

A Strong and Healthy Year: Food Services Guidance

Purpose

Because of the lifelong impacts on health and learning caused by malnutrition, it is important to ensure that students have uninterrupted access to adequate nutrition through the food service program. This is particularly important because the ongoing economic impacts of COVID-19 may mean that many more children are currently facing food insecurity at home. Current information suggests that food and food packaging are not known sources of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. School Food Service staff receive regular food safety training and are already knowledgeable about preventing foodborne illness. Ask for their input when designing food service models.

Communicate to households that school meals programs are a safe and nutritious source of food. Using recent USDA waivers extending the Summer Food Service Program, meals are free to all children whether they are at school or at home through September 30, 2021. Make sure that households are aware of the availability of free meals. Because households are especially likely to be facing food insecurity this year, consider [referring households to additional forms of food assistance](#), such as 3SquaresVT and WIC.

General Guidance

- Continue to follow all food safety requirements in the [Vermont Food Code](#). Have food service staff conduct frequent self-audits to ensure that these practices are being followed. Key areas to check include:
 - Allergen awareness and safety including, cleaning and sanitizing of food prep and eating surfaces to remove any oils and residue from allergy prone foods such as nuts and seafood.
 - Correct dishwasher temperatures for sanitization.
 - [Employee handwashing](#).
 - [Cleaning and sanitizing surfaces](#).
 - Procedures for employees to call in sick or doing non-food related duties at home when experiencing minor symptoms or in quarantine.
- HACCP plans may need to be adjusted to include new procedures.
- Consider how the kitchen receives deliveries of food and supplies. Often, delivery drivers enter the school through the kitchen entrance, so may not be subject to normal visitor procedures. In some cases, it may be usual practice for the delivery driver to bring food directly into the walk-in refrigerator or freezer. These are small spaces frequently entered by kitchen staff. Work with kitchen staff and vendors to determine the safest way to handle deliveries. If the vendor will now deposit deliveries outside of

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the entrance, consider investing in dollies or having other staff members assist kitchen staff with moving deliveries into the kitchen to avoid workplace injuries.

- Evaluate kitchen workstations and modify them to allow for physical distancing.
 - If the kitchen is small, move workstations into the cafeteria/gym if the cafeteria/gym is not in use.
 - Face workstations away from each other, such as towards the wall instead of toward the center of the room.
- If there is a large food service staff, consider having the staff work in shifts during the day to reduce transmission opportunity.
- Consider methods for ensuring food service continuity if food service staff become sick or need to quarantine.
 - This could include setting up coverage from other schools within the SU/SD, or even setting up a reciprocal agreement with a neighboring SU/SD to provide meals.
 - The school could look into purchasing a supply of shelf-stable meals to be available in the event that food service staff need to stay home.
- Ensure that food service substitutes have food safety training. Free web-based food safety training is available at any time from the [Institute for Child Nutrition](#). Child Nutrition Programs also recommends these [very basic training videos on hygiene, temperature control and sanitization](#) from Iowa State University Cooperative Extension.
- School Food Service Employees who work in PreK-12 schools in Vermont are eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. It does not matter if they are employed by the school district or by a contractor. Make sure food service staff are aware of their eligibility. To encourage vaccination, consider providing paid time for these employees to receive the vaccine, or other supports such as help with the online registration process or transportation to vaccine appointments.

Guidance for Meal Service

- Masks should be worn during mealtimes anytime that a student is not actually eating/drinking. Masks should be on when the student is receiving their meal and when they are disposing of their trash and trays. Masks should only be removed when the student is about to start eating/drinking, and they should be replaced as soon as the student is done eating/drinking.
- If staggered student schedules are used to reduce the number of students in the building at any one time, ensure that schedules allow students access to both breakfast and lunch.
- Napkins and silverware should be provided directly by staff, dispensed using one-at-a-time dispensers, or wrapped in napkins. Unwrapped silverware should not be provided in a communal container for individuals to grab.
- Pre-portion condiments and remove bulk condiment dispensers.
- Trays, utensils and dishes/cups that are washed and sanitized between uses can be used. Transportation of food should happen, as usual, on clean equipment, with proper handwashing before handling.

- Consider ways to provide water to students eating in the classroom. Students may be provided with their own reusable water bottles, if there is a location available to refill these during the day. A water cooler with dispensing spigot may be set up in the classroom. However, it should be regularly cleaned..
- Allow time for students to wash their hands prior to and after eating.
- Adults assisting students with their food should wash their hands before handling the student’s plate or lunch box, and wash or use hand sanitizer between the handling of the next student’s lunch box. This includes staff helping students open milk cartons or peel fruit.
- “Share tables” may be used for unwanted food items that are wrapped, have peels, or can be re-washed before serving. Follow all [regular share table guidance](#). During the 2020-21 school year, wrapped items or fruits with peels do not need to be sanitized between being placed on the share table and being taken by students. However, items with edible peels such as apples and pears should be returned to the kitchen for washing before being offered for consumption. Items that are not wrapped, peelable or washable should not be placed on the share tables at all.
- Additional COVID-19 guidance for food service programs can be found on the [Agency of Education’s COVID-19 webpage](#). The School Nutrition Association’s [Thought Starters in Reopening Schools for SY2020-21](#) is another good tool for thinking through all aspects of school food service during COVID-19.

Guidance for Providing Meals in Classrooms

- If the cafeteria is not being used to serve meals, students should be offered school meals in their classrooms.
- If it is not feasible to provide service directly to classrooms, grab-and-go meal carts could be placed in dispersed locations for students from nearby classrooms to collect their meals in small groups. Or, students may go to the cafeteria, one classroom at a time to collect their meals and return to their classroom to eat. If students are receiving meals in the cafeteria and bringing them back to the classroom, meals do not need to be covered on their way to the classroom.
- Food safety practices should be followed when serving perishable meals in the classroom. The best option is to serve meals immediately. However, if the meals will not be served immediately, hot holders and coolers should be used to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.
 - Desks that students eat at should be cleaned with soap and water following snack/mealtime.
- Additional trash and janitorial services may be necessary when serving meals in the classroom.
- Meals should not be self-serve.
- Meals should be unitized, or an advance ordering system can be used to allow student choice about meal components. Advance ordering could be done through a paper pre-order system in a smaller school, or web-based ordering systems are available from some food service software vendors.

- Food Service Programs may need to purchase additional equipment to package meals efficiently for delivery to classrooms. Many types of packaging systems are available. Speak to other food service programs, particularly those that have experience offering breakfast in the classroom or summer meals, about which equipment works best for them.
- Ideally, a designated staff member or student should place meals on students' desks, to avoid students congregating to collect their meals from one location.

Guidance for Providing Meals in the Cafeteria

While students may return to eating in the cafeteria, consider maintaining meals in the classroom if it is working well. If moving meal service to the cafeteria, take the following measures.

Cafeteria Capacity, Seating and Spacing

- Cafeteria capacity should be limited to ensure that minimum physical distancing is achieved.
- Schools should ensure that groups of students do not come into contact with each other upon entry and exit the cafeteria; classrooms should be staggered going through the line. The total capacity should not exceed the current state or local limits on indoor gathering size, as indicated on the [ACCD website](#).
- Because students will be removing their masks to eat, it is critical to maintain a minimum of 3 feet of distance for PreK to Grade 6; 6 feet of distance for Grade 7 to Grade 12.
- Assign seating so students eat with their classmates and do not mingle with other classes. If the building has multiple cafeterias or common areas where students may eat, consider consistently assigning classrooms to one area or the other to reduce interaction between cohorts.
- Seating should be set up so that children are not facing each other.
- If long cafeteria tables with built-in stools are used, children should be seated only on one side of the table, with seats blocked off in between each student to allow for appropriate spacing.
- Individual desks may be a better alternative to tables in the cafeteria, as these will allow for seating to be spaced more appropriately.
- Take steps to ensure physical distancing when students are waiting to receive their meals and at the end of the meal when disposing of compost/trash and returning trays. This could involve placing markers on the floor and using crowd control stanchions to direct lines.
- Students should not remain in the cafeteria any longer than is necessary for their class/pod/cohort to finish eating. Take steps to prevent students from lingering to socialize.

Meal Service

- Meals should not be self-serve. Staff members can serve students, or pre-portioned items could be provided for students to choose from.
- Salad bars may only be used if items are pre-portioned and packaged, or when an adult is doing all serving and plastic barriers are installed.
- If PIN numbers are used, have a staff member enter the PIN number on behalf of students.
- Engineering controls such as sneeze guards should be installed in the cafeteria.
- No-touch beverage dispensers may be used; however, students should be reminded through signage to use a new cup each time they use the dispenser.
- Consider eliminating beverage dispensers that require buttons to be pressed or having an adult serve the beverages from the dispenser instead. If this is not possible, the buttons should be frequently sanitized between groups of students.

Guidance for Food Service if a School or Classroom is Closed or Operating Remotely

- Continue providing access to meals to students when the school building or their classroom is closed using the Summer Food Service Program during an unanticipated school closure. The AOE has received USDA waivers to allow meal service to continue as it did in Spring 2020. These methods included:
 - Sending meals home with students on the last day of school for days when school is not in session (short-term closures).
 - Delivering meals to residences or bus stops.
 - Providing meals for pickup.
- The AOE has issued [extensive health and safety guidance](#) on providing meals using these distribution methods.
- School food service staff are already very familiar with how to handle this situation. Discuss with them what additional resources they will need to be able to continue providing meals under this scenario.
- Whenever the decision is made to close a school or classroom, make sure to include information on how to access meals in your communications to impacted households.