



COVID-19 Considerations for Reopening Schools: Food Service Operations – USDA School Meal Programs

June 22, 2020

As districts look forward to the start of the 2020-2021 school year, food service staff need to begin planning for necessary adjustments to food service. Multiple scenarios are being considered for the upcoming school year. There have been many questions about how best to accomplish this amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the unknown circumstances that likely will exist in the fall. This guidance will assist schools and districts in their planning for the delivery of food services during the 2020-2021 school year.

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Introduction

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) released [initial guidance](#) on how to comply with health and safety guidelines amid the COVID-19 pandemic to help schools begin this planning. This guidance, meant to help protect students and staff, included critical information that will be necessary to review for your food service operations. This Food Service Operations guidance should be used as a companion piece to the initial guidance. This is based upon current information that exists, including expiration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nationwide waivers. The non-congregate waiver, among others, expires on Aug. 31, 2020. In order to develop a sustainable food service plan that will be ready to implement when school opens, it is recommended that your plan focus on food service operations inside the school buildings and that you develop ancillary plans in the event that the USDA extends waivers beyond the current expiration dates. KDE's Division of School and Community Nutrition will continue to distribute the most current flexibilities as they become available.

The initial guidance outlined that each district and school will need to come up with its own individual plan given the number of students and layout of school buildings, and the same consideration will be necessary regarding food service. The building layout, including that of the kitchen and cafeteria, will be a key factor in determining your food service plan.

Prior to finalizing and announcing your plan, it is recommended that you consult with your local public health officials to ensure you have properly prepared and have not missed any important considerations that could affect your community. In addition, be sure to check the daily actions and orders issued by Gov. Andy Beshear.

Meal Service Environment

Meal Service Methods

Identify meal service methods that will enable all students to have access to program meals while complying with physical distancing guidelines, and that will enable contact tracing to occur if an individual receives a positive diagnosis. To achieve this goal, multiple meal service methods during a single meal service period may need to be utilized with different groups of children within the school building. Methods may include:

- Serving meals in classrooms
- Serving meals in other areas in the building, such as the gymnasium
- Providing “Grab and Go” meals in the cafeteria or hallways



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Consideration should be given to ensuring accurate point-of-service meal counts can be obtained in accordance with meal counting and claiming requirements for the meal service method(s) utilized.

Logistics

Meals should be served in supervised, non-congregate settings that enable social distancing guidelines to be followed. Pre-planning and thoughtful consideration on the delivery and service of meals to individual groups of students is needed to enable contact tracing. Additional equipment and resources are needed to implement meal service methods that take place outside of the cafeteria, or when multiple meal service methods are utilized within a single meal service period.

Strategies to achieve these goals may include:

- Identifying the equipment, supplies or resources needed for the meal service method(s) that will be utilized.
- Staggering meal service periods so that arrival and dismissal times limit the amount of contact between students in high-traffic situations.
- Assigning seats to students during mealtimes to enable contact tracing.
- Utilizing floor marks to highlight social/physical distancing guidelines where needed and to identify traffic patterns within spaces.
- Removing chairs to ensure social distancing.
- Arranging the chairs to face the same direction.
- Expanding meal service periods to allow students adequate time for handwashing and to get through serving lines; to count meals at the point of service; or for any other operational considerations that may require extended time.
- Installing clear plastic countertop shields by point-of-service stations or on other countertop areas where staff may be stationed.
- Utilizing disposable trays, dishes and utensils.
- Eliminating self-service stations.
- Eliminating share tables and any sharing of food.
- Identifying alternate locations for the storage and distribution of student meals brought from home (these cannot be stored in kitchen areas).
- Excluding access of all people (other than child nutrition staff and delivery people) from the kitchen and behind serving lines.
- Ensuring adequate sanitation occurs between the use of tables or other surfaces when multiple groups of students will consume meals in the same location.



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Consideration should be given to increased time that may be needed in order to maintain enhanced sanitation standards of high-touch areas and surfaces in the meal service area prior to and throughout the meal service.

Child Nutrition Staff

Food service staff will check temperatures and complete any employee health screening per district protocol upon arrival at the workplace. A sample Employee Self-Assessment Health Screening form from the Kentucky Personnel Cabinet can be found at the end of this document. Staff who develop symptoms during the workday shall follow district protocol for staff illness. Food service staff shall always wear face masks at the workplace unless the employee has been granted a medical exemption. These procedures are in addition to any existing health-related standard operating procedures or policies the district has in place for food service staff.

Identify resources that may be needed to enable child nutrition staff to implement enhanced sanitation standards and follow social distancing guidelines while preparing and serving meals. This includes:

- Maintaining consistency of the child nutrition staff assigned at each school whenever possible.
- Maintaining adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, towels, tissues, etc., for staff handling meals.
- Promoting healthy hygiene practices such as the use of face coverings, handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes and the proper use of gloves.
- Evaluating the space available in production areas and reconfiguring as able to allow for at least 6 feet of separation between staff while performing their required tasks.
- Assigning tasks to staff in a way that will enable them to perform their assigned duties with as little movement to other areas in the kitchen as possible.

Consideration should be given to policies and procedures for reporting illnesses, accommodations for disabilities that may preclude the use of facial coverings and reviewing the job duties that will be assigned to staff positions for any changes that may be needed in order to limit staff movement throughout production areas.

Guiding Questions for Meal Service Environment
Where will meal service take place?
How will meal distribution occur?
How will meal-counting and claiming take place?
How will students provide information at the point of sale ensuring sight identification is not utilized by staff?



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What is your schedule and how can you ensure students are given adequate time to enjoy meals and take time for personal hygiene needs?

Meal Pattern

Menu Planning

All meal pattern requirements must be met to receive reimbursement for the meals that are served. Ensuring that meals are properly planned to meet meal pattern requirements includes:

- Planning the meal pattern for each age/grade group that will be served.
- Determining if preschool age children will be co-mingled (eating at the same time and in the same location) with older students and if the preschool meal pattern must be followed.
- Determining if, or how, offer vs serve will be utilized.
- Identifying appropriate substitutions for menu items should shortages occur.
- Planning limited menu options to enable processes to be streamlined as needed.
- Monitoring food waste to identify menu items that are poorly accepted.
- Planning menus to utilize commodities to the maximum extent to lower food costs.

Consideration should be given to the meal service method(s) that will be used; availability of hot and cold holding equipment for transporting and serving meals in alternate locations, if applicable; any meal pattern waivers that may be available; the suitability of food items for the age/grade group that will be served; and the suitability of food items to be consumed with disposable plates and utensils.

Accommodations for Disabilities

Accommodations for disabilities that enable equal access to the program must be provided when supported by the proper documentation. The meal pattern must always be met to the extent that a child's disability allows. Meals must be served in a manner that offers a safe environment for children with food allergies. Strategies for providing safe and appropriate meals may include:

- Ensuring that surfaces are cleaned prior to meal services and adequate hand-washing facilities are made available.
- Working closely with other school staff who may be involved in the service of meals to ensure here is proper communication of what is needed to provide safe meals when necessary.



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- Ensuring all written food safety plans include standard operating procedures to ensure safety in the production and service of meals to children with allergies.
- Publishing planned meals and identifying allergens if able.
- Identifying secure methods to receive and communicate protected, student-identifying information with families and other school staff (cannot be emailed).

Consideration should be given to providing children with equal access to the meal pattern to the maximum extent that a child's disability allows, providing meals in a safe environment for children with food allergies. A medical statement with all required information (refer to USDA's Accommodating Disabilities in a School Meal program) must be received when meal pattern requirements cannot be met.

Guiding Questions for Meal Pattern
What type of student meal options will be available? Offer vs. serve, serve only
How will you ensure that all meal pattern requirements for the age/grade groups are met?
How will you utilize available resources, such as commodities, to keep food costs lower?

Food Safety

Food Safety Plan

Each school and/or feeding site is required to have an individualized, written food safety plan that is applicable to anywhere program meals are stored, prepared or served. The written food safety plan must include standard operating procedures that are specific to the processes used within that site to mitigate any food safety risks. To ensure there is an adequate food safety plan in place:

- Each school site or location that has a production kitchen, a meal service where meals are consumed by students or stores food and beverages for the child nutrition program should have an individualized, written safety plan.
- In each individualized plan:
 - Review and update the menu process charts with the updated menu for that location.
 - Review and update the operational description to identify how the program operates within that site.
 - Review the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to identify if new SOPs need to be added to the plan, if SOPs are no longer applicable and need to be removed from the plan or if SOPs need to be modified to reflect updated processes.
- Train all staff on and ensure they understand the SOPs relevant to their assigned duties, with an emphasis on SOPs for handwashing, proper glove use, personal hygiene, serving



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safe food to students with food allergies, cleaning, sanitizing food contact surfaces and the food service health policy.

Consideration should be given to the meal service method(s) that will be utilized, how the food safety plan should be adapted when meals are consumed in areas outside of the cafeteria, and where modifications are needed to include the role of other school staff in meal services.

Safe Food Practices

Creating a culture of food safety in all areas of the school building ensures that food safety practices outlined in the food safety plan are implemented. To ensure safe food practices are followed:

- Train all school staff on the food safety processes and SOPs in the food safety plan that are relevant to their role in providing meals.
- Identify any additional equipment or supplies such as thermometers, alcohol wipes or other equipment that may be needed to keep food safe when transported and served in other areas of the school.
- Obtain or develop posters or other aids to assist non-food service school staff to implement safe food practices when they participate in the service of meals.

Consideration should be given to the staff that will be involved in the service of meals. This may include teachers, administrators and janitors, depending on the meal service method(s) utilized. Normal training and communication methods may need to be altered for non-child nutrition staff who may not be familiar with food service processes and child nutrition program requirements.

Reopening the Kitchen

When reopening the kitchen, all food service areas should be deep cleaned and determined to be in good working condition to ensure the facility is safe for the production and service of meals.

To ensure this is accomplished:

- Empty and clean all equipment, including ice machines and sinks.
- Wash, rinse and sanitize all food-contact surfaces.
- Identify any equipment or facility repairs, maintenance or replacement that may be needed.
- Ensure the dish machine is working properly. Ensure the chemicals are dispensing correctly, and temperature gauges are working properly for wash and rinse cycles.
- Check the condition of any food products that may have been left in storage and discard any expired products.
- Remove all clutter and unused items from all food service areas, including storage rooms.
- Rearrange coolers, freezers and dry storage areas to reduce points of contact during deliveries if able.



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- Wash, rinse and sanitize all unprotected tools and small wares. Clean and sanitize all shelving before placing back into storage.
- Check floors and under equipment for signs of pest activity.
- Clean all floors and floor drains.
- If there is an anticipated increase in trash, ensure the dumpster areas are clean to prevent the attraction of pests.
- Check the facilities plan for the building. Water systems (hot and cold) may need to be flushed for 10 minutes to minimize the risk of Legionnaire’s disease before they are used.

Consideration should be given to the length of time the kitchen has been closed, the level of effort and resources required to ensure enhanced sanitation standards can be achieved, ensuring proper social distancing of staff, and collaboration with school facility and maintenance personnel when needed.

Guiding Questions for Food Safety
What is your plan for special meal accommodations?
Will you transport food and, if so, how? Is additional equipment needed?
Is staff properly trained on standard operating procedures?

Operational Support

Operational Procedures

Clearly written policies and procedures must be developed and implemented to successfully operate the child nutrition program. All staff must be knowledgeable about food service policies and procedures, and be able to collaborate and communicate effectively with other stakeholders as needed. Strategies to achieve this goal may include:

- Reviewing written policies and procedures to ensure they are up-to-date and clearly communicated to all applicable staff.
- Ensuring that written procedures for food safety, meal preparation and meal counting and claiming are available and easily accessible to staff when needed.
- Ensuring schools are properly staffed for the food service production and service methods that are and will be used, and that regularly assigned staff and substitute staff are properly trained.
- Identifying other school staff who may be trained to carry out select food service processes or tasks when staff shortages are expected.
- Establishing written procedures for when school staff receive household applications or other program-related documents or communications.



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- Working with vendors to create delivery plans for each location in order to establish processes that: reduce or eliminate contact with staff, ensure only one delivery is received at a time, and ensure all required health and safety guidelines for deliveries will be followed.

Consideration should be given to ensuring that there are clearly outlined roles and responsibilities for both child nutrition staff and all other non-child nutrition staff that interact or participate in program activities. Collaboration with non-child nutrition staff stakeholders is key to ensuring that processes are agreed upon and understood.

Outreach and Communication with Student Households

It is imperative that those in students' households know and understand how to communicate and interact with the child nutrition program. Families and caregivers must be able to provide and receive program-related information in a manner that is accessible to them. Strategies to achieve this goal may include:

- Identifying a specific contact person or people in each school to receive and respond to household communications. This contact should be included in all written materials that are provided to households and to school staff.
- Identifying multiple methods of communication concerning program activities and information. Communication can be simultaneously posted on a website, emailed to households, made through automatic calls and provided in written materials sent home with students.
- Reviewing the program-related information provided on the websites of the school and district. Assess areas where additional or clearer information may be needed to enhance communication about the program. Provide links to directly access documents, and answers to frequently asked questions. Ensure that information is presented in a user-friendly format.
- Assessing if new technology may be needed in order to provide online household applications, obtain electronic signatures or transfer protected student identifying information.
- Developing a program-specific information or policy document that details program activities that affect households, such as whether the use of vending machines is allowed, any changes to a la carte sales, policies concerning outside food brought into the building and restrictions on outside persons during the meal service.

Consideration should be given to providing program-related information and activities through multiple avenues to make program information as accessible as possible and identify avenues for households to easily interact with child nutrition staff.



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Guiding Questions for Operational Support
In non-CEP schools, how will household applications be distributed and collected?
How are you communicating with staff, students and the community?
What is your policy for the allowance of visitors for meal periods?
How will you handle deliveries?
Will a la carte items and/or vending machines be available?
How will available staff meet your plans for feeding students?

Appendix A: Outside Resources

Implementation and Training Resources:

- [School Nutrition Association COVID-19](#)
- [Institute of Child Nutrition: Food Safety Resources](#)
- [Institute of Child Nutrition: Practice Safe Hygiene and Cleaning](#)
- [USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Food-Safe Schools Action Guide](#)
- Kansas State University: [Center for Food Safety in Child Nutrition Programs](#)

Additional Guidance and Resources on Planning for Reopening:

- U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [School Nutrition Association: COVID-19 Thought Starters on Reopening Schools for SY 2020-21](#)

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