

SCHOOL NUTRITION: 2021-2022 CONCERNS AND NEEDS

The only hunger a child should have is a hunger to learn. School meals are more essential than ever for hunger relief among children and youth.

Over 30 million students rely on school meals and for many it may be the only source of good nutrition they receive on some days. **Research** shows that children receive their healthiest meals at school. USDA recently made an **unprecedented decision** to extend **universal school meals** through the 2021-22 school year, allowing schools to provide safe, healthy meals **free of charge to all students** regardless of household income as the pandemic continues to threaten the food and nutrition security of our most vulnerable.

While GENYOUth has provided funding to over 10,000 schools to purchase school meal delivery equipment during the pandemic, requests for support remain from another 10,000 schools.

With USDA extending free meals to all school children through June 2022, a recovering economy, and many students likely returning to classrooms this fall, GENYOUth conducted a survey of over 1,000 school nutrition professionals nationwide in May 2021 to assess the urgent concerns and needs of school nutrition programs as they prepare to feed more children in the 2021-2022 school year.

Key Findings

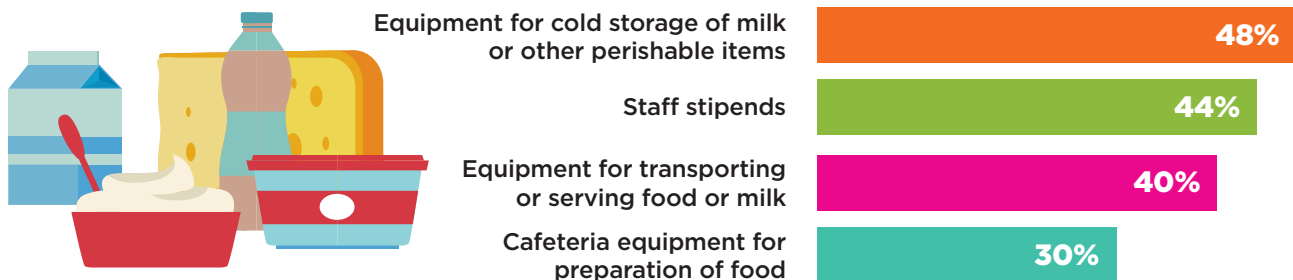
SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO FACE STEEP CHALLENGES IN FEEDING KIDS AND THEY URGENTLY NEED OUR HELP

- ▶ Student hunger/food insecurity remains a top concern: 4 in 10 school nutrition professionals rank it as their **top concern**.

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RESOURCES/EQUIPMENT MOST NEEDED FOR SCHOOL NUTRITION

Percentage of respondents selecting the item as their #1 or #2 most needed resource/equipment



▶ 86% of schools/districts will offer **multiple meal delivery options** to meet continued pandemic protocol and social distancing guidelines, including cafeteria, classroom, grab and go, off campus delivery and more.

▶ 1 in 4 schools anticipate **adding even more meal options** including breakfast, supper and after school snacks, to support students' well-being, while over half (53%) of respondents are still considering the meal options they will offer.

▶ School nutrition professionals identify their **top challenges** as:

- Staff shortages
- Equipment needs — to ensure school meal accessibility, they most urgently need equipment for cold storage of milk or other perishable items and equipment for transporting and delivering food
- Difficulty they face in forecasting meal participation/needs
- Financial uncertainty

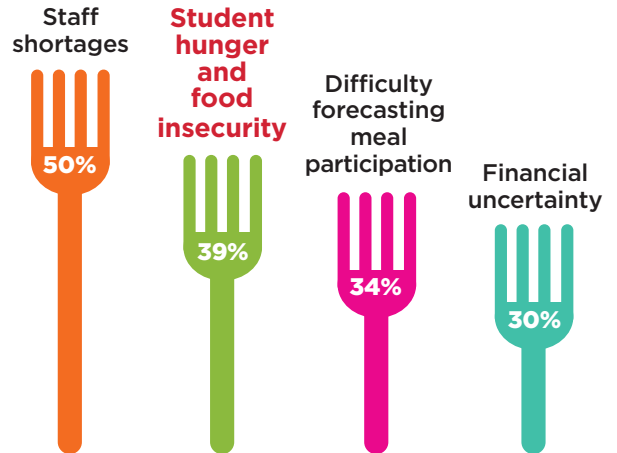
“Our main concern is the milk storage as ours is about 30 years old and the district does not have money to replace it. We are also facing issues with our large mixer, but again no money to fix or replace it.” — *Marmaton Valley USD 256, KS*

▶ School nutrition professionals need help with **awareness building** about the availability of universal school meals among parents, communities and even school administrators. Public and private partners can help support schools with communications, promotion and marketing of this crucial child wellness program to address hunger.

“Our district is very concerned with equitable access for all of our students. Twenty percent of our population is English-as-a-second-language speakers. We need more resources to help communicate with these culturally diverse populations.” — *Westbrook SD, ME*

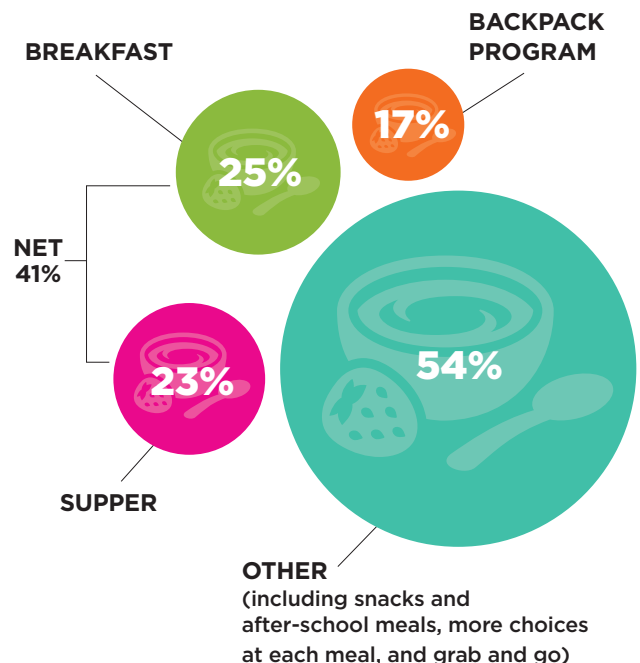
Biggest Concern for School Nutrition Operation in 2021-2022

Percentage of respondents selecting the item as their #1 or #2 concern

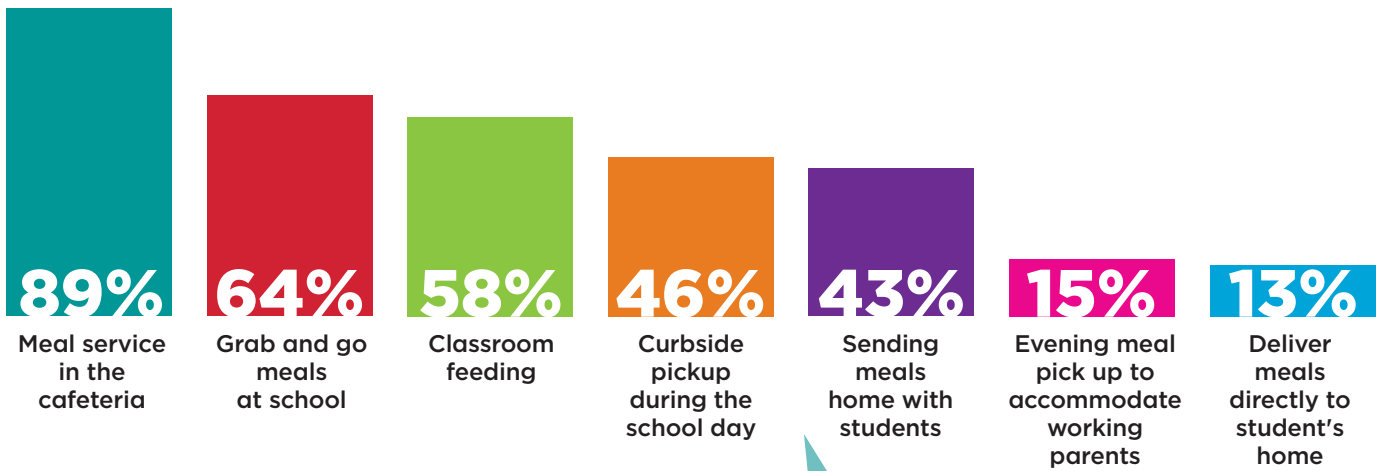


Meal/Service Options to Be Added in 2021-2022

Based on the 27% of respondents who already know they are expanding their options in 2021/22:



ANTICIPATED MEAL SERVICE MODELS: 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR



“During normal school years, all administrative/office staff are required to have lunch with students at least four times a month and do a mini-survey with a few kids. Results are analyzed to help guide our changes and improvements.”

— St Paul Independent SD 625, MN

“I often make myself available during Grab and Go breakfast service to talk to the students about items they prefer. I also sit with students during lunch and let them help me create the menu for the month based on their favorite items and recipes.”

— McKeesport Area School District, PA

“Students’ success in the classroom goes hand in hand with their ability to access basic needs like healthy and nutritious meals. It’s critical that our efforts to reopen schools quickly and safely include programs that provide access to free, healthy meals for our most vulnerable students, particularly those whose communities have been hardest hit by the pandemic.”

— U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS ARE LISTENING TO YOUTH

The majority (73%) of school nutrition programs engage students in providing input on their school meal program. Key methods include surveys, taste-tests, focus groups, student advisory councils and social media.

GENYOUTH’s Youth Council members offer these suggestions to increase access to and participation in school meals:

- ▶ Location is key: Grab and Go allows students to get food where they are and eat with their friends.
- ▶ Universal free meals level the playing field: reduces stigma associated with getting a meal for free.

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“We are all understaffed and trying to provide meals for all students onsite, which is very challenging while trying to stay within a budget of what we are reimbursed for each meal.”
 — Los Angeles USD

- ▶ Awareness building needed: Many students and families are not aware that free school meals are now available for all students.
- ▶ Student engagement is essential: Youth are the customers and they have first-hand experience.
- ▶ Everyone is doing it: If students eat school lunch, their friends will, too!

What Needs to Be Done

Universal school meals permit all students to receive school meals at no cost, regardless of household income, reducing the stigma and leveling the playing field for equitable meal access. This important program also brings new challenges. Additional funds are urgently needed to cover school meal delivery equipment and resources to enable schools to serve more students while implementing a wider variety of service models driven by continued pandemic guidance, and incremental meal opportunities to help overcome hunger in the community. Anticipated **increase in meal participation levels** next year intensifies existing challenges.

Although the worst of the pandemic may be behind us, the nation’s child hunger crisis is not. Thirty million students rely on school meals for their daily nourishment, and too many kids go to school with empty stomachs. **The crisis is most critical for low-income, Black and Hispanic students, and those who live in urban and rural communities.** Every child deserves equitable access to healthy nutrition. GENYOUth, in its commitment to food equity and creating healthier school communities, is raising funds and awareness **For Schools’ Sake** to help feed our nation’s kids. Donate today to **GENYOUth’s End Student Hunger Fund.**

www.genyouthnow.org



METHODOLOGY

Online survey conducted from May 4–13, 2021, with 1,018 school nutrition professionals from 49 states and 824 school districts across the U.S. Over half (58%) of respondents work at the district level and 42% work at the school building level. Other characteristics of respondents’ schools/districts include:

- ▶ Population of free/reduced price meal-eligible students: 65% high (>40% students eligible), 35% moderate to low (<40% eligible)
- ▶ Minority student population: 33% high (50%+ minority students), 37% moderate, 28% low (15% or less)
- ▶ Locale: 23% urban, 26% rural, 51% suburban
- ▶ District size: 19% very large (>25K students), 14% large (10-24K students), 33% medium (2,500-9,999); 34% small (<2500)