

Facing

# COVID-19 with

Courage • Commitment • Compassion

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SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Official Publication of the  
School Nutrition Association

## Getting Through This **TOGETHER**

Celebrating the many ways communities have stepped up to support school nutrition teams.

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*A Special Digital Supplement  
to School Nutrition's  
Ongoing Coverage of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic*

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BY CHRISTINA UTICONE

# Getting Through This *TOGETHER*



Celebrating the many ways communities have stepped up to support school nutrition teams.

**W**ith more than six weeks of school closures and consequential emergency meal distribution efforts now under their collective belts, school nutrition operators are really hitting their stride. While there is no shortage of uncertainty about the future, the main focus of each day remains largely the same: feeding kids. As always, the devil is in the details, which continue to shift, presenting a “new normal” that is full of unexpected challenges. But within those, fresh opportunities are also emerging, especially as community partners turn to school nutrition operators

and offer their assistance—setting the foundation for some promising longstanding relationships.

From emotional encouragement to financial support to helpful donations to hands-on volunteer efforts, individuals and organizations alike across the country are rallying around their local school nutrition programs and professionals. Never has the annual School Lunch Hero Day (May 1) celebration been more timely—or more accurate—as in 2020. The COVID-19 crisis has confirmed that school nutrition programs and workers are the beating hearts of their communities.

And while cafeteria teams are moved by the outpouring



of local support, what really resonates is a growing optimism that community attitudes for their commitment, their professionalism and their *essential* role in the education day will be forever changed. There is a prevailing sense of hope that this level of respect and support will carry on long after the crisis has come to an end.

## A LITTLE GRATITUDE GOES A LONG WAY

The exhaustion of long days at work is compounded by the added stress we are all feeling during the COVID-19 crisis. In many districts, school nutrition staff have their spirits buoyed through kind and thoughtful gestures from students and parents.

Jennifer Borrer is the Assistant Food Service Director of **Bluffton-Harrison (Ind.) Municipal School District**, where prior to COVID-19, her staff of eight served cafeteria meals to a school population of 1,500 students. They have transitioned to curbside service, along with a few deliveries to families who can't get to the site for pickup. Borrer welcomes the show of community support for her team. "It's neat seeing the community recognize that these ladies are putting

themselves out there, and that the reason they do what they do is the students," she reports.

Gratitude takes several forms. School staff from other departments sewed and donated face masks for her team members, while a distributor's daughter made them "blessing bags" filled with small trinkets. Members of Borrer's own family have dropped off treats and notes. "I know I am very lucky, and not everyone is that lucky," says Borrer. "It's been amazing to see everyone come together and work together."

Shannon Solomon, SNS, Nutrition Services Director, **Aurora (Colo.) Public Schools**, reported on social media how her team received a generous donation of "quick-and-easy dinners" they could take home to their own families. These were especially welcome after long days spent coordinating emergency meals and little time to grocery shop.

Simple acts of generosity and gratitude have been reported over and over again in neighborhoods all across the country. Children use colorful chalk to leave expressions of appreciation on sidewalks and parking areas. Parents have delivered flowers and there have been many, *many* handmade cards and notes from students to the cafeteria staff members they miss.



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In many of the examples cited in this article, community members reached “in” to school nutrition staff, asking how they could help support emergency feeding efforts. But this crisis offers a unique opportunity for you, as school nutrition professionals, to reach “out,” and explore new partnerships, while strengthening existing ones. It starts with the simple recognition that you should never limit your idea of “community.” Consider *all* of the following categories!

**SCHOOL COMMUNITY:** The other people who work in your school and district.

These include administrators and teachers, of course. But don’t overlook opportunities to connect with school nurses and counselors, office staff, custodians and maintenance teams, librarians, facilities staff, security officers, transportation teams, finance officers and volunteers. Parents and the students themselves are key members of this community, too.

**RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY:** The many organizations and businesses of your municipality. Examples of these include local government offices, first responders, retailers, members of the media, service providers, religious organizations, college/universities, childcare centers, sports and entertainment venues, arts organizations and more.

**FOODSERVICE COMMUNITY:** Everyone who works in the food business. These include local independent restaurants and franchisees of national chains, supermarkets and groceries; as well as community garden advocates, farmers/growers, dairies, bakeries, manufacturers/processors and distributors; plus caterers and others in the hospitality industry.

**HEALTH COMMUNITY:** All who support child wellness. These include individual medical practitioners, hospitals and urgent care centers, dietitians, advocacy organizations and more.

**SOCIAL SERVICES COMMUNITY:** Organizations that provide assistance to those struggling with hunger, poverty, mental illness, abuse, homelessness and other life issues. These include food banks/pantries, shelters, counselors and advocacy organizations.

**SCHOOL NUTRITION COMMUNITY:** All of your peers who work in large and small districts, individual school cafeterias, state agencies and vendor businesses, as well as consultants who provide education, training, marketing and public awareness support. Don’t forget your state and national associations.

## (M)ASKED & ANSWERED

When it became clear that wearing face masks would be a necessary new protocol for the **Charleston County (S.C.) School District** staffers he supervises, Nutrition Services Officer Joe Pettit took to his individual Facebook page to request help. He credits his personal network with stepping up without hesitation. “I reached out [on Friday] and asked if anyone would have masks to donate,” recounts Pettit. “By close of business, I had received 15 donated masks, with others wanting to do even more.”

This is another generous act repeated in numerous communities—but its prevalence doesn’t diminish the

powerful impact it has on individual school nutrition teams. In **Warsaw Community (Ind.) Schools**, “We had students and community volunteers making masks for our staff,” reports Director of Food Services Marci Franks. “We simply asked, and many responded overnight. We have always had support from our district and our community, but in terms of understanding more about what we do, this has changed. Daily, we receive calls, emails and notes telling us how much they appreciate our hard work.”

Local businesses are also donating masks. Jody Buckle, Director of Food & Nutrition in **Humboldt (Ariz.) Unified School District**, reports that several local partners are

providing this assistance to her department—including an actual mask manufacturer! Prescott Arizona Face Masks donated face masks for every member of Buckle’s crew.

## FOOD RELIEF

A number of school nutrition departments are partnering with area food banks and food pantries to coordinate grocery distribution for families to run concurrent with school meal pick-up. In Texas, the Houston Food Bank is the largest such food distribution organization in the country, and Director of Outreach Services Stephanie Berno credits longstanding connections with **Houston Independent School District**, as well as several other districts, in their ability to serve area families during the crisis. “The Region 4 Educational Service Center has also been so supportive. Their executive director shared our emails with superintendents, so we are working with some [new] districts,” says Berno. “I think this will forever change things going forward and help us all have better relationships.”



“This crisis has really opened my eyes. Not only are we working with our community partners, but we’re really deepening our relationships with internal stakeholders, as well.”

Joe Pettit, Charleston County School District, South Carolina

Every segment of the foodservice industry has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, so it should come as no surprise to see restaurants join forces with school foodservice departments. In Warsaw, Ind., partnering with local restaurants has been a “win-win-win,” according to Franks, and she credits local chef Scott Tope for getting the ball rolling. “Within days of schools being closed and stay-at-home orders issued, Chef Scott contacted us to ask how he could be of assistance,” Franks recounts. Less than a week later, a plan was underway for four small, local, family-owned restaurants to help prep school meals. “The partnership will help them make payroll throughout COVID-19,” Franks notes. “It’s a win-win-win by keeping staff employed, and safe, while meeting the essential nutrition needs of our children.”

When a chef showed up to lend a hand in Charleston County School District, few people realized they had a celebrity in their midst. As Pettit recounts, he simply received a call from a community member who had an idea to help out. “He said, ‘I have a smoker, and I want to come and hand out pulled pork and pulled chicken sandwiches to

the parents who don’t get meals from you guys.’” It was a parent who recognized Jamie Hough from “MasterChef” Season 10 and gave the tip to Pettit.

Pettit later learned that Hough’s day job is as a charter boat captain. “But during disasters, he volunteers to help rescue and feed people. That’s his deal.” In fact, Captain Jamie’s non-profit, Southeast Rescue and Relief, was involved in relief efforts in Houston during Hurricane Harvey and in the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian.

## TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

For many attendees of SNA’s 2020 Legislative Action Conference in Washington, D.C., the event was a turning point in COVID-19 awareness. Patsi Gregory, SNS, Supervisor of School Nutrition, **Robertson County (Tenn.) Schools**, says she returned to her district with a new sense of purpose. “At that point, we couldn’t envision what would happen,”

recounts Gregory. “I got back to my district on a Wednesday, and talked to my director and assistant director of schools on Thursday and Friday. On Monday, we were forming a leadership team that also included the supervisors of student services and transportation.”

The transportation partnership turned out to be a crucial one for Gregory, whose meal services plan had to transition from curbside pick-up to off-site delivery in order to reach more students. The process has required constant adjustment, and the transportation team has been supportive every step of the way. “Right now, we are running 34 bus routes out of 11 schools,” reports Gregory. “Working with our transportation department has been phenomenal. We could pack meals all day, but we can’t get the meals out without them.”

The YMCA has also emerged as a crucial community partner for Gregory’s team. Located directly across the street from NorthCrest Medical Center, “They are providing daycare for the children of the medical staff, so we were asked if we could deliver meals for those students,” explains Gregory.



## AS SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Here are a few more inspirational connections *School Nutrition* discovered on social media in recent weeks:

- » Seeds and/or seedlings donated by local nurseries, parks departments and local Dairy Councils to be distributed to students in honor of Earth Day;
- » Local stores of national and regional retailers (including Ace Hardware, CVS, Kroger, and Winn-Dixie) donating bags to help schools package meals;
- » Other national businesses, such as T-Mobile, making donations of cash and/or supplies in several districts;
- » Teachers, para-educators and other school volunteers producing handwritten notes to include in meals for students;
- » Members of religious communities volunteering to deliver meals or help with curbside distribution;
- » Tents donated by a local funeral home to help a district serve students in the rain; and
- » Police officers ensuring the security of staff responsible for meal distribution in many communities.

She didn't need to be asked twice. Now, the YMCA's director sends her a daily text with the number of children expected for childcare, "And we make sure those meals are delivered."

## INNOVATIVE INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

As school nutrition operators started scaling up their COVID-19 emergency feeding operations, many national and regional vendors serving the K-12 segment took steps to offer a wide range of support. Examples include free resources from several tech companies (such as EMS-LINQ/Meals Plus, NutriSlice and PCS Revenue); menu ideas, meal kit suggestions and recipes (from organizations like the American Egg Board, Bush's Best Beans and Kellogg's); special heat-at-home instructions for company product lines (from such vendors as Schwan's, Tasty Brands and Tyson Foods); customizable signage and bags (from partners like General Mills, Loveyourlunchroom.com); and helpful supplier connections (United Fresh Produce). You can learn more about these and many others on SNA's COVID-19 special web section at [www.schoolnutrition.org/covid19/sna-industry-partner](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/covid19/sna-industry-partner).

Other partners in the food manufacturer and processor segment are more local, and sometimes individual in nature. In **Clayton (Wis.) School District**, Food Service



“We could not be more proud of the efforts of the foodservice, transportation and nursing staff for their commitment to the children in our community during this national crisis. This is the greatest example of teamwork ever witnessed in school foodservice.”

Joe Urban, Greenville County Schools, South Carolina

Manager Diane Swiontek’s students are enjoying tasty cheese curds thanks to the efforts of a local dairy delivery truck driver who launched a “cheese curd fund” with a personal \$5,000 donation, which is helping dairy farmers *and* students. “The farmers here have had to dump their milk,” laments Swiontek. “Sales are down, and this is a way to help farmers by getting their cheese to the schools.” She explains that when one local dairy called and asked her if she’d be interested in a donation, “I said yes, of course! The kids love cheese. They also gave us a recipe for pepperoni pizza bread, with the nutritional information.” Another in-kind donation in the chain was the free delivery of the cheese curds to schools by an area trucking company. “Cheese curds are a big thing in Wisconsin,” she notes.

In **Cypress-Fairbanks (Texas) Independent School District**, “Early on, we realized we would need a way to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. This is quite a challenge to do when feeding curbside,” recounts Darin Crawford, Director of Nutrition Services. “We reached out to Igloo Products Corporation here in Texas, and they agreed to allow

us to purchase nearly 600 of their large catering coolers at cost. This has allowed us to do some home delivery and it also will enable us to transition to hot entrées,” he notes.

## THE TIES THAT BIND

“*We’re all in this together*” is so much more than an oft-repeated slogan. It represents an undeniable truth. After all, you can probably fill in this blank yourself: “I couldn’t have done this without \_\_\_\_\_.”

Moving forward, it’s important to remember that no matter what the future holds, making the most of *today’s* opportunities is critical. Strengthening your existing partnerships and forging new ones will help you to position your school nutrition program for success in a post-COVID-19 landscape. After all, someday, someone will remember that they couldn’t have done it without *you*. **SN**

*Christina Uticone is a contributing editor for School Nutrition.*



“School foodservice teams are putting themselves at risk on the front lines to feed our children because at the core of their very being, they want to make sure our students are taken care of. We share a common purpose, a common vision with our community to make that happen.”

Marci Franks, Warsaw Community Schools, Indiana

# is for Thank You

When COVID-19 shut down our schools, families across the country faced a hunger crisis. But K-12 food service operators rose up to meet that crisis head-on and served **MILLIONS** of meals in very difficult times to ensure children would not go hungry.

We see you. We see what you're doing for our children, our families and our communities. And we *thank you*.



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