

Optimizing Lessons Learned from COVID-19's Effects on School Nutrition Programs



The closure of US public schools during the COVID-19 public health emergency has affected up to 55 million students, 13.6% of whom come from food insecure households.^{1,2} In the study reported by McLoughlin et al., they remind us of the breadth of services that schools offer to children and families.³ Not only do schools seek to educate and provide opportunities for cognitive and social-emotional growth, they also support physical growth and health, providing nutritional stability and food security for children and families in need. In their work, McLoughlin and colleagues demonstrated both initiative and foresight in examining how COVID-19-related closures of schools may have affected school districts' abilities to continue to provide meals during a public health emergency. They systematically investigated the presence and clarity of child nutrition agencies' communications and guidance aimed at personnel who administer nutrition programs and for children and families who participate in said programs. They focused on availability and location of school meals and the extent to which additional flexibility was permissible to serve children and families during the COVID-19 emergency.

On a positive note, they report that a majority of jurisdictions included information about school meals in their school closure announcements and provided information related to meal site location and content of meals continuing to be offered. However, guidance regarding safe implementation of continued meal provisions and clear information directed towards the families to be served were noted less often. A missed opportunity was the potential to partner with other agencies that fight hunger and food insecurity and to synergize efforts to support those most in need.

Of particular interest is their mention of the Public Charge Rule, which states that immigrants who have received public benefits for 12 months out of any 36-month period may be ineligible to become lawful permanent residents.⁴ Such public benefits include the *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* but not, currently, assistance supplied by school nutrition programs. Thus, I learned that in addition to bolstering food security for the growing number of children and families who find themselves needing help, school meals also represent allowable support for immigrant families who struggle with poverty, and school meals provide this support with fewer potential unintended consequences.

I do not believe that anyone wants to contemplate another year of school closures. That said, many schools remain online or with hybrid online/in-person schedules, and the potential

of closure in the future remains real. Thus, this research calls out to the nutrition community to perform even better in future public health emergencies by defining and articulating guidance for safe implementation of continued provision of school meals such that school personnel and families are protected, by developing clear communications for families who depend upon these services, and by partnering with other local and national organizations to fully and efficiently support children and families.

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