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FOOD, FUN and CREATIVITY

in the **Time of COVID-19**

A continued celebration of the inventiveness of America's school nutrition professionals showcases scratch-made meals, locally sourced produce, culinary education projects and many other surprises.

*A Special Digital Supplement
to School Nutrition's
Ongoing Coverage of the
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FOOD, FUN and CREATIVITY in the Time of COVID-19

BY DAYLE HAYES, MS, RD

A continued celebration of the inventiveness of America's school nutrition professionals showcases scratch-made meals, locally sourced produce, culinary education projects and many other surprises.

In the middle of March 2020, thousands of school nutrition operations abruptly pivoted from “What’s for lunch in the cafeteria on Monday?” to “How the !#\$@ are we going to start distributing hundreds of meals on curbsides and bus routes on Monday?” At the time, no one could have guessed that weeks would stretch to months and meal totals would rise into hundreds of thousands—in some communities even topping one million!

Grab ‘n’ go-based menus were the most obvious and immediate solution, but in some parts of the country, individually wrapped (IW) items quickly became as rare and as valuable as rolls of toilet paper, and operations scrambled to source single-serve portions of everything from cereal to hummus. Packaging to provide multiple meals with less-frequent distribution quickly became a new concern—and supply chain disruption was on the tip of everyone’s tongue. Long-planned, multi-week cycle menus went the way of face-to-face meetings. Directors worked to reduce inventory and everyone focused on getting meals to children in as efficient and safe a manner as possible.

After eight weeks navigating uncharted territory, emergency feeding operations are calmer and even have grown a bit “routine.” Farm-to-school programs are realizing the substantial benefits of local relationships and some school districts are exploring completely new ways of supporting

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Part One of this article, featured in the print edition of *May’s School Nutrition*, shared how school nutrition professionals focused on morale-boosting and problem-solving while serving emergency meals during school closures. This digital supplement is Part Two and concentrates on the food schools are serving to their communities, from scratch menu items to locally sourced products to restaurant partnerships and even some culinary education projects. Still, this is only a tiny taste of the innovations, inventiveness and “hacks” that school nutrition magicians have been employing to feed their students during COVID-19. Honestly, I could write a book about all the amazing things that you have done! I have endless gratitude for your incredible dedication.





community businesses. While none of us can accurately predict the reality of school meals next year (or even summer feeding!), many are forging ahead and finding new ways of doing the most important parts of school nutrition: nourishing children, supporting e-learning and educating children about food.

BACK TO THE FUTURE WITH SCRATCH

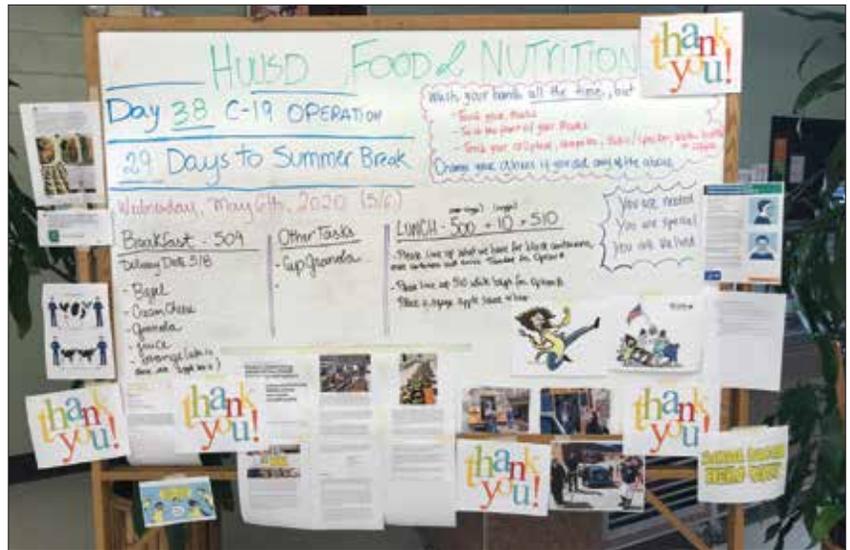
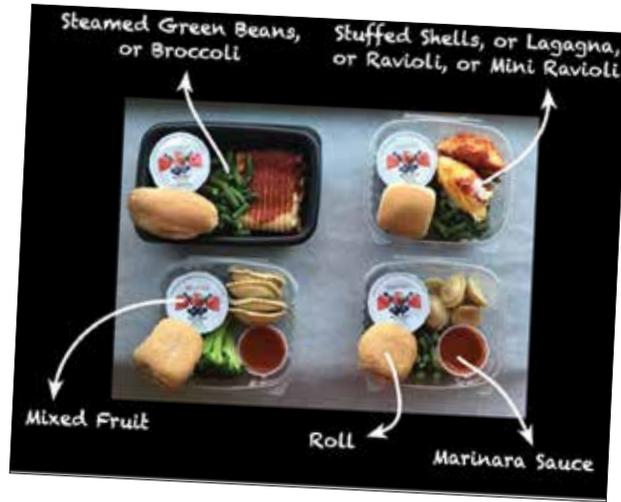
After a month or so of emergency grab ‘n’ go meals, examples of scratch and speed-scratch meals began to show up more frequently on social media. When Wayne Stephens posted a photo in mid-April of taco salads being prepped, the internet noticed. His post earned numerous positive reactions and dozens of comments. For Stephens, Food Service Manager at **Brandon-Evensville (Minn.) Independent School District #2908**, the reasons to return to fresher meals were simple. His 600 customers in this rural Minnesota community were tired of grab ‘n’ go—and he still had plenty of inventory in his freezers. Stephens started working with his DoD Fresh distributor to



identify available produce and with local sanitarians to discuss specific SOPs that would allow him to send menu items home for reheating.

His daily breakfast and lunch choices (delivered on two bus routes plus school walk-ups) now include school-baked goods plus lots of fresh fruits and veggies packaged with entrées that students knew and still love: chicken patty sandwiches, spaghetti and meatballs and lasagna roll-ups (*pictured above*).

In rural western Massachusetts, Liz Bouchard, Food Service Director at **Franklin County Technical School**, realized that she had a serious problem after just two weeks of serving prepackaged grab ‘n’ go items. She literally could not turn around in her freezer or cooler, because she had received a large USDA Foods delivery the day before school closed,



and that had gone untouched initially. “So I searched for the perfect heat-at-home containers and started cooking our scratch meals again,” Bouchard recounts.

“That led to huge increases in my meal counts, so my inventory was quickly depleted. Now, I have ample storage room and have been able to take a double brown box order,” she continues. “Today, our students get the fresh food we pride ourselves on!” Her team of four produces 1,160 breakfasts and lunches that are distributed by seven buses making 35 stops in 17 towns across a 561-square-mile area. Using USDA Foods every day also allows Bouchard to keep her budget in check. Her Facebook post of a chicken teriyaki stir-fry earned numerous requests for the recipe (made entirely from brown box USDA Foods items, plus a simple house-made sauce).

The Food and Nutrition team at **Harwood Unified Union (Vt.) School District** barely missed a scratch-cooked-meal beat in their COVID-19 response. They learned about school closures at 4:00 pm on Sunday afternoon and were serving fresh-prepared items on the following Wednesday morning. In a district of 1,900 students at seven sites, they rapidly ramped up to distributing 3,000 breakfasts and 3,000 lunches each week from one central kitchen, then satellited to

distribution sites at six schools. They use Google docs to allow families to place orders.

According to Co-Directors Erika Dolan and Paul Morris, all meals are made from scratch. They credit their ability to continue regular operations to their phenomenal team, all of whom are still working, supported by the complete trust of the district’s administration. “Along with as much produce as possible (fresh and processed USDA Foods), we serve microwavable entrées with labels and complete cooking instructions,” they explain. “Honestly, we have had very few kinks—we just had to organize our inventory of USDA Foods and figure out how to all work [safely] in one kitchen/cafeteria. There is a lot of slicing, dicing and packing that goes on every day.”

A white board has become the hub of their workday—essential to team communications. It allows them to follow their progress from day to day, work out minor problems, and—perhaps most importantly—share kudos from families and the community. The board also boasts eye-catching reminders about safety protocols, including the fact that six feet apart is the size of one large dairy cow or two calves. (Now *that’s* a relatable image in rural Vermont!)



#HAVEAPLANT

For years, school nutrition operators have been focused on increasing children's intake of fruits and vegetables in all forms—frozen, canned, dried and fresh and local, when possible—meeting federal nutrition standards, but, for many, also meeting a passionate mission. When COVID-19 school closures eliminated beautiful salad bars as an option, districts had to maximize their creativity and their partnerships to maintain a premium produce priority. Of course, it's critical to remember that districts have very different resources, especially in terms of staff and equipment, and in these challenging times, programs are doing the best they can with what they have.

Laura Fails, Food Service Director, **Wamego (Kan.) Public Schools**, has ramped up her team's Facebook presence to communicate with parents and others in the community. The team's colorful photos of fresh fruits and vegetables—all prepped inhouse—keep the attention on these healthy foods.

With a student enrollment of 1,600 and a free/reduced rate of 25%, the Wamego team is now serving about 900 children daily, one lunch and one breakfast Monday through

Wednesday and two of each on Thursday. Recognizing the rising food insecurity in her small Kansas town, Fails is now learning all she can about the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), in order to take over summer feeding operations from the previous sponsoring organization; it is the first time that the school district will serve as an SFSP sponsor. "I hear regularly from parents about how thankful they are for these meals. It's the only time the kids get to go anywhere, so they love seeing familiar faces from their school buildings. We also hear how these meals have helped their food budgets at home," says Fails. "My team fully recognizes how important this work is, too. They have pulled together in new and amazing ways—better communication, more flexibility, more thinking outside the box."

Meanwhile, some 1,100 miles to the east, another Laura, Laura Lynn, SNS, School Nutrition Director, **Brantley County (Ga.) Schools**, faced a produce problem that required a different solution. The two sites being used for meal prep had insufficient refrigeration to handle the volume of milk and large cases of bulk produce items, and limited prep space for



safe-distancing while processing and packaging fruits and veggies.

Lynn reached out to a locally owned produce distributor, The Garden Produce, which provided her with IW packages of a variety of fruits and veggies: broccoli, cherry tomatoes, celery sticks, cauliflower, watermelon pieces, grapes and more. The vendor would also stagger food deliveries to help manage both refrigeration and prep limitations. This solution was considered a win for Garden Produce, as well, since it was faced with lost business from closed restaurants and resorts. Like many other districts, Lynn has also been connecting with local farmers, even scoring some donations of fresh blueberries to pack with lunches.

The Food Service & Nutrition department at **Morgan County (Tenn.) Schools** received a USDA Farm to School Implementation Grant in August 2019. Director Peggy Hamby was just getting going this spring, with plans for a greenhouse at the district's career center and nutrition education offered on "Gus the Bus." Then COVID-19 struck. But it would take more than a pandemic to deter Hamby! She has not missed a day of serving Morgan Country's 2,780 students, with breakfast and lunch provided even during spring break and Good Friday "closures." Gus the Bus still delivers books and farm-related fun to students in different parts of the district. And, in late April, she had grown enough hydroponic lettuce to pair with locally sourced berries in a gorgeous Spring Chicken Salad lunch (*above*).

FARM TO SCHOOL TO HOME

Farm-to-school programs take on many different forms across the country. During COVID-19 school closures, some districts have maintained these projects and relationships or, like **Decorah (Iowa) Community School District**, have been able to dig even deeper into local options. During the first week of school closures, Chad Elliott, Decorah High School Food Services Director, served 5,300 grab 'n' go meals to approximately 1,400 students, with the help of a generous local donation. But with a 24% free/reduced-price eligibility rate and trouble filling bulk orders for items like peanut butter, tuna, apples, raisins and paper sacks, Elliott needed a different strategy for his emergency meals.

He reached out to the Iowa Food Hub, an area nonprofit that connects local farmers, ranchers and processors with retailers and foodservice outlets. As a result, food packages provided through the district have included locally produced cheese curds, yogurt and cucumbers, as well as lettuce, spinach, beet greens and pea sprouts from Decorah High School's greenhouses. Elliott also has local sources for milk and whole-wheat bread. "It is a win for the producers, a win for the school, and a definite win for the students," Elliott explains. "I have always felt fortunate to have access to local producers, and during this emergency, we have truly experienced the great value of local." Just prior to sharing this story, Elliott had been on the phone with the county's cattlemen's organization, which offered to donate a thousand

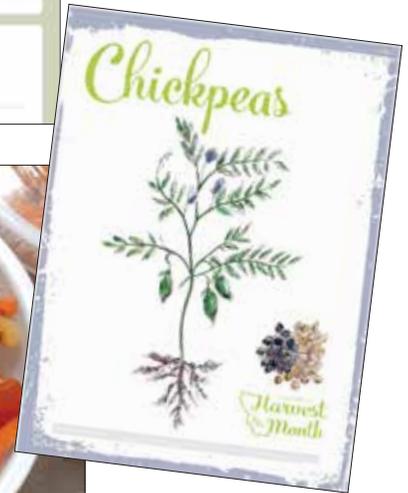


locally raised and processed beef sticks to add to the following week's school meal deliveries.

Harvest of the Month campaigns are a common component of many farm-to-school programs. The **Farm to School of Park County** program operates in close cooperation with the foodservice teams at several schools in and around **Livingston, Mont.** Not wanting to abruptly end its successful SY2019-20 programming, two FoodCorps Montana service members found creative ways to continue providing taste tests, recipes and educational materials to students learning at home. Oatmeal-on-the-Go Bars, Carrot Quinoa Muffins and Chickpea-Wheat Berry Salad were incorporated in the daily breakfast and lunch meals, celebrating the monthly harvest highlights of carrots, grains and chickpeas.

In central Washington, **Concrete School District** boasts a robust farm-to-school program developed in partnership with a local community health center, and it includes a school garden and greenhouse, classroom demonstrations and cooking stations. When Concrete schools closed in March, they were right in the middle of a series of cooking classes. The program did a quick pivot from in-school programming to distributing recipe kits along with the meals delivered by bus to families. On Fridays, they send home all the required ingredients for a different dish; these have ranged from Blueberry Pancakes, Broccoli Mac and Cheese and Reinventing Ramen with Vegetables.

Concrete Farm to School Coordinator Rachel Muia says, "The response from families has been great. We keep it simple and provide everything they need for each recipe, along with instructional videos posted on Facebook. I'm proud of what we are doing but it does take a lot of work. Our partnership with the school nutrition program is what makes this possible."



CULINARY CLUBS GO VIRTUAL, TOO

Concrete's farm-to-school recipe kits are one model for engaging families in cooking (and eating) together during COVID-19 school closures. School-based culinary clubs are also adapting in the wake of in-school learning cancellations. Scott Anderson, Food Services Director, **Madison County (Ky.) School District**, and his team have been prepping and delivering 18,000 breakfasts and lunches daily in their emergency meal service. Before the pandemic, the department's Little Chef Cooking classes had been teaching 50 to 60 students each month for the last year and a half. The cafeteria team thought it would be fun to send home recipe kits that were based on cooking club activities, as well as popular school meals. These have included ingredients and instructions for baking a dessert pie with apples and a pizza pie with fresh peppers. In addition, the department provides online video instructions.

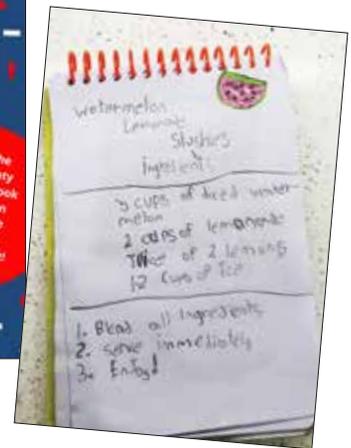
The most recent make-at-home item featured dehydrated potato "pearls," since "Madison County Food Service is famous for our mashed potatoes," explains Anderson. "It was almost like a science experiment to have families watch the pearls transform



into potatoes!" He knows this because many families have posted their own photos on the department's Facebook page. "We're proud to bring families together in any way we can—especially around the dinner table—during these difficult times."

School closures actually prompted the Nutrition team at **Brooks County (Ga.) Schools** to coordinate a Chopped Junior Chefs program. The district's drama teacher knew how much her own children enjoyed watching "MasterChef Junior" on TV and suggested that a similar contest might be fun while students were out of school and families were looking for activities. Nutrition Director Chynna Wilson, a chef who had previously been a culinary instructor, jumped on the idea as a way to integrate local products into emergency meals—and to build on their pre-pandemic monthly afterschool Culinary Club activities.

Each week, "secret ingredients" are announced by Chefs Jack and Emmy (the children of the drama teacher) and sent home with meals. These have included local broccoli, watermelon and blueberries. "I've been delighted—and a little surprised—to see how engaged the children are in creating their recipes," reports Wilson. Our Facebook feed is now filled with the sweetest family photos of food creations and hand-written recipes. Now, I'm looking for ways to get teachers involved, too, since recipes are such a natural way to teach math and literacy concepts."



RALLYING WITH RESTAURANTS

There's long-established precedent for partnerships between school nutrition operations and restaurants—especially when it comes to everyone's favorite: pizza. National chains and local pizzerias alike have worked to develop school-compliant variations of their recipes. But COVID-19 has prompted new partnerships between these two foodservice segments.

Livingston, Mont., is a small town of about 7,000, and serves as a northern gateway to Yellowstone National Park. Tourism has been the foundation of the local economy. There are about 1,500 students enrolled in **Livingston Public Schools**, where pre-pandemic meal service numbered some 450 breakfasts and 900 lunches daily. Although emergency lunches number only half that amount, the team is challenged to produce both breakfast *and* lunch meals for early morning bus delivery.



PICK UP INFORMATION

Shelbina Valley
 Program Details: 4 days of lunch & snack available Monday - Thursday
 Advance order required. Meals are delivered to your home
 Contact: Mrs. Taylor 606-876-2325 or ktaylor@shelbina.k12.mo.us

Livingston
 Program Details: Daily breakfast & lunch Monday - Friday
 Contact: 406-222-6200 Sam - 7pm or michale.carter@livingston.k12.mo.us

11:00am	11:30am	11:45am	12:00pm	12:30pm
Mountain Top & Sun				
Mountain Top & Sun				
Mountain Top & Sun				
Mountain Top & Sun				

Livingston
 Program Details: Weekly pick up at 4 days' worth of lunch/breakfast
 Pick-up every Tuesday 12-1 pm.
 To participate, please contact me later than Sunday.
 Glenda Roberts 406-222-4329 or glroberts@livingston.k12.mo.us
 Erin Barr 406-222-4328 or ebarr@livingston.k12.mo.us

Cardinal
 Program Details: Daily breakfast & lunch Monday - Friday
 Pickup at the following locations and times:
 Hawthorn Community Center - 12 - 12:30
 Cardinal School - 12 - 12:30
 Cardinal Springs Bus Stop - 12:30 - 12:45
 East River Road Bus Stop - 12:30 - 12:45
 Contact: Anna Hultaway 406-222-2781 or ahultaway@cardinal.k12.mo.us

YOUR DOLLARS HELP TO SUPPORT STUDENT MEAL PROGRAMS

TO DONATE CONTACT MICHAEL JONES, FARM TO SCHOOL OF PARK COUNTY
 406-222-2206, michael.jones@livingston.k12.mo.us



Local restaurants quickly rose to the top of the list of potential solutions. They had trained staff, access to supply chains and food safety knowledge—plus they were hurting from the massive drop in tourism. The first step was a two-week pilot with a regional sandwich chain called The Pickle Barrel. Once they had a better handle of the logistical and budgetary issues that sustained emergency meals would require, Livingston School Foodservices issued an RFP through the Livingston Area Chamber of Commerce outlining safety protocols, nutrition standards, quantities and budgetary requirements. To date, 10 restaurants have responded, with several noting that the partnership would make a real difference in their survivability.

By early May, 40% of entrées sent home to families were being produced by local restaurants, including Breakfast Burritos and Turkey Chili. The community response has been incredible. “This is truly a win-win-win for Livingston,” says Rachael Jones, Executive Director of Farm to School of Park County. “We are supporting local businesses while saving the

sanity of our hard-working ‘Livingston Lunch Ladies.’ Most importantly, our students are getting amazing meals from restaurants where some of their families work.”

Parisa Mohammad, RD, SNS, is a Nutrition Services Supervisor at **Fullerton (Calif.) School District**. As the elementary/middle school district’s emergency meals grew from 7,000 to 10,500 per day (and more with supper), the department started to run out of storage and prep space in its central kitchen. Some out-of-the-box thinking was required. “We already partnered with the local franchises of a national pizza chain,” reports Mohammad. “What about other local restaurants?” Like Livingston, the team organized an RFP with all the requirements, and responses were then managed by the department’s purchasing agent who was working from home.



Today, Fullerton's Nutrition Services team is working with a national sandwich chain and a few local businesses to provide items like a “truly delicious” Brisket Burrito and a Cold Chicken Sandwich. Since the department is now offering three meals per day, they are providing hot lunch items and cold entrées for supper. Mohammad is developing a master schedule to spread ordering out among local businesses, continuing to expand the very successful program. The only challenge, she says, has been adapting the overly large restaurant portion sizes, but these have been easy to fix.

These two local school-restaurant partnerships may very well be pilot programs for whatever the “new normal” looks like for schools this summer and fall. As celebrity chefs like José Andrés develop new ways to fight community food insecurity with restaurant collaborations, this may be another silver lining to COVID-19.

INSPIRATION ABOUNDS

As I said in the beginning, I could write a book about the amazingly creative things that school nutrition professionals are doing as they supply far more than mere “emergency” meals to their communities. As always—and even during a pandemic—school nutrition professionals are focused first on

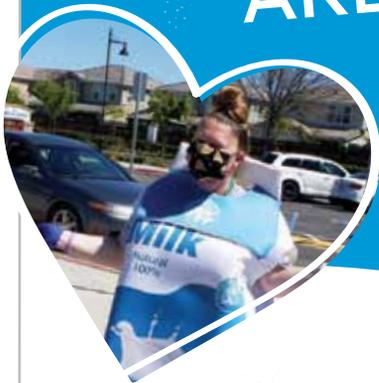


making sure that children are fed. But once the basics are in place, they continually seek fresh ways to add value to those meals. We can all aspire to finding such inspiration amid challenges and changes. **SN**

Dayle Hayes is a school nutrition and social media consultant based in Bozeman, Mont.

#TRAYBLAZERS

ARE MAKING MEALS HAPPEN



K-12 school nutrition staff are facing COVID-19 head-on all around the country—and General Mills is ready to lend a hand as you continue to serve students. Find all of our **prep-free, shelf-stable student favorites**—from 2 oz. equivalent grain cereals to whole grain snacks—all in one place at

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