the United States has seen a resurgence in pre-packaged, highly processed food being served to kids, especially those most in need. Many districts that made progress moving toward a more environmentally friendly, whole foods-based operation in the past 10 years have had to revert to single-use plastics and frozen or shelf-stable meals, to accommodate remote transportation, distribution, and to-go style programs.

Some districts are still incorporating whatever amount of scratch cooking they can, but others are missing the resources, funding, and expertise needed to ensure children have access to high quality food, especially during a time when feeding models are unlike anything they’ve ever been.

“Alternative learning environments have made it hard for school food teams to determine what feeding models

FOOD SERVICE HERO HIGHLIGHTS

Hero Highlights: Stories from the Field is a multimedia series presented by the Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) with support from Danone North America. The *Hero Highlights* series tells the stories of school food teams as they tackle food insecurity amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including Lori Danella, food service director at Lee’s Summit R7 School District in Kansas City, Missouri; Isaiah Ruffin and Aretha Carrington from Alexandria City Schools in Virginia; and Omar Guevara-Soto, of Minneapolis Public Schools in Minnesota.

Read their stories and others from around the country at www.chefannfoundation.org/knowledge-center/covid-19/hero-highlights

should look like going forward,” says Brandy Dreibelbis, director of school food operations for CAF. “It’s important for districts to understand that healthy food is still possible, despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic.”

One of the most challenging tasks in emergency feeding is identifying scratch cook recipes that can be easily packaged, transported, and stored until ready to eat. Dreibelbis recommends that food service and child nutrition directors who want to incorporate healthier food into their programs keep it simple and start small. Districts can introduce “speed-scratch” items on the menu and package the meals in-house. Dreibelbis is establishing new protocols to safely serve scratch-cooked meals and is working with CAF’s partner districts to provide support.

CAF operates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works with school districts nationwide to help them transition toward sustainable, scratch-cooked, and self-operated models. The organization has added an “Emergency Feeding” section to their online resource hub The Lunch Box (www.thelunchbox.org), the United States’ largest source for scratch cooking in schools, to support districts during the pandemic and beyond.

It’s a crucial time for schools in America, where food service teams are coursing through an unprecedented school year filled with uncertainty and, in some cases, a degree of hope. More than ever, school food teams are gaining recognition for their part in ensuring today’s youth has equal access to fresh, healthy meals so they can thrive mentally, physically, and emotionally.

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