



SAFER SCHOOLS AND CAMPUSES **BEST PRACTICES CLEARINGHOUSE**

Lessons from the Field - Supporting Student Health Through School Nutrition

Wednesday, October 6, 2021 | 3:00 – 3:45 PM ET

Transcript

Tim Duffey:

Good afternoon and welcome everyone to today's Lessons from the Field webinar, supporting student health through school nutrition. On behalf of the US Department of Education, we're pleased to have you join us today. In fact, over 600 people have registered for today's webinar so additional people will likely be joining us as we kick off here with these opening announcements. Thanks to all of you who have already joined online with us. My name is Tim Duffey, training specialist at the National Center on Safe, Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE. And I'll be facilitating today's webinar.

NCSSE is funded by the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Our aim at the center is to build the capacity of state education agencies, districts, and schools to make school climate improvements, foster school safety, and maintain supportive, engaging, and healthy learning environments to support the academic enrichment and success of all students.

To learn more about NCSSE and to access a range of resources that address school climate and conditions for learning, we encourage you to visit our newly designed website. To give you a sense of what the website looks like and what it includes, on the screen now you will see many of our popular products listed on the left side of the screen and an image of our homepage on the right. Please note that all materials you'll see today, including the slides, referenced resources, and the archive version of the recording will be available on the event webpage within this website. In fact, some items, including the slides and speaker bios have already been posted there. Please note also that you can access previous Lessons from the Field sessions by visiting the webinar series' web page, which is also listed here and Daniel will be posting it in the chat for your reference.

Let's move now to look at our agenda for today. So we are just about completed with section one of the agenda, the introduction and our logistics for today. And following that, we'll be kicking off the event with a session addressing how the key factors in serving meals and a dynamic school environment, which I think we can safely say this year is that given the pandemic realities. Following a brief presentation on that content, we'll conduct a panel discussion of all of our presenters in which we will address common questions related to supporting student health through school nutrition. We'll have a brief wrap up and closing, and that will conclude us at 03:45 Eastern time. It's now my great pleasure to introduce Mr. Levi Bohanan, our first speaker. Levi is special assistant in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the US Department of Education. Levi will moderate today's webinar. Levi I turn it over to you.

Levi Bohanan:

Thank you so much, Tim. And welcome everybody to today's webinar. On behalf of the US Department of Education, I want to thank you for taking the time to join us today. Secretary Cardona extends his greetings to each of you, as we gather to continue to explore ways to strengthen our support of student health through school nutrition programs today. All of us at the department are acutely aware of the challenges educators, parents, caretakers, students, and staff have faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We also know that critical lessons have been learned to inform the practice as we have returned to in-person instruction this fall. To showcase effective practices and response to the pandemic, the department established the best practices clearing house whose web address will be posted in the chat box now for your access.

Through the clearing house, the department has done extraordinary work and will continue to provide resources for communities, schools, educators, and families as we work together to reopen our schools for in-person learning, sustain in-person learning and support the needs of all students, especially those most impacted by the pandemic. As an extension of the clearing house, this Lessons from the Field webinar series, which we find ourselves in today, has been part of a federal effort to highlight effective tools, techniques, and strategies, employed by programs and practitioners every day, designed to address challenges as a result of the pandemic and strengthen the resilience of the education system. Today's session is another opportunity for us to continue that journey by exploring strategies for providing student nutrition in a dynamic school environment.

To help us explore the topic, we're joined today by several speakers with significant experience that I know I'm personally excited to hear from and learn more about. We're going to be joined by Madeline Becker from USDA and Tina Namian as well, who share a little bit more information about the programs that USDA runs as well as Neha Cramer from the CDC who will be able to share some updates around CDC guidance. Looking forward to hearing more from them. And without further ado, I would like to introduce Madeline Becker, who we'll have an opportunity to hear from as a part of the presentation from the USDA. So Madeline, I will turn it over to you.

Madeline Becker:

Great. Thank you so much for that introduction Levi. As Levi said, my name is Madeline and I work on school meals policy at USDA. So today I'll give an overview of the waivers and flexibilities that USDA has provided this school year and share best practices for successfully implementing these waivers in the field. And while our focus today is primarily on schools, it's also important to note that many of these waivers also apply to the child and adult care food program, which I know several of you are interested in learning about and which also may operate within school settings.

So before diving in, we want to acknowledge the incredible work of school nutrition staff who manage our programs on the ground. We know that the past year and a half has been incredibly difficult and that school food service staff continue to face many challenges. In the best times, running a school lunch program is a lot of work. And in response to COVID-19, school nutrition professionals had to turn their programs upside down with very little notice. They have been working tirelessly since the early days of the pandemic to ensure that children have access to nutritious meals. We also recognize that school nutrition professionals need more than appreciation. They need support from all of us to be successful. This school year, school nutrition professionals are facing a number of challenges, including staffing issues, supply chain disruptions, and in some areas, adapting to temporary shifts and to hybrid and virtual learning models.

We are committed to doing everything we can to ensure that school nutrition professionals have the tools they need from the USDA to provide a successful meal service this year. I'll discuss some of our strategies in the next few minutes. And during and after the presentation, we hope you'll consider the ways that you can appreciate and support school nutrition professionals in your community too.

Now, I'll share some highlights from our school year 2021-2022 waiver package, which published in April. For the sake of time, we won't discuss everything, just some of the flexibilities we think are especially helpful in providing financial and operational support to schools. Throughout this school year, schools can continue to serve all students free meals through the Seamless Summer option. By not collecting money for meals or attracting student eligibility, schools have maximum flexibility to serve meals in a way that prioritizes health and safety. Schools participating in Seamless Summer will also receive a higher reimbursement rate for their meals, helping to offset the increased costs of providing safe meals during the pandemic. Additionally, schools and childcare operators may continue as non-congregate meal service, mealtime flexibilities, and parent guardian meal pickup as needed. For example, a school that needs to transition to virtual or hybrid learning for a period of time could use these waivers to provide grab and go meals service during that time. We hope these waivers will help to ensure children continue to have access to nutritious meals, no matter what the school year could bring.

We also issued a waiver that allows schools to request flexibility for certain meal pattern requirements, recognizing that some requirements are harder to meet

when providing grab and go or prepacked meals. This waiver covers sodium, whole grains, vegetable subgroups, milk variety, unflavored fluid milk, and planning menus that follow the age grade group combinations. With the exception of sodium, state agencies will consider approval for these flexibilities on a case-by-case basis. For sodium, we have advised states to provide flexibility, regardless of the reasoning given. For safety reasons, many schools are relying on grab and go or shelf stable meals that are pre-packaged, many of which are higher in sodium than the foods that were typically served prior to COVID-19.

We recognize a lot has changed in a short period of time, specifically with the supply chain and strongly encouraged states to grant flexibilities as needed and for a reasonable time period. While states have discretion about the meal pattern waiver request process, we expect it will be a fair process that provides an appropriate amount of flexibility to meet the evolving needs of schools. We also encourage the agencies to use a process that minimizes burden for schools and for their own staff.

We know supply chain challenges are a major concern for schools right now and want to highlight a few more strategies to address these challenges. I'll start by highlighting some options for schools. First, federal procurement regulations provide school food authorities with the flexibility to conduct emergency non-competitive procurements when an urgent need or emergency arises such as the nature to replace missing foods or paper goods with alternative products quickly. This is a standing flexibility and does not require a waiver. Another option for schools is to purchase smaller quantities through local businesses instead of purchasing products in a single large transaction through a broad line distributor. Leveraging local foods may help form new connections with local producers, which can help create a more resilient food system.

USDA regulations also provide flexibility to the milk requirements when there is an emergency. If an emergency temporarily prevents a school or a childcare provider from obtaining a milk delivery, the state agency may allow meals to be served with an alternate form of milk or without fluid milk. Supply chain disruptions caused by COVID-19 would be considered a temporary emergency for the purposes of this flexibility. And finally, we recently issued a waiver giving state agencies discretion not to take fiscal action for meal pattern violations resulting from a supply chain disruption due to COVID-19. Given nationwide supply chain constraints, we are encouraging state agencies to use this flexibility provided in the waiver.

Another challenge facing some schools this year is unanticipated school closures. Unanticipated school closures occur when a school unexpectedly closes and instruction is not provided to children. As a point of clarification, virtual or hybrid learning days are not considered school closures since they are still instructional days. However, we understand that situations may come up where schools unexpectedly need to close and cancel the instructional day completely. We hope these situations will be limited, but want you to know that program operators have options if this does happen. Standard policy allows

summer food service program operations during unanticipated school closures, meaning that non-school sponsors can step in and provide meals to children when school is closed and there is no instruction. Traditionally, this policy has been used when schools closed due to natural disasters or snow days. For this school year, we have issued waivers allowing non-congregate feeding, meals service time flexibility, parent or guardian meal pickup, and site location flexibility for summer food service program operations during unanticipated school closures.

In cases where schools unexpectedly need to close and no instruction is provided, this means that school and non-school sponsors will have the flexibility they need to provide safe socially distant meals to students. To be clear, schools can also choose to continue with the Seamless Summer meal service during unanticipated school closures, using the many flexibilities available to them this school year. Once instruction resumes in any form, the unanticipated school closure ends and schools must return to providing meals through the Seamless Summer option.

Before wrapping up, I'll highlight a few best practices for schools to consider. As we all know too well by this point, we should expect the unexpected. To that end, we are encouraging schools to develop a meal service plan for different learning scenarios. For example, we encourage schools that serve meals at school to be prepared to pivot to grab and go meal service if circumstances change. This would support continued meal access if a school temporarily needs to shift to virtual or hybrid learning. Schools can also partner with community organizations which can serve as meal service sites. Only school food authorities may sponsor the Seamless Summer option, but they can have sites at non-school locations. For example, if some students at a school are learning virtually, the school could host a meal pick up site at a non-school location that is convenient for virtual learners.

As mentioned, community organizations can also step in to serve meals during unanticipated school closures when there is no instruction. Schools could consider working with community organizations to develop a plan for serving meals if an unanticipated school closure occurs. Community organizations can also provide meals and snacks through the child and adult care food programs using the many flexibilities available to them this school year. For example, community organizations can participate in the afterschool meals component of the child and adult care food program and provide meals or snacks to children after the school day.

Finally, we recommend regularly communicating with families, students and the school community about changes to the meal service and menus. School meals might look a little different this year due to challenges with product orders and adjustments to how and where meals are served. Communicating with families can help to manage expectations and promote understanding. Our website has a customizable letter that schools can adapt and share with families for this purpose.

To learn more about the waivers and flexibilities I shared today, please visit our website. A great place to start is our planning for a dynamic school environment webpage, which you can access using the QR code on the screen. This page includes an overview of the flexibilities available this school year, as well as menu planning and procurement strategies. It's also where you'll find the customizable letter that I just mentioned. Through this webpage, you can access her school year 2021-2022 waivers and policy guidance. Our Team Nutrition webpage also has many helpful resources, including a back to school resource kit and several COVID-19 specific resources. We encourage you to check our website regularly as we're always posting new materials. So that's all I have for our prepared remarks today so I will hand it back to Levi for that panel session.

Levi Bohanan:

Thank you so much, Madeline. I am constantly astounded by the sheer span of programs and the reach of the great work of USDA. As I invite Tina and Neha to join us on camera and Madeline to come on camera as well for the panel discussion. I do want to do a couple of things. I want to echo your thanks to the school professionals, school nutrition professionals in particular, for the hard work, and frankly ingenuity that the professional showed to meet the needs of schools and communities. It's been critical over the course of the pandemic, and we are incredibly thankful for the work that they have done. I also want to thank you Madeline for outlining these programs and options for participation. We've heard from schools that these waivers and flexibilities have been critical in helping keep students and families fed when no other programs could. So we're so thankful that you could join us and share the information.

Now, I think we're ready to move on to the panel discussion to address some of the questions that we've received from the field related to meeting the nutritional needs of students. I will probably start with Neha and CDC, if that's okay. We've gotten a couple of questions from the field. We've received some from audience members and frankly I myself have a couple of questions, so excited to learn something new from the panel discussion today. So Neha, like I said, I'd like to start with you. I'm wondering if you could tell us what the CDC recommends for physical distancing during mealtimes.

Neha Cramer:

Yeah. Thanks Levi. That's a great question. In mealtimes in particular during the school day, it's a particularly high-risk situation and that's because masks are removed when you're eating. And as you know, we recommend layering prevention strategies so meaning using multiple prevention strategies at the same time to be as safe as possible. And one of those measures is of course, the use of masks as well as distancing. And when one prevention measure isn't used, it increases the risk of transmission, especially when that prevention measure is masking. So we recommend for meal times a minimum distance of at least six feet during meal times. And that's for any space, that includes classroom, the cafeteria, so on and so forth.

Levi Bohanan:

That's helpful, Neha. And you talked about the layering of mitigation strategies. Where can we find the most up-to-date information on CDC guidelines that outlines some of those strategies?

Neha Cramer: Yeah, great question. So we have our school's landing page and I can pop that link into the chat and on our school's landing page, you'll be able to find our latest guidance for K-12 schools, childcare, early care and education providers, guidance around that. We also have parent ethic use posted on that. And we also have a new toolkit that we posted a few weeks ago, and this toolkit is around identifying cases within the school and what steps administrators can and should take once they've identified a student or a staff member that has tested positive with COVID-19. But I also wanted to note that our healthy schools branch within our division of population health here at CDC is currently updating guidance for school nutrition professionals, which would include guidance, more detailed guidance rather, around mealtimes, along with some mealtime diagrams. So those will also be linked from our school's landing page, and we'll be sure to share once those are posted so you can all disseminate that.

Levi Bohanan: Thank you, Neha. I know those tools are incredibly helpful for schools and help inform practices that happen in classrooms and in school facilities every day so very appreciative of the work that you all are doing. I want to turn it over to USDA for a quick minute and ask a question for Madeline and Tina that we got from an audience member. The question is if our school is operating an open site, can we serve any child from the community? For example, can we serve non-school aged children or children who are homeschooled?

Tina Namian: Sure. And I'm going to take that one. Yes. So if a school is operating an open site, then the regulations require that they serve all children in the community who request a meal. So they would serve everybody, any child that comes to the site would be served a meal. Just to note, schools can also choose to operate closed enrolled sites, which would just be for enrolled students. That's also an option and we really encourage schools to just think about what their community needs are. If there are children in the community who need meals and they are able to offer an open site, then that would be a great choice, but they can choose to just serve their own students in a closed enrolled site.

Levi Bohanan: Thank you, Tina. Was there going to be an updated fact sheet providing information around the extension for USDA free meals waiver?

Madeline Becker: And I can take that one. So it's hard to know for sure which resource that's referring to because we've been issuing resources it feels like nonstop for a year and a half now. But we do know that there was one fact sheet that the Department of Ed and some of our other partners at the Department of Ed worked on last year to help schools manage the lack of free and reduced price data since schools operating under our waivers, aren't accepting applications. We know that that has been an issue and this fact sheet last year was a really helpful resource for schools. So we do know that they're working on updating that. We don't know when it will be published, but when it is, we'll certainly share that with our state agencies and also post the updated version on our website. And just to the question in general, we're also constantly working on new guidance and resources and working to get additional information out to states in schools as well and we'll continue to do that this school year.

Levi Bohanan: Thank you, Tina and Madeline. Neha, I want to come back to you with a question that we got from an audience member around a particular circumstance. The question is my school has tried to maintain six feet of distance and it is not possible. What would the CDC recommend that we do or what mitigation strategies should we focus on if we cannot achieve the recommended distancing?

Neha Cramer: Yeah. So of course with schools back in full in-person capacity, I do realize that six feet is going to be pretty difficult to maintain and when you take distancing away, in remembering that masks are removed, that this does become that much more of a risky situation when eating meals. So I would say that ventilation, improving ventilation with would then become almost the most important prevention measure in my mind. If you can to take mealtimes outside where the risk of transmission is much lower and it may also provide an opportunity to perhaps distance a little bit more between students if you have the space outside. If you can't go outside for whatever reason, thinking about using or utilizing additional spaces other than the cafeteria. So using the gym, library, an auditorium if you have that at your school to help facilitate that distancing and allow for bigger spaces to have some more improved ventilation in those bigger spaces. Of course, opening windows and doors, if it's safe and possible to do so.

And perhaps even staggering those lunchtime so not all students are eating lunch all at the same time. And to remember when you're not actively eating to put that mask back on. So when you're in line, getting your food, or sitting at the table or going to and from the cafeteria to put your mask back on. And of course COVID or not to remember wash your hands and practice those healthy hygiene behaviors, covering those coughs and sneezes. Of course, we want people to do that COVID or non-COVID times so, yeah.

Levi Bohanan: Thank you, Neha, always appreciate a reminder to wash our hands. Madeline and Tina, I would like to go back to you with a question that we got from the audience, a particular set of circumstances around half days. The question is our school has a set number of half days this year, and it is not possible to socially distance in the cafeteria on those days, since all children would have to eat lunch right after school, can we use the waivers to provide to-go meals on those days?

Tina Namian: Sure. So Madeline talked about the non-congregate waivers so this would be an appropriate use of that waiver. Children who are leaving or need to leave for the day, they could get the grab and go meals on those half days. So the non-congregate waiver would allow that on those days. And then when you have full days and everybody's at school, then you just don't need to use that waiver and you can offer congregate meals, but that is an appropriate use of the waiver when you need that flexibility.

Levi Bohanan: Got it. Thank you. How does Seamless Summer participation impact a school's community eligibility provision cycle?

Madeline Becker: Sure. So many people on the call are probably familiar with the community eligibility provision or CEP, but for those who aren't just to give a brief overview of what it is, it's a meal service option that allows schools to provide breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge without collecting school meal applications and CEP schools are then instead reimbursed based on a formula that considers the number of students that participate in other means tested programs, such as SNAP. And participation in CEP occurs on a four year cycle.

So, we have been getting a lot of questions about what the last two years mean for schools that are in CEP schools and maybe were partway through the four-year cycle. So the law requires that that four year cycle lasts for four consecutive school years, meaning that this year and last year would count towards the four year cycle because we can't have those gaps in the middle. It has to be the four consecutive years. So what this means for schools that maybe would have been coming to the end of a four year cycle this year or last year, is that they would need to reelect community eligibility prior to the election deadline for school year 2022-2023. And that election deadline is June 30th each year.

So, what we're encouraging schools to do, whether these are schools that need to reelect CEP or maybe schools that haven't participated before but could be eligible for CEP is to do a direct certification matching throughout this school year so they can have a good percentage...CEP going into next school year. So just doing that matching throughout the school year will get schools in a good position if they're interested in doing or continuing with CEP. And we think this is really important because especially after the two years under the waivers community eligibility and being able to continue to provide all meals at no cost to children would be a great way for schools to transition off the waivers and kind of get back into normal program operation.

Levi Bohanan: Thank you, Madeline. And the next question is a question that I have heard from schools a number of times over the course of this year, particularly around weekend meals, can schools continue to provide weekend meals this school year?

Tina Namian: So I can take that one. This school year, we are not allowing schools generally to provide weekend meals through the Seamless Summer option. Last year, that was an option, but this year we're getting more towards, well, and last year many schools were operating the summer food service program where the rules were a little different. This year, we were trying to get back more towards a normal school year and normally schools can't offer meals on days when they're not providing instruction through our programs. So this summer, or this school year, they can't offer weekend meals through the Seamless Summer option. There are some limited exceptions for like the residential childcare institutions that can always offer weekend meals. They can still do that, but normally schools can't do that.

However, we do have other programs, the child and adult care food program at risk after school care component, that program allows for one meal, well, a

meal and a snack on weekends and any school day, school holidays, that sort of thing. So many schools operate that program and if schools aren't on the program, we encourage them to join that program. You can offer a snack and a supper on school days, and then you can offer a meal and a snack on weekends and holidays.

Levi Bohanan: Got it. And what about bulk meals this school year, Tina and Madeline?

Madeline Becker: Sure. So the waivers that we've mentioned a couple of times, the non-congregate...waivers and mealtime flexibility and parent guardian pickup waivers. Schools that are participating under those waivers would have the option to provide bulk meals for up to five days at a time this school year. So while we wouldn't expect schools to need that if they're serving meals during the school day at school, because students could just receive those meals kind of as normal or as normal as school is this year. In situations where maybe a school does need to do a virtual or hybrid learning for a period of time, bulk meals could be a good option for those schools. A couple of things we like to mention with bulk meals, schools need to make sure that the foods they're providing when they're offering bulk meals are easily identifiable as reimbursable meals. And we have several resources that can be useful for schools that would be interested in this option. So I can drop a link in the chat for anyone who might be interested in learning more about that.

Levi Bohanan: That'd be great, I appreciate it. I think we have time for one more question. So we will end on an issue that is near and dear to my heart, which is early childhood education. I'm wondering Madeline and Tina, are there any new guidelines around USDA that allows early childhood providers to send food snacks home with children around early dismissal or just generally?

Madeline Becker: Yeah. So again, for this one, I'm kind of going back to those same waivers that they've been coming up during the whole pandemic really, but non-congregate, feeding and mealtime, and parent guardian pickup waivers, those are three that do apply to the child and adult care food program. So these would also allow childcare operators participating under those waivers to do to-go meals in that program if needed due to the pandemic.

Levi Bohanan: Got it. Thank you. Well, Madeline, Tina, and Neha, thank you so much for taking the time today. I'm so appreciative of that you were able to join this panel today and share some very important information for the field. Our thanks to CDC, USDA, and of course our colleagues at NCSSE for helping pull this together. And with that, I will happily turn it back over to Tim.

Tim Duffey: Thank you, Levi, and to all the panelists, appreciate immensely that good information on a variety of topics that of course are of high importance to those who are joining us today. So as we close, we're posting a link for this feedback form, it's screen, and it also is Daniel's posting it in the chat. So I encourage all of you who joined us to take just a couple of minutes and provide us with your critical feedback about today's session and to share with us topics and formats for upcoming events that you might prefer. In addition, please visit our website

where today's presentation will be posted, and you can listen to an archived version of this presentation, as well as previous sessions in this series. You'll also be able to see, again, all of the slides that were used today, along with links to the resources referenced throughout this session.

I again want to thank each of our presenters for all your excellent information that you shared with everyone today in this session. And want to thank all of you, some 350 strong, who joined us for today's session to hear this information. And as I mentioned, we will leave the Zoom link open here for a few minutes so, again, you can give us additional feedback and post questions. Thank you for your time today. We greatly appreciate your time and you and we thank you for all you do to provide students with those safe, supportive learning environments. I hope we'll see you on one of our future webinars. Have a great afternoon.