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COVID-19 Taskforce

Phase I

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Applied Research Division

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Institute of Child Nutrition

COVID-19 Taskforce

Phase I

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INSTITUTE OF CHILD NUTRITION COVID-19 TASKFORCE, PHASE I

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, nationwide school closures were one of the first precautions taken to control the spread of the virus. Although education shifted to remote/virtual platforms, it was recommended school nutrition programs (SNP) continue to operate to protect the health of over 21 million low-income children who rely on free or reduced-price school meals as a vital source of nutrition during the school year (Food Research & Action Center, 2020). With limited information on how school nutrition (SN) professionals responded to the unexpected changes of COVID-19, researchers at the Applied Research Division (ARD) of the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) established the COVID-19 Taskforce to accomplish the following research objectives:

1) Investigate the experiences of SNP directors and State agency (SA) staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2) Identify SNP directors and SAs perceived barriers to school meal preparation and service, as well as their ideas and intentions to mitigate challenges and navigate concerns for the 2020–2021 school year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
3) Provide practical applications for these findings through the development of trainings and resources that provide guidance and support for SNP directors in the 2020–2021 school year.

To accomplish these research objectives, focus groups were conducted with SN professionals (n=23) in July 2020. Purposive sampling techniques were used to form three focus groups with SNP directors based on school district enrollment size [large (n=5), medium (n=7), and small (n=6)]. Focus groups included participants across all seven U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regions (Western, Southwest, Southeast, Northeast, Mountain Plains, Midwest, and Mid-Atlantic) and various National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-central locale categories (i.e., city [small, medium, large], suburb [small medium, large], town [fringe, distant and remote], and rural [fringe, distant, remote]). To supplement the information gathered from SNP directors, a fourth focus group was conducted with five (n=5) SA directors representing five USDA regions (Southeast Regional Office, Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, Western Regional Office, Northeast Regional Office, and Mountain Plains Regional Office).

Each focus group lasted 60–90 minutes and was facilitated by an ICN staff member using the Zoom online virtual platform. A member of the research team captured detailed field notes during the focus group discussions, and these field notes were crosschecked against the original audio transcripts, then used during the analysis process. The questioning sequence employed in all focus groups reflected a Pragmatic inquiry tradition, and Grounded Theory Method analysis processes. Descriptive statistics were performed to add context to the qualitative data collection.

Findings from this study shed light on the unique challenges that SN professionals experienced during COVID-19. Because SN professionals had minimal time to prepare, many of the reported challenges revolved around transitioning into and/or developing novel emergency feeding techniques. Due to the fluidity of the situation and a lack of involvement in the planning process, SN professionals also reported facing challenges with preparing for the upcoming school year.

Based on the identification of specific factors that helped to facilitate meal service during this time, it is recommended that SN professionals continue to maintain strong communication with stakeholders during emergency situations. It is also recommended that SNP directors maintain strong fund balances as well as prepare for future situations by developing emergency feeding plans now.

Many SN professionals also reported unforeseen positive aspects from the experience, which could influence how SNPs are looked upon and operate in the future. A positive aspect that was mentioned frequently was how SNPs became a focal point during this time, leading to a greater appreciation for the vital yet often overlooked role of SNP staff. In addition, many SNP directors also reported how the experience brought their team closer together and forced them to break out of silos in order to bridge new partnerships.

Through this research, specific areas were identified where guidance and support can be devoted for the 2020–2021 school year. Based on the identification of these areas, it is recommended that resources and materials be developed to address the following topics related to the training of both foodservice and non-foodservice staff for the upcoming school year:

Audience: Foodservice Staff

- ◊ How to Interpret USDA Waivers
- ◊ How to be prepared if several SN staff gets sick all at once
- ◊ A snapshot of all relevant information for nutrition staff, specifically
- ◊ Civil Rights Training Updates
- ◊ Technical Support
- ◊ Contamination prevention for packaged foods
- ◊ Food safety- meal delivery practices
- ◊ Conducting in-person meetings safely
- ◊ Food planning, procurement, and production in emergencies

Audience: Non-Foodservice Staff

- ◊ Civil Rights Training updates
- ◊ Food Safety-Transporting Food Home
- ◊ Classroom Sanitation
- ◊ Classroom Feeding
- ◊ School Meal components and considerations (simplified)

Although this study provides valuable insight, recognizing the fluidity of a pandemic in terms of guidance, restrictions, and intentions, future research should explore the experience of SNP professionals closer to the start of, and during the 2020–2021 school year to account for the potential variation of challenges and insight available at that time.

Focus groups remain the recommended methodology for conducting this research in the future in order to get the most nationally representative sample of participants and maintain safety for all involved; however, an online survey utilizing responses from this study to craft relevant questioning sequences as a follow-up, might also be a good strategy moving forward. Acknowledging the limitations from this study, there are aspects of the data collection process that should be remedied, one of which would be to allow more time for responses in the focus groups; rather than asking each individual participant a question, the focus group should be facilitated to allow more open-ended conversation among participants. Also, the attendance of a USDA representative on the focus group zoom meetings should be understood as a potential influence on participants' honesty in their feedback and possible frustrations they may want to provide insight on during the study. To remedy this potential influential factor, USDA representatives should not be part of the focus groups with participants.

RESEARCH BRIEF

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research was to explore how SAs and SNP directors were providing meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific objectives were to: (1) Better understand SNP directors and SA staff experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) Identify SNP directors and SA perceived barriers to school meal participation and service, as well as their ideas and intentions to mitigate challenges and navigate concerns for the 2020–2021 school year; and (3) Utilize findings from this study to assist in the development of SNP resources (i.e., fact sheets, tip sheets, trainings, etc.) that provide guidance and support for SNP directors in the 2020–2021 school year.

Method

A qualitative research design was selected for this study. Four focus groups were conducted to explore SNP directors' and SA directors' experiences with school meal service during COVID-19. Purposive sampling was used to identify a nationally representative group of professionals from small, medium, and large-sized school districts with varied degrees of urbanization (i.e., rural, suburban, and city). Researchers employed pragmatic inquiry tradition and the Grounded Theory Method to analyze the data.

Practical Applications

Based on the identification of barriers, challenges, and direct suggestions for trainings by participants, the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) COVID-19 Taskforce provided guidance on applying this information in a practical manner, to fulfill the latter purposes of this study; practical applications are outlined below, including training and communication delivery methods, and topics for both foodservice staff and non-foodservice staff.

Figure 1

Advice/Lessons Learned from SNP Directors about Emergency Meal Service

- ◊ Let go of things you can't control or change, and prioritize focus.
- ◊ Get comfortable saying "I don't know."
- ◊ SN staff are superheroes.
- ◊ Remember that communication takes time.
- ◊ People are willing and want to help during a crisis.
- ◊ It's okay to feed basic/less complex meals to manage financial challenges.

Figure 2

Guidance and Support Suggested by SNP Directors and SAs

Audience: Foodservice Staff

- ◊ How to Interpret USDA Waivers
- ◊ How to be prepared if your staff gets sick all at once
- ◊ A snapshot of all relevant information for nutrition staff, specifically
- ◊ Civil Rights Training Updates
- ◊ Technical Support
- ◊ Contamination prevention for packaged foods
- ◊ Food safety- meal delivery practices
- ◊ Conducting in-person meetings safely
- ◊ Food planning, procurement, and production in emergencies

Audience: Non-Foodservice Staff

- ◊ Civil Rights Training updates
- ◊ Food Safety-Transporting Food Home
- ◊ Classroom Sanitation
- ◊ Classroom Feeding
- ◊ School Meal components and considerations (simplified)

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic brought about swift, unprecedented changes for our nations' schools. As one of the first precautions taken to control the spread of the virus, nationwide school closures presented a multitude of obstacles with minimal time to prepare. Though education transitioned to remote/virtual platforms, it was recommended SNPs continue to operate, protecting the health of more than 21 million low-income children who rely on free or reduced-price meals during the school year (Food Research and Action Center, 2020). Aiding in this effort, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) issued guidance on the recommended school feeding models in the case of unexpected school closures such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO). FNS also introduced waivers to ease some of the barriers preventing schools from distributing meals effectively and efficiently throughout this transition period.

Despite receiving government assistance, school nutrition program (SNP) directors navigating school meal service during the pandemic have expressed numerous concerns including: the hunger and safety of students; the safety and availability of staff; financial losses to their SNP and lack of eligibility for reimbursement; challenges with transportation; loss of staff income; regulatory restrictions on serving students and legal liabilities; and having enough product available (SNA, 2020a; SNA, 2020b). Although USDA issued new waivers and waiver extensions for the 2020a–2021 school year, SNP directors will continue facing unique challenges in operating under a new school reopening model that will likely involve servicing both in-person and virtual students (No Kid Hungry, Center for Best Practices, 2020b). While existing studies have explored the implementation of spring and summer meal services during COVID-19, a gap exists in the literature pertaining to the reopening of schools and how SNP directors plan to navigate the continuation of meal service during this time.

Researchers at the Applied Research Division (ARD) of the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) established the COVID-19 Taskforce to address COVID-19 issues in SNPs. The purpose of this study was to explore how SNP directors and State Agencies (SA) were providing meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific objectives were to: (1) Better understand SNP directors and SA staff experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) Identify SNP directors and SA perceived barriers to school meal participation and service, as well as their ideas and intentions to mitigate challenges and navigate concerns for the fall 2020 school year; and (3) Utilize findings from this study to assist in the development of SNP resources (i.e., fact sheets, tip sheets, trainings, etc.) that provide guidance and support for SNP directors in the 2020–2021 school year.

BACKGROUND

Timeline of Pandemic

In late December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (World Health Organization, 2020) led to the discovery of a novel coronavirus, otherwise known as SARS-CoV-2, and more commonly referred to as COVID-19. On March 13, 2020, United States President Donald Trump announced a national emergency ("Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency", 2020) just two days after the director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic ("WHO Director-General's opening remarks", 2020). The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimated that 107 countries had implemented national school closures related to COVID-19 by March 18th, 2020 (Viner et al., 2020). In the United States, Seattle Public Schools became the first major district to close schools on March 11th, directly preceding the first statewide school closure enforced by Ohio governor Mike Dewine on March 17th. By March 20th, a total of 48 states had announced complete school closures or recommended district closings ("The Coronavirus Spring: The Historic Closing of U.S. Schools (A Timeline)", 2020).

Impact of School Closures on Child Nutrition

During spring 2020, 55.1 million children in 124,000 U.S. schools were reportedly impacted by school closures ("Map: Coronavirus and School Closures", 2020). Schools provide a multitude of essential services for children, including school meals. FNS administers 15 federal nutrition assistance programs including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Together, these programs provide school meals to low-income children during the school year as well as reimbursement for meals and snacks served to eligible children and youth participating in afterschool care programs, day care homes, child care centers, and children residing in emergency shelters (*Child and Adult Care Food Program | USDA-FNS*, 2019). These federally assisted meal programs act as nutritional safety nets by preventing many children from becoming food insecure or lacking consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life (USDA Economic Research Service [ERS], 2020). Food insecurity has been linked to both short- and long-term health consequences (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015).

Child Nutrition Assistance Program Participation

With more than 21 million low-income children relying on free or reduced-price meals during the school year (Food Research and Action Center, 2020), lost access to school meals during unexpected school closures highlights the fragile financial health of families in the federal nutrition safety net (Dunn et al., 2020). In addition to financial health concerns, existing literature shows school closures during pandemics have negative nutritional implications for children who rely on free school meals as an important source of nutrition (Bin Nafisah et al., 2018; Health & Mangtani, 2014; Rashid et al., 2015). To protect the health of all children, it was recommended SNPs continue to operate despite COVID-19-related school closures (Martin & Sorenson, 2020).

In accordance with this recommendation, and as part of a nationwide effort to control the nation's rising food insecurity rates (Kinsey et al., 2020), many local education authorities

(LEAs) continued to provide meals to students during the pandemic. During this time, schools were tasked with "balancing their role of helping to prevent disease transmission with ensuring access to food for children who rely on the federal nutrition safety net" (Dunn et al., 2020).

Guidance and Resources Provided for School Nutrition Programs

USDA

Guidance and resources from a variety of sources became increasingly available to help SNPs through this unprecedented transition. As the federal agency that oversees the nation's school meal programs, the USDA FNS provided some guidance prior to the pandemic: a memorandum to regional and state directors in November 2019 updating guidance on SNP flexibilities during unanticipated school closures (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2019). More specifically, this memo described SNP directors' ability to operate under the SFSP and/or the SSO so they could continue receiving full reimbursement for providing free meals to all children age 18 and under (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2019). In addition, the USDA provided new resources as early as March 9th, 2020 in the form of waiver approvals; the first of many to follow, Congregate Meal waivers allowed SFSP and SSO sponsors to serve meals in non-congregate settings and at school sites during COVID-19-related school closures (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2020b). Following the enactment of the Families First Coronavirus Act on March 18, 2020, the FNS began issuing nationwide waivers that provided SNP directors the flexibility to adapt their traditional meal service models to best accommodate emergency feeding amid the pandemic. To date, 27 nationwide waivers have been made available to states by the USDA, and are presented in **Appendix A.**

Notable waivers that provide key flexibilities and were adopted by nearly all states include: (a) the meal-times waiver, which allowed meals to be served outside of the standard meal time in SNPs; (b) the non-congregate feeding waiver, which allowed non-congregate feeding to occur in SNPs to promote social distancing requirements; (c) the parent/guardian meal pickup waiver, which allowed parents/guardians to pick up meals for their children without the child being present; and (d) the meal pattern waiver, which allowed states to waive certain meal pattern requirement as needed (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2020a).

State Agencies

Acting as a liaison between the USDA FNS at the federal level and the SNP directors operating at the local level (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2017), SAs overseeing SNPs played a pivotal role in facilitating meal service during this time. The complex role of SAs can be categorized into six functional areas as it relates to the administration of SNPs: (1) financial management, (2) personnel management, (3), program management, (4) program and regulatory compliance, (5) technology and data management, and (6) training, technical assistance, and outreach (National Food Service Management Institute, 2013).

These roles became even more important during the pandemic as the USDA FNS continuously issued new waivers to accommodate the needs of SNP directors. Because interpreting the nuances of waivers can be difficult under normal circumstances (Schwabish et al., 2020), it likely became even more challenging for SNP directors amidst the pandemic. Thus, SAs had an important responsibility of interpreting the guidance released by FNS and communicating it to SNP directors to ensure they were operating according to federal guidelines and regulations.

Despite the support of SAs and the waivers issued by FNS, SNP directors still experienced financial challenges due to the extra costs incurred from activities that are not typically accounted for in SN reimbursement rates, such as the purchase of personal protective equipment for SN staff (Schwabish et al., 2020) and the provision of meals to adults (Green & Fadulu, 2020). These challenges led to the establishment of the U.S Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act on March 27, 2020. The CARES Act helped to mitigate the financial losses faced by SNP directors by providing $8.8 billion worth of financial assistance to SNPs. The three streams of funding that were established under the CARES Act to support SNPs are described elsewhere (http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/cares-act-overview-federal-funding-schools-and-school-districts).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

In May 2020, the CDC released considerations for the opening of elementary and high schools in the fall in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2020a). In addition, the agency developed a 9-page checklist for school administrators with policies, procedures, facilities, supplies, and education and training necessary for the safe reopening of schools (CDC, 2020a). In July, the CDC published more resources that emphasized the importance of reopening schools safely for in-person education and provided tips and guidelines on how schools can accomplish that goal (CDC, 2020b). However, amongst these resources, guidance for SNP directors on how to continue school meal service was limited and most were recommended to follow specific SA instruction. Particularly in the early weeks of school closures, SNP directors were given minimal time to put together a plan to convert their prior foodservice models into a model suitable for the unknown future.

National Governors Association (NGA)

The National Governors Association produced memos as early as March 17th discussing school meals for low-income students during COVID-19 closures *(*McBride, 2020*).* As time passed, more resources became available to guide SNP directors, including a resource titled “Thought Starters on Reopening Schools for SY2020–21” by the School Nutrition Association (SNA, 2020c). Most resources provided general guidelines that would require each individual State agency and school district personnel to come up with a plan that best suits their schools and situations.

As spring semesters came to a close, resources began shifting towards school reopening in fall 2020. On July 31st, 2020, the NGA Center for Best Practices produced a policy memo detailing School Nutrition and Meals Programs During K–12 School Reopening (Casalaspi & Kannam, 2020). This resource included expectations of schools and LEAs to develop plans utilizing the recommendations provided for meal consumption during in-person instruction, meal distribution during online learning, health and safety of school foodservice personnel, communications with students and families, and collaborations with key stakeholders (Casalaspi & Kannam, 2020).

Individual State Departments of Education

Some individual state Departments of Education were able to produce and publish resources prior to the NGA memo recognizing all 50 states had released reopening plans and guidance as of July 31, 2020. The Department of Education for individual states including Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Washington released COVID-19 considerations for reopening schools (Ohio Department of Education, 2020; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020; Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020; Tahoe, 2020)

Research Gap

Current literature discussing the experiences of SN professional with COVID-19 is limited. A thorough literature search revealed two articles that directly assessed the impact of COVID-19 on SNPs and responses (SNA, 2020a; SNA, 2020b). The SNA surveyed SN directors from March 12–16 2020 to identify concerns regarding school closures and initial plans to continue foodservice (SNA, 2020a) then again in a follow-up survey in May to understand how programs were feeding students, participation trends, current member concerns, and the financial impacts of COVID-19 closures (SNA, 2020b).

Schwabish et al. (2020) produced an in-depth brief on school districts' responses to how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school meal service utilizing a plethora of information sources and means of data collection, both direct and indirect. These sources included the USDA FNS, school district websites and media reports, nonprofit and advocacy groups, websites, emails, and text messages shared through an informal request on social media platforms, and parents and school district personnel whom they connected with directly. This research produced a useful overview of the circumstance in the early stages of the pandemic, with a focus on policy implications. Recommendations by Schwabish et al. (2020) to include the collection of as much data as feasibly possible to better understand the crisis and propose solutions influenced the development of this research and its overarching objective to support and provide guidance for SNP directors in the wake of COVID-19.

Objectives

Specific objectives in this study were to:

1) Better understand SNP directors and SA staff experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2) Identify SNP directors and SA perceived barriers to school meal participation and service, as well as their ideas and intentions to mitigate challenges and navigate concerns for the fall 2020 schoolyear.
3) Utilize findings from this study to assist in the development of SNP resources (i.e., fact sheets, tip sheets, trainings, etc.) that provide guidance and support for SNP directors in the 2020–2021 school year.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

A qualitative research design was selected for this study, employing focus groups with SNP directors and SAs in respect to their experiences with school meal service during COVID-19. To provide insight into the current situation and manifest strategies to help guide school meal service in the future, explanatory and descriptive research design was used. This approach to inquiry highlights the pragmatic approaches forming the research design. The presentation of this research follows APA guidelines for qualitative and mixed methods reporting (Levitt, 2020).

Researcher Description

The ICN is a federally funded national center dedicated to applied research, education and training, and technical assistance for child nutrition programs. ICN provides research-based education and training resources designed to help district SN directors/supervisors, managers, and nutrition assistants/technicians meet the challenges of the day-to-day operations of successful SNPs. Composed of employees from the ICN, the ICN Applied Research Division, and outside consultation in the area of community nutrition research, the research team began the research process with not only the expertise, but the will to help SNPs in any way possible. This team harbors a range of knowledge and research experience in the areas of child nutrition, SNP service, epidemiology, and community nutrition, which structured and enhanced the data collection and analysis processes in this study. For example, focus group questions were based not only on existing literature and NGA memorandums, but also from informal feedback the ICN had received from SNP personnel during the first weeks of transition in this pandemic.

Sample

The selection of SNP directors was established utilizing the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website (*National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, Part of the U.S. Department of Education*, 2020) and a purposive sampling technique, where potential participants were identified from existing pools of "Orientation to School Nutrition Management" or other training participants. The objective of this sampling technique was to form three groups of SNP directors based on school district student enrollment size (small < 2,800, medium 2,800 – 30,000, large > 30,000) with each group including participants from various USDA regions and NCES urban-centric locale categories (i.e., city [small, medium, large], suburb [small, medium, large], town [fringe, distant, remote], and rural [fringe, distant, remote]). The participants of this study group were chosen to represent a diverse sample of schools/individuals from across the country; similarly, the participants of the SA focus group were chosen to represent a diverse sample of schools from across the country, with each USDA region accounted for by one SA. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern Mississippi. Each participant provided consent prior to participating in the focus group interview.

Recruitment

A letter explaining the purpose and procedures of the study and inviting participation was sent via email to potential focus group participants along with contact information for questions and concerns. The first and second rounds of recruitment for all school district sizes began on June 8th and June 15th, 2020, respectively. Recruitment rounds followed the same procedure, until all focus groups had reached the acceptable size of 5–8 participants.

The invitation explained that both audio and visual elements of the focus group would be recorded and that a representative from USDA FNS would be quietly observing the focus group. A long-form consent was provided to participants detailing the pupose, description, benefits, risks, confidentiality, and participant assurance. Any email correspondence with participants prior to the focus group included a confidentiality statement and contact information for the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee. Acceptance of the invitation signified consent to participate in the study.

Participants

A total of 23 SNP professionals representing all seven USDA regions participated in this study: five SNP directors from large school districts, seven SNP directors from medium size school districts, six SNP directors from small school districts, and five SA child nutrition program directors. Descriptive statistics and distribution of SNP director focus groups can be found in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. In addition, representation of USDA regions in the sample of SA directors can be found in Table 3.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of SNP Director Focus Group Participants – Region, School District Size (based on student enrollment), and Degree of Urbanization (N=18)

Variable	**n**
Student Enrollment	
>30,000	5
2,800 – 30,000	7
<2,8000	6
Region	
SERO	3
NERO	2
WRO	3
MARO	2
MWRO	2
MPRO	4
SWRO	2
Degree of Urbanization	
Suburban – Large	5
Suburban – Small	1
City – Large	3
City – Mid-Size	1
City – Small	2
Town – Distant	1
Town – Remote	2
Rural – Fringe	3

Note: *SERO=South East Regional Office; NERO=Northeast Regional Office; WRO=Western Regional Office MARO=Mid-Atlantic Regional Office; Mid-West Regional Office; MPRO=Mountain Plains Regional Office; Southwest Regional Office*

Table 2

Distribution of SNP Directors Within Focus Groups

Large Size School Districts (> 30,000 Student Enrollment) n=5		**Medium Size School Districts (2,800 - 30,000 Student Enrollment) n=7**		**Small Size School Districts (< 2,800 Student Enrollment) n=6**	
1. SERO	Suburban-large	1. SWRO	Suburban-Large	1. MPRO	Town-Remote
2. SERO	City-Midsize	2. NERO	City-Small	2. MPRO	Town-Remote
3. MWRO	City-Large	3. MARO	Suburb-Large	3. WRO	Rural-Fringe
4. SWRO	City-Large	4. WRO	Town-Distant	4. MWRO	Rural-Fringe
5. MPRO	City-Large	5. WRO	City-Small	5. MARO	Suburb-Large
		6. SERO	Suburban-Large	6. NERO	Rural-Fringe
		7. MPRO	Suburban-Small		

Note: *SERO=South East Regional Office; NERO=Northeast Regional Office; WRO=Western Regional Office MARO=Mid-Atlantic Regional Office; Mid-West Regional Office; MPRO=Mountain Plains Regional Office; Southwest Regional Office*

Table 3

SA Focus Group – Participant Overview (USDA Region) (N=5)

Variable	n
USDA Regions	
NERO	1
WRO	1
MARO	1
MPRO	1
SERO	1

Note: *SERO=South East Regional Office; NERO=Northeast Regional Office; WRO=Western Regional Office MARO=Mid-Atlantic Regional Office; Mid-West Regional Office; MPRO=Mountain Plains Regional Office; Southwest Regional Office*

Data Collection

In an effort to collect information from multiple individuals simultaneously, focus groups were utilized as the method of data collection in this study. The existing literature indicates that focus groups are less threatening to many research participants and help facilitate discussions of perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Two questioning routes were employed, with differing content for the SNP directors and SA directors, respectively. A total of seven questions were asked uniformly of all three SNP director participant groups, while a separate script composed of five questions was used for SA focus group participants. One member of the research team acted as the moderator for all four focus groups, to maintain consistency. The questioning routes for both SNP director and SA focus groups can be found in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

Focus groups were held over a period of four, non-consecutive days, with a duration of 60–90 minutes each. Participants were placed in focus groups based on their respective school size to ensure a communicative environment among participants and limit potential comparisons among school sizes that could be interpreted poorly. This decision was supported by existing literature reporting the sense of belonging to a group increases a participants' sense of cohesiveness and helps them feel safe to share information (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009)

Detailed field notes were captured during the discussion by a member of the research team. These field notes were cross-checked against the original audio transcripts and used during the analysis process. The recording of all focus groups occurred at the consent of participants.

Figure 3

SNP Director Questioning Route

1) Please briefly describe your meal service model (i.e., traditional, grab-n-go, meals in the classroom, etc.) before COVID-19?

2) How has your SNP been preparing and serving school meals as a result of COVID-19?

3) What are some of the lessons you have learned while providing meal service during COVID-19 that will impact your SNP operations in the fall 2020?

4) What are superintendents sharing about the school district's plan for returning in the fall 2020?

5) Please describe in detail your plans for implementing meal service when school resumes in the fall.

6) As a result of COVID 19, several recommendations have been provided to ensure safety procedures are being practiced. Which safety procedures do you foresee being utilized in your SNPs in fall 2020? What processes will you implement to ensure that safety procedures are being followed?
7) What trainings and methods for delivering training do you anticipate will be needed to support child nutrition staff as well as school staff in implementing any procedural SNP changes identified for fall 2020?

Figure 4

SA Questioning Route

1) How are SFAs in your state planning to implement meal service when school resumes in the fall?
2) What are some of the lessons you have learned while providing support for SFAs during COVID-19?
3) Please describe in detail your plans for supporting SFAs in your state when school resumes in the fall.
4) As a result of COVID 19, several recommendations have been provided to ensure safety procedures are being practiced. Which safety procedures do you foresee being utilized in SNPs in fall 2020?
5) What training and methods for delivering training do you anticipate will be needed to support SFAs as well as school staff in implementing any procedural SNP changes identified for fall 2020?

ANALYSIS

Researchers employed Grounded Theory Method (GTM) and pragmatic inquiry tradition to analyze the data. The coding process was performed by three researchers; one transcript was coded individually by two researchers, and the third took both coded versions, assessed them for rater reliability, and identified any areas that needed further discussion amongst researchers to reach agreement. Once the transcripts were re-coded and inter-rater reliability was satisfied, the third researcher created a codebook reflective of the first transcript analysis. The codebook was adapted with the additional analysis of each focus group by the two researchers, and the inter-rater reliability was maintained, giving credibility to the consistency of emerging themes and categories reported in the findings.

Consistent with GTM and constant comparison analysis, researchers identified commonalities within participant responses from focus group transcripts. Next, data were grouped into categories, while generating labels for each category based on their commonalities. The labeled categories were then compared with each other to develop overarching labels reflective of their common meanings, and that continued until a clear hierarchy was formed, revealing central findings. Analyzing one focus group at a time, researchers were able to satisfy the theoretical sampling component of GTM, while avoiding additional sampling (Charmaz, 2000), still assessing the meaningfulness of themes and refining them. Researchers were able to assess if emerging themes were consistent among multiple groups, reach data saturation in general and across groups. Specific questions were asked in such a way to provide description and insight; however, coding categories that were used to create central findings were also further described with simple frequencies to substantiate their degrees of agreement among participants.

FINDINGS

Meal Service Models Before COVID-19

The SNP directors participating in this study employed varying school meal service models prior to COVID-19. Most participants reported using traditional, Grab N' Go, a la carte, and open campus in both lunch and breakfast models. Other elements that were mentioned when describing their meal service were the existence of salad bars and second chance breakfast programs. All SNP directors from large schools reported using traditional service models in some capacity, with other models used less consistently. A la carte, Grab N' Go options, and open campus lunches were other models used in these schools. The majority of breakfast options were traditional, but also included Grab N' Go and classroom eating. Reported school district size and respective meal service models utilized before COVID-19 can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Frequency of School Service Models/Methods Utilized Before COVID-19, and Respective School District Sizes

School Meal Service Models/Methods Utilized Before COVID-19	Number of Schools Employing this Method and (Respective School district Sizes)
Traditional	n=14 (Small=2; Medium=7; Large=5)
Grab N' Go	n=8 (Small=4; Medium=3; Large=1)
Breakfast in classroom	n=8 (Small=3; Medium=3; Large=2
Offer Vs Serve	n=7 (Small=5; Medium=1; Large=1)
A la carte	n=6 (Small=2;Medium=2; Large=2)
Salad bars	n=4 (Small=2; Medium=2)
Second Chance Breakfast	n=3 (Medium=3
Speed-scratch	n=3 (Large=3)
Self-Serve	n=2 (Large=2)
Food court style	n=2 (Medium=2)
Fresh fruit and vegetable program	n=2 (Small=1; Large=1)
Open campus models	n=1 Large=1

(Table 4 continues)

Table 4 (continued)

Frequency of School Service Models/Methods Utilized Before COVID-19, and Respective School District Sizes

School Meal Service Models/Methods Utilized Before COVID-19	Number of Schools Employing this Method and (Respective School district Sizes)
POS	n=1 (Large=1)
Buffet	n=1 (Small=1)
Snack bar	n=1 (Small=1)
Made-to-order deli	n=1 (Small=1)
Ship food to alternative school	n=1 (Small=1)
Central kitchen	n=1 (Small=1)
Disposable materials/no dish machines	n=1 (Medium=1)
Breakfast after Bell	n=1 (Large=1)
Speed lines	n=1 (Medium=1)

Meal Service Models as a Result of COVID-19

Regardless of school district size, the majority of SNP directors in this study (12 of 18) reported having less than a week to prepare and transition their normal school meal service into an emergency feeding program. The transition times for SNP directors are recorded in Table 5.

Although 2–3 days' notice was the norm for preparation/transition time in this study, only five participants emphasized the short notice as a challenge; and of those five participants, four were SNP directors from medium school districts, and one from a large school district.

Table 5

School Closure Dates and Implementation of Emergency Feeding Service

School Closure/Date Emergency Feeding Service Started	Transition Time Total	Number of Schools
"Last minute and/or short notice" (Did not specify)	NA	n=6
March 13th/March 16th	2 days	n=8
March 13th/March 17th	3 days	n=3
March 13th/March 20th	6 days	n=1

Depending on the models utilized prior to COVID-19, some schools were able to adapt to their Emergency Feeding Model with more ease than others, nevertheless the task was not without challenges for any participants' school district. An overview of the Emergency Feeding models by each participant can be found in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6

Frequency of School Meals Service and Distribution Models/Methods Utilized as a Result of COVID-19, with Respective School District Sizes

Method	**n**
Grab N' Go	n=4 (Medium=2; Large=2)
Curbside Pick Up	
• From unspecified location	n=3 (Small=1; Large=2)
• From Site	n=1 (Medium=1)
• From School	n=7 (Small=2; Medium=2; Large=3)
• From Buses	n=3 (Medium =3)
Bus delivery	
• Unspecified	n=2 (Small=1; Large=1)
• Central locations	n=2 (Medium=1; Large=1)
• To Homes	n=4 (Medium=3; Large=1)
• To remote Locations	n=1 (Medium=1)
Tractor-Trailer Delivery	n=1 (Medium=1)
Van Delivery	n=1 (Small=1)
Parent Pick-Up	n=2 (Small=2)
School Feeding Sites	n=9 (Small=2; Medium=3; Large=4)
Summer Feeding Locations	n=1 (Medium=1)
High-Need Site Areas	n=2 (Medium=1; Large=1)
Strategic Location Distribution Sites (Not Schools)	
• Unspecified	n=4 (Small=3; Large=1)
• Boys and Girls Club	n=1 (Medium=1)
• Family Resource Center	n=1 (Medium=1)

Table 7

Food Items Served in School Meals as a Result of COVID-19, with Respective Frequencies and School District Sizes

School Meals Served as a Result of COVID-19	Number of Schools Employing this Method and (Respective School district Sizes)
Pre-Packaged	n=2 (Medium=1; Large=1)
• Unspecified	n=1 (Medium=1)
• Outsourced from National Company	
Cold Meals	n=6 (Small=1; Medium=4; Large=1)
Sandwiches	n=2 (Large=2)
Freezer Items	n=3 (Large=3)
Pre-Heating Items	n=1 (Large=1)
Take n' Bake Lunch	n=1 (Large=1)
Bulk Meals	
• Unspecified Contents	n=1(Small=1)
• Food Boxes Containing Produce and Dairy)	n=1 (Large=1)
• Hot Meals	
• Unspecified	n=5 (Medium=5)
• Hot Lunch	n=1 (Small=1)
• Cooked (Prepared Meals)	n=2 (Small=1; Large=1)
Pre-Prepared/Shelf-Stable	n=1 (Small=1)
Food Already in Storage	n=2 (Medium=2)
Commodity Products	n=1 (Medium=1)

Twelve SNP directors employed strategic school sites as their location for distribution and curbside pick-up throughout the week; consistent with findings from a nationally representative sample survey reporting 68 percent of schools have meals available for daily pickup at school sites (Malkus et al., 2020). Findings from this study show a much larger percentage (n=12) of SNP directors employing the use of buses or vans for meal delivery to students' homes (n=4) or in central location (n=8) when compared to findings from Malkus et al. (2020) reporting 25% of schools employing this method of meal delivery.

Of the respondents who provided specific information about their emergency feeding distribution services, specifically frequency of distribution and quantity of meals provided (n=14), seven reported daily distribution services, and seven reported less than frequent distribution services. The least common distribution model provided one meal daily and was reported by two SNP directors from medium-sized school districts. Distributing daily and providing more than one meal per day was a much more commonly utilized method (n=5) among all three school district sizes; small (n=1), medium (n=2), large (n=2) school districts.

All SNP directors that reported emergency feeding service distribution less than 5–7 days per week provided more than one meal per day (n=7); and among those respondents, medium (n=3), large (n=2), and small (n=2) districts were represented. This is consistent with findings from Malkus et al. (2020) indicating 45 percent of schools offer multiple days to a week of meals at once for pickup at schools. A breakdown of frequency and quantity of emergency feeding services reported in this study is shown in Table 8. A few SNP directors (n=4) representing large (n=1) and small (n=3) school districts did not provide specific information about their emergency feeding services distribution model and were therefore labeled as NA (not applicable) in Table 8.

Table 8

Frequency and Quantity of Emergency Feeding Services (N=18)

Variable	**n**
NA[1]	4
Daily pick up	
1 meal	2
>1 meal	5
Less Than Daily pick up	
>1 meal	7

[1]NA = Specific data not available

Perceived Barriers to School Meal Service During COVID-19

One of the purposes of this study was to better understand the experiences of SNP directors and SA staff during this pandemic. In order to provide the most useful tools and resources, the research staff felt it was necessary to identify barriers and challenges SNP directors and SA staff faced at this time, and those that may continue to be a hindrance in the 2020–2021 school year amidst the pandemic. As this was an unprecedented change for the nations' schools, there were many challenges shared by focus group participants.

In this section, we identify and summarize the barriers and challenges reported by participants. A list of barriers or challenges faced, along with descriptions from the respective participants that identified them, and a frequency count detailing the number of participants who identified that barrier is provided in Table 9. Barriers that are specifically identified as potentially carrying over into the 2020–2021 school year can be found in Table 10.

Table 9

Barriers and Challenges Identified by Focus Group Participants and Respective Quotes from Participants about Barriers

Barriers or Challenges Identified	Exemplary Data
Financial Concerns	
Weak funding balance (n=5)	• Due to director before them • Not breaking even • Close to breaking even, may have short deficit • Should be breaking even by the end • Will be back to zero funds unless receive outside help from care funds
Increased costs (n=4)	• From paying staff and buying goods • Will not be able to pay all employees regardless of working and pay workers extra because it is not financially feasible • Meal count was also a problem • Was not able to provide emergency pay for employees who worked, • Trying to pay employees full salary even if employees had health issues or age restrictions
Decreased revenue (n=3)	• Lost 2.3 mil in revenue • Numbers did go down a lot • Lost millions in paid revenue and a la carte sales and reimbursement • "essentially bankrupt because of the millions lost in paid revenue and sales"
Financial state of district (n=1)	• Don't see a lot of money coming to them because district is in debt currently • Essentially bankrupt because of the millions lost in paid revenue and sale
Decreased funds (n=1)	• Districts received less money (48,000 less in funding
Being a low % free/reduced department (n=1	• Low % Free/Reduced has made it difficult to get reimbursable foods in

(Table 9 continues)

(Table 9 continued)

Barriers and Challenges Identified by Focus Group Participants and Respective Quotes from Participants about Barriers

Barriers or Challenges Identified	Exemplary Data
Limited staffing (n=6)	• Staffing limitations caused a reduction in drive thru pick-up sites • 50% staying home due to fear • Scaled back hours of employees, due to financial strain • 70% of normal nutrition staff workers – essentially (90%) of staff continued to work • Fear of labor issues and potential walkouts by staff due to political climate
Type of meal service before COVID-19 transition/major change in production system (n=5)	• Did not do a lot of pre-packaged meal items prior • Transitioning from scratch cooking to convenience • Served hot meals that required a lot more labor • Sudden change in process that has been in place for years • Developing plans and quickly learn new foodservice practices they never traditionally used before
Lack of advanced notice/adequate preparation time (n=5)	• Only the weekend to prepare • Had only a short time to prepare • Had only 2–3 days to prepare
Limited supplies (n=5)	• Scrambled for packaging and materials although quality was great with outsourced foods, was very expensive • Suffered food shortages from vendor • Competition with larger districts for procurement has been tough • Finding food has been difficult • Getting supplies and making sure they are dated properly has been a challenge

(Table 9 continues)

(Table 9 continued)

Barriers and Challenges Identified by Focus Group Participants and Respective Quotes from Participants about Barriers

Barriers or Challenges Identified	Exemplary Data
High demand/participation in school meals amidst school closures (n=5)	• High need areas opened first but because of such high volume, couldn't sustain • Opened elementary sites first for drive thru pickup then reduced to 26 b/c of overwhelming participation • Demand was too high +panic from COVID-19 had to shut down the 14 schools for Grab N' Go curbside pickup • Served more during COVID-19 than before • Served 3,000 more meals than normal
Uncertainty driven by lack of guidance by upper levels/government (n=3)	• Unsure of what operation will look like in future • Information he has received from leadership (i.e., governor) has lacked substance and has not helped him prepare for opening • "Tornado of guidance" that is occurring and lack of definitive decisions, "does not know what he does not know" • Believes USDA made it more difficult than it needed to be, could make it faster if they remember the intent of the program and maintain integrity
Political aspects (n=3)	• To the point of only having one partner, the political aspect of COVID-19 was difficult to navigate • Politics involved and how a lot of decision are driven by funding • Anxiety is high due to political climate

(Table 9 continues)

(Table 9 continued)

Barriers and Challenges Identified by Focus Group Participants and Respective Quotes from Participants about Barriers

Barriers or Challenges Identified	**Exemplary Data**
Limited space (n=2)	• A lot of schools lacked walk-in cooler or freezers • Having enough storage room is difficult (Brought in coolers from other schools) • Operating from one central kitchen=challenging
Lack of experience/preparation (n=2)	• The participants' district had never dealt with natural disasters or emergency response before, and how dealing with peoples' fears was very difficult. • Although emergency plans were in place in some schools already, lack of experience with pre-packaged goods made the plans harder to carry out
Mental, emotional and physical fatigue of staff (n=1)	• Was relieved when they stopped in the month of July and were able to take a break • Trying to maintain compassion for everyone, especially when dealing with people's fears • Overwhelmed and uncomfortable about current situation and uncertainty around current state
Lack of partnerships available (n=1)	• Usually have 185 partners, had 1(food bank), everyone relied on them, and put a lot of stress on the district

Table 10

Identified Barriers or Challenges That are Expected to Carry Over and Affect the 2020–2021 School Year

Barriers or Challenges Identified	Exemplary Data
Un-involvement in fall re-opening plans (n=6)	• Was involved in decision making process, but had very small contribution (100 people on 4-hour call) • Included in one of five of district's work group • Has not been included in decision making process very much • Was involved in discussion when COVID-19 first started but not involved in recent conversations about how schools were going to open back up in fall • Fall plans created by unions, so protocols are written at very high level • Included to some extent in planning • Concern is that decision will be made and press conference called to cause them to change their plans
Uncertainty (n=4)	• Uncertainty also seemed to stem from fear of spiked cases and high numbers/what that would mean. So, not only if things remained the same but fear and anticipation of things getting worse. • Uncertain of what operation will look like • Flexibility and fluidity of the situation has made it, so he does not know more now than a few months ago • District is very indecisive, terrible indecisive mode • Receiving a lot of conflicting information regarding what should/shouldn't be done for safety protocols • Delayed decision making has led to a rushed procedure and way less time than needed to prepare for schools reopening • Vendors are about to become "undone" takes them 8–10 weeks to prepare and schools cannot provide projections about what they will be doing and what they'll need)

(Table 10 continues)

(Table 10 continued)

Identified Barriers or Challenges That are Expected to Carry Over and Affect the 2020–2021 School Year

Barriers or Challenges Identified	Exemplary Data
Continued loss of employees (n=4)	• Very low on staff and custodial workers • With hybrid model may have difficulty distributing labor among staff • Scheduling labor will be a challenge going into school year, due to small size
High numbers and spikes in cases (n=2)	• Local health department developed model to determine school reopening-may be rapid changes due to spikes • Some of the highest cases in the country, which has led to state of "limbo" about whether or not schools will open
Social distancing (n=1)	• Trying to figure out regional meetings for bringing employees together while social distancing • It is difficult to transition the trainings that teach in-person skills to socially distanced trainings • Social distancing in the kitchen is a challenge due to space and job requirements for cooking • A lot of employees are comfortable within their own group and view themselves as a family; therefore, social distancing isn't strictly practiced

Facilitators from SNP Directors and SAs Focus Groups

Although numerous barriers and challenges were identified among participants, there were factors that promoted success, made things easier, or facilitated the transition (i.e., actions, policies).

Planning and Preparation

Though this may seem rather obvious, the mention of having an emergency plan already in place was crucial to limiting the challenges and barriers SNP directors faced during the first few weeks of COVID-19. Although schools with emergency preparedness plans already in place were chosen strategically as feeding sites by many SNP directors, many came across obstacles related to pre-packed items from lack of experience handling them prior. In addition to having a pre-existing emergency preparedness plan, the location of schools within a district with those plans in place mattered; these were strategically chosen school sites for factors such as population density or relativity to high-need areas in addition to having a pre-existing preparedness plan in place.

Strategic Sites for Feeding

The location of schools was seen as a facilitator for getting meals out to students. Within districts, choosing central locations for Grab N' Go and curbside pick-up was beneficial. However, many participants also mentioned setting up feeding sites strategically within the community to offer a drive-thru pick up service for the meals. Schools were often used as drive-thru sites, as they had the necessary equipment to produce and hold food safely in their storage areas.

Transportation Services

The use of transportation services, mainly school buses provided by the transportation departments, was crucial in delivery of meals to students. Handicap buses were used in addition and found to provide more space to hold the meals for delivery. For rural locations particularly, buses were heavily relied upon as methods of transportation and delivery of meals. Where infrastructure that would allow for the meals to be set up inside for pick up was not feasible, buses held the meals on board.

Staff

While some SNP directors reported retaining all of their staff during these times, others mentioned a heavy reliance on community volunteers or voluntary employees such as custodians, teachers, and bus drivers to distribute and deliver meals to students. All SNP directors emphasized how imperative it was to have a dedicated group of workers and how helpful it was having innovative, creative, and dedicated staff. Partnering with community churches allowed for volunteers to aid with Grab N' Go meal distribution. Boys and Girls Club and family resource center were other helpful partners.

Once the meals were prepared and loaded onto the buses, the methods of pick up from students (curbside pick-up, or even home delivery for those who could not drive to the specified pick-up site) allowed for maintaining social distancing safety measures to minimize contact.

Pre-Packaged Foods/Meals

The transition to utilizing school buses for delivery required a switch to mainly pre-packaged foods such as sandwiches and Grab N' Go items for most schools. Outsourcing from national companies aided schools in serving pre-packaged meals. Others utilized foods found in storage areas, such as the freezers first and sent them out for delivery cold. Schools that initially served pre-heated items soon transitioned to food that could be cooked at home for lunch and cold items for breakfast only. This method of preparation allowed for better food safety compliance when taking into account the travel time of delivery routes and food brought to sites for pick up. Rural areas demonstrated meal preparation that included a week's worth of food delivered at one time.

Storage

Some of the larger schools depended heavily on the warehouse operation connected to their meal services, which provided them with many readily available food options. Foods that were already in storage for some of the medium and small schools were used.

Distribution Models

The transition to an all-convenience model emphasizing premade options was difficult for many schools; however, once put into place, the model was most suitable for the environment. Alternating days of distribution so that meals were served 2 or 3 days out of the week rather than preparing food every day was reportedly helpful; however, not all schools proceeded in that manner. Some maintained food distribution every day. Frequency of distribution affected the types of food provided as well. Cold foods were used primarily when students would pick up lunch and breakfast for two days during one drive through pick up. Timing of food distribution was also very important, and as this evolved from late spring into summer. Serving foods in the morning was helpful to maintaining food safety standards amongst environmental conditions. Summer feeding locations were opened to accommodate pick-ups. Google forms were used to communicate with parents about delivery of meals.

Having a Proactive State Agency

State agencies sending required documentation for waivers facilitated certain meal components, such as vegetables to be waived, which in turn allowed staff to provide meals to students that required less preparation in the kitchen. In turn, by requiring less prep time, staff could produce more food and limit their time in the kitchen, which puts their health at risk. Another waiver allowing parents to pick up meals for students under 18 years of age was helpful to limit the need for delivery. While this was not a waiver, staff were instructed to distribute meals to parents as requested, not requiring verification of their family's meal needs per student.

Budget Management

There was consistent emphasis on maintaining balanced funds to cover costs of operation. Care company [CARES Act: http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/cares-act-overview-federal-funding-schools-and-school-districts) provided by the government helped to cover losses made during this time, and prevent layoffs and pay cuts at the time that allowed schools to continue serving. Participating in the summer meal service program allowed some schools to recover some funds as well.

Lessons Learned

Moving Forward into Fall 2020–2021 Based on Lessons Learned

Information was collected on lessons that SNP directors and SAs learned during COVID-19 that will impact how they operate in the fall. A summary of these lessons is presented below.

SNP Directors

Aspects of preparation, service, and distribution models and methods that were implemented during COVID-19 that SNP directors plan to continue using upon school reopening were placed under the category of "lessons learned" in the analysis of this data. The most notable lesson learned was to stay prepared and proactive; though a vague recommendation, participants mentioned specific facilitators as well, including having an emergency plan already in place; staff communication, and parent communication; balancing funds; a food safety plan, and safety procedures.

Emergency Plan

One of the schools serves as an evacuation site for another school district and therefore already had emergency plans in place, which was seen as extremely helpful in facilitating the preparation and service of school meals while navigating this pandemic. This exemplifies the necessity of all schools having an emergency feeding plan in place. In the evacuation plans, it would be imperative to get partners lined up ahead of time such as food banks, United Way, and vending sources specifically for similar food shortage/distribution situations.

Staff Communication

Utilizing an online interface for staff communication allowed for a higher frequency of communication and provided a safe alternative to meeting in person when it could be avoided. This facilitates the servicing and preparation of food and could be continued in fall. The forced use of these online platforms also allowed for staff to envision communication in a way they had not seen possible prior to COVID-19.

Community/Parent Communication

Maintaining open and reliable lines of communication with the community, as they are often unsure about various rules and regulations of the SNP, will be essential as this transition progresses. This line of communication will also be essential for students engaging in virtual learning so as to choose how they will receive meals. Some SNP directors identified the use of a form that will document meal choices ahead of time to reduce food waste and pick up one day of the week to encompass five breakfast and five lunches. Having personnel focused on marketing and promotion of school meals to the community is another use of this line of communication. Frequent and effective communication with stakeholders will continue to be important.

Fund Balance

There was consistent emphasis on maintaining a fund balance to cover costs of operation. Evaluating assets and liabilities that were acquired during spring and summer emergency feeding models may provide greater insight on how to maintain a fund balance during a disaster in the future.

Safety Procedures

Protective equipment usage was consistently mentioned as a facilitator for preparing and serving meals safely and one that will be necessary to continue into fall 2020. Face masks, face shields and hand sanitizer were the most commonly reported, with slight variations by district.

State Agency (SA)

Due to the nature of their role, all SAs reported learning lessons centered on communication. Through the experience of COVID-19, SAs realized the importance of regular communication with all stakeholders, including SNP directors, internal staff, and superintendents. These lessons shaped many of the plans SAs developed for supporting SNP directors in the fall. A summary of these plans is presented in Table 11 below.

Table 11

SA Plans for Supporting SNP Directors in the 2020–2021 School Year

Plan	Exemplary Data
Hosting task force or focus group meetings with various stakeholders to gather information about school reopening plans and the needs of SNP directors. (n=4)	• Has focus group meetings with these [buy-in] groups as a method of determining what reopening will look like for schools • Through informal focus groups, has identified specific needs for SNP directors (i.e., equipment needs due to change in methods for serving meals) • Started doing informal weekly meeting to learn about what schools are doing • Task force with foodservice directors where they "hash things out" and then distribute that information/strategies to other foodservice directors
Developing webpages to communicate information on COVID-19 as it relates to SNP directors and the public. (n=3)	• Internet site ("sponsor net") that posts information for foodservice directors • Website that includes COVID-19- related information for public • Website that allows counties to learn about resources in their area

(Table 11 continues)

(Table 11 continued)

SA Plans for Supporting SNP Directors in the 2020–2021 School Year

Plan	Exemplary Data
Gathering useful information and resources for SNP directors from various sources. (n=3)	• DOE (Department of Education) developed toolkit that touched on Child Nutrition specifically • First lady has been very involved, developed a Hunger Task Force at the very beginning of the situation • Kentucky releasing reopening guidance documents for foodservice (one for in-person and one for virtual instruction) • Department of Education has formed "Smart Start Group" that allows schools to submit their plans for reopening so they can be evaluated
Using online platforms to maintain regular communication with internal staff and SNP directors. (n=2)	• Weekly update email sent out [to SNP directors] every Monday • Has "Team's account" through Microsoft where they can discuss various topics and do live meetings and demos, has been very helpful for communication
Managing SNP directors activities to ensure they are prepared. (n=2)	• [SNP directors] will be asked to submit proposals for waivers soon so they can start preparing in advance • Asking districts to complete a contingency survey to share their plans in the case of emergency feeding, sudden changes

(Table 11 continues)

(Table 11 continued)

SA Plans for Supporting SNP Directors in the 2020–2021 School Year

Plan	Exemplary Data
Submitting grants to fund the needs of SNP directors (n=1)	• Has submitted grants and identified organizations to help fund these needs
Advocating for SNP directors by requesting certain waivers. (n=1)	• Plan to advocate for SNP directors in two areas: 1) supporting use of SFSP meal pattern instead of NSFP meal pattern (much more simplistic, less waiver requests) and 2) advocating for universal free meals (not financially feasible to provide meals to community, will help with the challenge of distribution)

Plans of SNP Directors for Returning in the Fall 2020

When asked about how SNP directors plan to implement meal service in the fall, SAs mentioned a variety of different meal service options being considered by schools in their state, including classroom feeding and the use of large spaces (i.e., gym, outside) to feed in-person students and methods that were used in the spring/summer (i.e., parent pick-up, meal delivery, etc.) to feed virtual students. However, many SNP directors have not finalized these plans due to uncertainty about school reopening plans. SNP directors that have been more involved in the planning process are preparing by developing different models based on possible reopening scenarios. The following section summarizes the school reopening plans reported by SNP directors in each school district size:

Large

SNP directors do not have definitive plans in place yet but have brainstormed different ways they can operate. Many are trying to push Offer Versus Serve to control costs. They are also considering ways they can continue to serve virtual learners.

Medium

A variety of different meal service options are being considered for every type of school reopening scenario. For hybrid or in-person model, a lot of directors are considering having students go through the cafeteria to receive meals (Grab N' Go style) then returning to the classroom to eat. Some are considering the use of carts for meal delivery to minimize close interactions. For those who do not eat in the classroom, they are considering having kids eat in the cafeteria or other large area (i.e., gym) with social distancing restraints. A lot of schools also have plans in place to feed virtual students, which are likely similar to how meal service was performed during the spring/summer. In terms of the type of food being served, a lot of SNP directors are considering limiting food choices by removing options that would be difficult to maintain, such as salad bars.

Small

For a lot of schools, meal service will vary based on grade level. Most respondents mentioned having students go through a cafeteria service line, but a few respondents mentioned delivering meals directly to students. A lot of respondents mentioned either having the students eat in the classroom or the cafeteria with social distancing restraints. A couple of respondents mentioned pre-packaged items for the type of meals being served. In case of a hybrid model, SNP directors are mainly considering sending students home with food for the days they are not in school or parent pick up, but this remains undecided.

Safety Procedures

SNP directors plan to follow national guidelines for safety (i.e., use of mask/face shield, handwashing, social distancing, employee symptom check) and are trying to anticipate and prepare for new challenges that may come with this (i.e., costs, non-food-friendly germicide, social distancing in the kitchen). Some mentioned that they are planning to update manuals to incorporate new safety procedures that will be relevant in light of COVID-19 and considering having a back-up team in place in case of sickness among staff.

To assist SNP directors with following national safety guidelines, SAs are maintaining regular communication with the Department of Health to ensure SNP directors receive the latest guidance pertaining to safety recommendations. They are also taking steps to ensure SNP directors have access to the relevant trainings they will need to prepare for operations in the fall (i.e., trainings for non-foodservice staff, classroom feeding training, and civil rights training).

Training and Resource Recommendations from SNP Directors and SAs

Of the SNP directors and SAs participating in this study (N=23), three continue to communicate with their staff and hold trainings through in-person meetings. These participants reported small enough staff numbers to comply with social distancing guidelines in person (small district, small nutrition department, etc.). Print materials are necessary for those holding in-person meetings and trainings, and also those lacking technology resources or operating knowledge for virtual/online platforms, and for tangible/visual information tools such as infographics or flyers.

Twenty utilize virtual/online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Soapbox, and YouTube for communication and training purposes. While videos are the predominant training mode/communication platform, it is important that training and informational videos relay complex information in a direct, attention-grabbing, and quick manner (roughly 15 minutes duration), including step-by-step processes when necessary.

Based on barriers reported by SNP directors, some specific challenges that could be addressed through expertise guided trainings and or resource development can be found in Table 12.

Table 12

Training and Resource Suggestions (Categorized by Audience and Subject Matter)

Audience: Foodservice Staff

Subject: Administrative/General

- Interpreting USDA waivers – *How to access, and where in the document, to find the most relevant information*
- Creating a back-up team – *How to assemble additional (back-up) nutrition staff in case of sickness among current staff*
- Relevant information resource – *Snapshot of updates and information relevant to nutrition staff, specifically*
- Updated Civil Rights training and information
- Technical Support
    - *Recommended as print resource*
    - *How to operate a computer*
- Instructional packet in case of emergency shut down (Spanish and English Translations)

Subject: Food Safety

- Safety/sanitation protocols
    - *Quick, reference materials*
    - *One-page infographic/visual flyer*
- Contamination Prevention – *How to package food to prevent contamination*
- Meal Delivery – *Best practices and methods for maintaining food safety and personal safety while delivering meals to children at home*

Subject: Personal Safety

- How to conduct in-person meetings safely

(Table 12 continues)

(Table 12 continued)

Training and Resource Suggestions (Categorized by Audience and Subject Matter)

Audience: Foodservice Staff

Subject: Food Planning, Procurement and Production

- Operations out of one central Kitchen (best practices)
- Menu Building using:
  - *Bulk meals*
  - *Pre-packaged meals*
  - *Temperature-sensitive meals*
  - *Only what is in storage*
  - *Dry products*
- How to fight food boredom in students while limiting procurement expenses
- Ingredient Substitutions – *How to plan ahead with ingredient substitutions in case of unforeseen vending obstacles*
- Locally Sourced Foods – *How to preserve the integrity of the program while also incorporating locally sourced foods*
- Low percentage of Free/ Reduced Lunch Rate – *Specific guidance on how to maintain/increase purchasing rate while limiting procurement expenses for schools with low rates of free/reduced price lunches*
- Locating Vendors – *How to locate the best vendor options for your school and work through some of the challenges of competing with other (or larger) districts*

Audience: Non-Food Service Staff

Subject: Administrative/General

- Civil Rights Training and informational resources for all staff/community members handling food

Subject: Food Safety

- Informational resource for children on transporting food home safely
- Video/training for teachers on sanitation and food in the classroom
- Video/training for teachers on classroom feeding, with considerations and recommendations
-

Subject: School Meal Components and Considerations

- Explanatory video for teachers about school meal components and considerations for school
- Manual developed for distribution to community members with simplified explanation of school meal components and considerations
-

LIMITATIONS

Data collection procedures were limited by the environmental circumstances brought forth by COVID-19. The timing of this data collection, as with most disaster-preparedness and response research, presented fluidity in findings and many questions that could not be answered simply because the participants did not know. Participants' responses when referring to plans for the future exemplified this. Specifically, some schools mentioned that it takes 8–10 weeks to prepare for school meals under normal circumstances, and in the current ever-changing conditions, schools cannot provide projections about what they will be doing or what they will need for fall reopening. The urgency to complete data collection and produce relevant resources in response to concerns that were expressed during the study limited researchers' recruitment and participation numbers, as well as the depth of questions that could be asked during focus groups. The adaptation to an online platform may have hindered the normally 'conversational tone' brought forth in a focus group, and future use of this method might involve a more random pattern for questions being asked to participants instead of following a specific order. The methodology used to conduct focus groups over zoom is not well cited in the existing literature when referring to disasters and emergency preparedness strategies, which can be seen as a limitation during this study. While the novelty of using these methods may be limitations, the timeliness of the research prevented researchers from waiting to utilize traditional methods of inquiry.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study shed light on the unique challenges that SNP professionals experienced during COVID-19. Due to the limited amount of time that SNP professionals had to prepare, many of the challenges revolved around transitioning into and/or developing emergency feeding techniques that were employed to facilitate the ongoing operations of school meal service during this time. SN professionals also reporting facing challenges with preparing for the upcoming school year due to the fluidity of the situation and a lack of involvement in the planning process. Challenges mentioned in these focus groups are consistent with those reported in a survey taken at the beginning of the pandemic by SNA, including: Financial losses to SNP; staff safety, availability of products and vendors; staff availability; regulatory restrictions on serving students during closures; and loss of staff income (SNA, 2020a). Existing literature also mentioned community leaders turning to schools to offer meals to parents as an important strategy for mitigating the food insecurity vulnerabilities affecting high-risk families under stay-at-home orders (Schwabish, 2020). Though participants in this study did not identify their involvement with feeding parents within the community or the costs incurred to cover unreimbursed expenses such as these, future research should address this challenge, as existing literature shows funding concerns are expressed frequently by SNP directors at this time.

Based on the identification of specific factors that helped to facilitate meal service during this time, it is recommended that SN professionals continue to maintain strong communication with stakeholders during emergency situations. It is also recommended that SNP directors maintain strong fund balances as well as develop emergency feeding plans and safety procedures in order to stay prepared for future circumstances like this.

Many SN professionals also reported unforeseen positive aspects from the experience that could potentially influence how SNPs are looked upon and operate in the future. A positive aspect that was mentioned frequently was how the SNP became a focal point during this time, leading to a greater appreciation for the vital yet often overlooked role of SN staff. In addition, many SNP directors also reported how the experience brought their team closer together and forced them to break out of silos in order to bridge new partnerships.

Through this research, specific areas were identified where guidance and support can be devoted for the 2020–2021 school year. Based on the identification of these areas, it is recommended that resources and materials be developed to address the topics outlined in Table 12 related to the preparation of both foodservice and non-foodservice for the upcoming school year.

Due in part to the researchers' prominent objective of developing and distributing training and resource materials based on findings from this study, and limitations in the current assessment methods feasible and available during a pandemic, researchers did not attempt to establish correlations or causal relationships between environmental aspects of the pandemic, distribution of emergency feeding services, and behaviors of SN professionals in this study. Recognizing the fluidity of a pandemic in terms of guidance, restrictions and intentions, future research should explore the experience of SN professionals closer to the start of and during the fall 2020–2021 school year, to account for the potential variation of challenges and insight available at that time.

Focus groups remain the recommended methodology for conducting this research in the future in order to get the most nationally representative sample of participants and maintain safety for all involved.; however, an online survey utilizing responses from this study to craft relevant questioning sequences as a follow up, might also be a good strategy moving forward. Acknowledging the limitations from this study, there are aspects of the data collection process that should be remedied, one of which would be to allow for more time for responses in the focus groups; rather than asking each individual participant a question, the focus group would possess a much more conversational structure and dialogue among participants. Also, the attendance of a USDA representative on the focus group zoom meetings should be understood as a potential influence on participants' honesty in their feedback and possible frustrations they may want to provide insight on during the study. To remedy this potential influential factor, USDA representatives should not be part of the focus groups with participants.

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APPENDIX A

USDA Child Nutrition Waivers and Flexibilities

Nationwide Waivers	
***Meal Service Time Restrictions in SFSP and NSLP SSO** *Extension 3:* *Effective August 31 – December 31, 2020*	Letting meals be served to kids outside traditional meal times to maximize flexibility for meal pick-up
***Non-Congregate Feeding in SFSP and NSLP SSO** *Extension 4:* *Effective August 31 – December 31, 2020*	Allowing meals to be served in non-group settings to support social distancing in NSLP, SBP, SFSP, and CACFP
***Parent/Guardian Meal Pick-Up Waiver** *Extension 4:* *Effective August 31 – December 31, 2020*	Allowing parents/guardians to pick-up meals and bring them home to their children
***Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and Summer Food Service Operations** *Effective through December 2020*	Allowing SFSP and Seamless Summer Option operations to continue
60-Day Reporting Waiver	Extending the 60-day reporting deadline for all state agencies, school food authorities, and CACFP and SFSP sponsoring organizations for January and February 2020
After School Activity Waiver *Effective March 20 – June 30, 2020*	Paused requirements for enrichment activities to accompany afterschool meals & snacks
Area Eligibility Waiver *Extended through December 31*	Working with states to increase the availability of meal sites
Area Eligibility for Closed Enrolled Sites *Effective until December 31, 2020*	Allowing closed enrolled SFSP or SSO sites to use area eligibility without collecting income eligibility applications
Child Nutrition Monitoring *Extension 2* *Effective through June 30, 2021*	Flexibilities provided for certain monitoring and review requirements for child nutrition program

<table>
<tr>
<td>Community Eligibility Provision Data Waiver
Effective as of March 25, 2020</td>
<td>Extends Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) election, notification, and reporting and deadlines for school year 2020–21:
<table>
<tr><th>CEP requirement</th><th>Waiver Deadline</th></tr>
<tr><td>Data used to calculate ISP</td><td>April 1 – June 30, 2020</td></tr>
<tr><td>LEA Notification</td><td>June 15, 2020</td></tr>
<tr><td>State Agency Notification</td><td>June 15, 2020</td></tr>
<tr><td>State Agency Publication</td><td>June 30, 2020</td></tr>
<tr><td>Elect CEP for following SY</td><td>August 31, 2020</td></tr>
</table>
</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Service Management Company Contract Duration Requirements
Effective July 1, 2020 – June 20, 2021</td>
<td>Waiving food service management company contracts duration requirements for all SAs, SNP directors, and SFSP sponsors. FSMC contracts that may expire by or around June 30, 2020 may be extended through school year 2020–2021 (June 30, 2021).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local School Wellness Assessments
Effective April 23, 2020 – June 30, 2021</td>
<td>Supports schools unable to complete a triennial assessment of the local school wellness policies by June 20, 2020 due to school closures with state agencies that have LEAs administering the NSLP and/or SBP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meal Pattern Waiver
Extension 7:
Effective August 31 – December 31, 2020</td>
<td>Giving states the flexibility to serve meals that do not meet meal pattern requirements when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Versus Serve in Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
Effective April 21, 2020 – December 31, 2020</td>
<td>Allows offer versus serve flexibilities in the Summer Food Service Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Versus Serve Flexibility for Senior High Schools in NSLP School Year 2020–21
Effective July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021</td>
<td>Waives the requirement to serve meals using offer versus serve principles to all senior high school students</td>
</tr>
</table>

Pandemic EBT *Issued April 15, 2020 with a recommended, state dictated expungement date 365 days after issuance*	Allowing states to provide benefits (similar to SNAP or "food stamps") to children who normally receive free or reduced-price school meals
Pre-Approval Flexibility *Effective August 31, 2020 through December 31, 2020*	Allowing reimbursements for meals served at a site before the sponsor has received written notification of approval for participation in the program, and waiving the requirement that SAs pre-approve SFSP sponsors and sites
Unexpected School Closures *Effective March 9, 2020*	In the early days of the pandemic response, FNS provided guidance and flexibility regarding where and how school meals could be served during closures.
Additional Flexibilities	
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Alternate Sites Waiver	Allowing approved school food authorities to offer FFVP foods from elementary schools closed due to COVID-19 at SSO and SFSP sites operating during school closures.
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program Alternate Sites Waiver SY 2020–21	Allowing approved school food authorities to offer FFVP foods at alternate sites through June 30, 2021
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Parent Pick-Up Waiver	Allows State agencies to approve participating school food authorities to distribute FFVP foods to a parent or guardian to take home to their children during an unanticipated school closure due to the novel coronavirus
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Parent Pick-Up Waiver SY 2020–21	Allowing parents/guardians to pick-up FFVP foods and bring them home to their children through June 30, 2020
Minimum Administrative Review Flexibilities	Waiving certain requirements for administrative reviews in cases where an insufficient number of the School Food Authorities' schools are operating
Provision 2 Base Year	FNS is granting requests for waivers for schools that were conducting a Provision 2 base year in SY 2019–2020 to develop their claiming percentage using data collected when school was in full operation.

SFSP SNP Director Sponsor Review Waiver	FNS is waiving the review requirement for experienced SNP directors that operated the Summer Food Service Program as a new sponsor during an unanticipated school closure.
SMP Non-Congregate Waiver SY 2020–21	Allowing state-approved Special Milk Program operators, in good standing, to be reimbursed for milk served in non-congregate settings
SMP Parent Pick-Up SY 2020–21	Allowing state-approved Special Milk Program operators to waive the requirement that milk may only be provided to students during non-congregate meal services.

APPENDIX B

Training/Resource Suggestions Categorized by Audience and Subject Matter

Audience: Foodservice Staff

Subject: Administrative/General

- Interpreting USDA waivers
  - How to access, and where in the document, to find the most relevant information
- Creating a back-up team
  - How to assemble additional (back-up) nutrition staff in case of sickness among current staff
- Relevant information resource
  - Snapshot of updates and information relevant to nutrition staff, specifically
- Civil Rights
  - Updated Civil Rights training and information
- Technical Support *Recommended as print resource
  - How to operate a computer (expanding on other technical issues)
- Instructional packet in case of emergency shut down (Spanish and English Translations)

Subject: Food Safety

- Safety/sanitation protocols
  - Quick, Reference Materials
  - One-Page Infographic/Visual Flyer
- Contamination Prevention
  - How to package food to prevent contamination
- Meal Delivery
  - Best practices and methods for maintaining food safety and personal safety while delivering meals to children at home

Subject: Personal Safety

- In-person meetings
  - How to conduct in person meetings safely

Subject: Food Planning, Procurement and Production

- Operations out of one central Kitchen
  - Best Practices
- Menu Building
  - How to build a menu using:
    - Bulk Meals
    - Pre-Packaged Meals
    - Temperature Sensitive Meals
    - Only what you already have in storage
    - More dry products
- Fighting food boredom
  - How to fight food boredom in students while limiting procurement expenses
- Ingredient Substitutions
  - How to plan ahead with ingredient substitutions in case of unforeseen vending obstacles
- Locally Sourced Foods

    - How to preserve the integrity of the program while also incorporating locally sourced foods
- Low percentage of Free/ Reduced Lunch Rate
    - Specific guidance on how to maintain/increase purchasing rate while limiting procurement expenses for schools with low rates of free/reduced price lunches
- Locating Vendors
    - How to locate the best vendor options for your school and work through some of the challenges of competing with other (or larger) districts

Audience: Non-Foodservice Staff

Subject: Administrative/General

- Civil Rights Training
    - Civil Rights Training and informational resources for all staff/community members handling food

Subject: Food Safety

- Transporting Food Home
    - Informational resource for children on transporting food home safely
- Classroom Sanitation
    - Video/training for teachers on sanitation and food in the classroom
- Classroom Feeding
    - Video/training for teachers on classroom feeding, with considerations and Recommendations

Subject: Meal Components and Considerations

- School Meal components
    - Explanatory video for teachers about school meal components and considerations for school
    - Manual developed for distribution to community members with simplified explanation of school meal components and considerations

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