



# Meeting the Moment

Q&A with Dr. Rajiv J. Shah, President,  
The Rockefeller Foundation

## How is The Rockefeller Foundation “Meeting the Moment” to feed students during COVID-19?

The Rockefeller Foundation is committed to making sure every child and family in America can access the resources they need to weather the COVID-19 crisis. In March 2020, as schools across the country began to close indefinitely, we focused quickly on the 30 million children who rely on the National School Lunch Program for their nutritional needs. By funding our valued partners, including GENYOUth and the Urban School Food Alliance, today we’re helping schools provide more than 1.7 million meals per day in both urban and rural communities. As of earlier this summer, together we’ve provided nearly 110 million meals since the start of the pandemic.

## What concerns you most about the state of food insecurity in America?

COVID-19 started as a public health and economic crisis, but it’s also created America’s worst hunger crisis in generations. Before the pandemic, the USDA had estimated that 37 million people in the United States struggled with hunger. Recent research indicates that since the pandemic began, food insecurity has doubled overall and tripled among households with children. Today 14 million children are regularly missing meals — three times more than during the Great Recession and five times more than before the pandemic.

The fact that our society is plagued by systemic racism and inequality makes these

problems even worse. Black and Hispanic households with children are nearly twice as likely to be struggling with food as similar white families, and it’s roughly three times as likely that their children aren’t eating enough. Research also shows that hunger is now common even among families that normally earn up to \$50,000 or even \$75,000 per year — showing how widespread, pandemic-induced job losses have only amplified what’s becoming a global hunger pandemic and the need for a stronger nutrition security system.

## How critical are schools to feeding food-insecure youth?

Schools are essential to making sure children can eat the food they need to learn, grow and thrive. It’s become clear during this crisis that schools’ role in nourishing our children is just as important as their role in educating our children. School nutrition professionals, like other essential workers, stepped up to the plate this year — sometimes at great personal risk — to keep providing healthy meals to the millions of children who rely on them. And school food programs have taken significant financial risks in continuing to distribute food to children and families in need, not knowing whether they will be reimbursed for the costs they’re incurring.

The Rockefeller Foundation is grateful for the partnership of GENYOUth, the Urban School Food Alliance and many more who are providing direct support to school food programs so they can fill these gaps and keep them operational. But keeping schools

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running — and financially afloat — as the anchors of community food safety nets that they are will require even more public and private resources in the coming months and years.

### What types of structural reforms do we need to support healthier school communities?

One key reform is to activate the power of food purchasing to set even higher standards for the food children get. Schools are doing a phenomenal job of cooking, preparing, packaging and serving nourishing meals with the limited resources they have. But these programs are overextended and underfunded. As a result, too many public dollars are being spent to purchase cheap food that's ultimately bad for public health, for the environment and for racial and social equity. That's why, through our network of grantees and partners, The Rockefeller Foundation is helping school districts to use their food dollars in innovative ways: getting more nutritious, delicious food onto students' plates while prioritizing food that's grown sustainably and equitably and advances the public good.

Kids can't learn when they don't eat. That's why more broadly, we should ensure all children gets the nourishment they need to be healthy and reach their full academic poten-

tial by first enabling schools to provide free meals to all children, and also by putting in place programs to make sure children don't miss meals when schools are closed. Schools should be able to pay all their workers living wages, be incentivized to source products sustainably and equitably, and be equitably funded to create inviting cafeterias and purchase kitchen equipment to do more cooking from scratch if they choose to.

### How critical are public-private partnerships?

Public-private partnerships are essential to make nutritious food affordable and accessible to everyone. Historically, public-private collaboration has been key to efforts to fight hunger and malnutrition in the United States, and that basic concept is still relevant today. While we have proven approaches — including federal nutrition assistance like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), local food banks and national school meal programs — they don't coordinate with each other. The result is a patchwork of programs that allows too many families to slip through the cracks. These essential services — public, private and philanthropic food safety nets alike — must be more tightly woven together, so that no child goes hungry or malnourished.

**Rajiv J. Shah, MD serves as President of The Rockefeller Foundation**, a global institution promoting the well-being of humanity around the world. The Foundation improves health for women and children, creates nutritious and sustainable food systems, ends energy poverty for more than a billion people and enables meaningful economic mobility around the world. Shah served as Chief Scientist and Undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics at USDA, before being appointed USAID Administrator by President Obama. Shah reshaped the \$20 billion agency's operations in more than 70 countries by elevating the role of innovation, creating high impact public-private partnerships, and focusing U.S. investments to deliver stronger results. Shah secured bipartisan support that included the passage of the Global Food Security Act and the Electrify Africa Act. He led the U.S. response to the Haiti earthquake and the West African Ebola pandemic and served on the National Security Council. Shah founded Latitude Capital, a private equity firm focused on power and infrastructure projects in Africa and Asia and served as a Distinguished Fellow in Residence at Georgetown University. He served at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where he created the International Financing Facility for Immunization helping reshape the global vaccine industry. He has received the Secretary of State's Distinguished Service Award, and the U.S. Global Leadership Award.