Local Food Systems Response to COVID:
Building Better Beyond

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PreK & K-12 Schools as Access Points for Local Food

ISSUE

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 emergency caused the abrupt shut down of schools and many early care and education sites across the country. These closures not only disrupted classroom learning, they limited access to school meals, a vital source of nutritious food for many children. Prior to COVID-19 related closures, United States Department of Agriculture Child Nutrition Programs served nutritious meals to 29.4 million children per day. Three quarters of these meals were served to children eligible for free or reduced price meals, based on their family income. The closures of schools in addition to other wholesale outlets have severely impacted food producers. Inflexibility and lack of diversity within consolidated food supply chains and some supply chain partners left producers with abundant product that they could not move amidst dramatic market losses.

INNOVATION

In addition to or as an alternative to leveraging federally funded programs, communities developed their own ways to respond to and support children and families. Many schools used their distribution infrastructure and reach to become hubs for families and communities to access food beyond school meals. By partnering with philanthropic organizations, city governments, and non-profit community organizations, many schools became central distribution points for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, local food boxes, or grocery bags. These are all broadly referred to as "food share programs." Communities also used the opportunity to prioritize purchasing from local food producers, especially farms that have historically not had access to institutional markets and federal supports, including small farms and farms owned by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), to supply these programs.

OUTCOME

Communities with existing farm to school initiatives and multi-agency collaboratives were able to quickly pivot to provide urgently needed food access while re-investing local, philanthropic, and federal dollars into a local food economy reeling from pandemic disruptions. It is precisely because of community-scale networks and ongoing partnerships (rather than large scale or consolidated efforts) that initiatives highlighted in this brief were able to provide hundreds of thousands of pounds of locally produced, fresh, and healthful foods to community members impacted by COVID-19 and the associated economic crisis.

Background

School meal programs are an important economic support for families. These programs allow families to use what might be limited household funds on other expenses with assurance that their children are receiving nourishing breakfast, lunch, snacks, and often dinner at school. Disruption of access to these meals, resulting from school closures, coincided with dramatic increases in unemployment and reverberating pandemic-related economic losses. The pandemic and associated economic crisis created an unprecedented spike in the number of families experiencing food and nutrition insecurity. Feeding America projects an additional 864,000 children are now living in food insecure households due to COVID-19, bringing the estimated total in the U.S. to 2.2 million children.

Schools and communities responded quickly to address the needs of children and families. Thanks to a series of USDA waivers, schools were able to shift meal service to innovative COVID-adapted approaches. In many instances, these waivers enabled schools and community service sites to provide meals to all children free of charge and allowed for service models such as grab n'go meals that families could pick up, and even meal delivery to neighborhoods using school buses. In addition, Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), supplemental funds to purchase food while children had less access to school meals, was available for families of children eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. And yet, many districts across the country have faced challenges balancing the quality and nutrition of these meals with slashed budgets and limited staff. These issues are complicated further by the logistics of grab n'go distribution as well as significant delays in the implementation of P-EBT.

Federal interventions, including the Farm to Family Food Box program, attempted to help fill this food access gap for families and provide outlets for producers. However, in execution of the program, distribution of these food boxes was a challenge and local and regional serving producers, particularly producers of color, did not proportionally benefit from these funding opportunities. Schools and partnering community organizations played an essential role in bridging the divide between local food systems and an array of emergency food distribution efforts.

This brief highlights school-based food share programs and identifies strategies for successfully using them to feed students and their families while supporting the local food system. Further, it examines how many of these initially short-term emergency programs are transitioning to permanent models.

On-site Food Share Programs During COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, as students were first shifting to remote learning, school districts and communities quickly adopted several different models for procuring, distributing, and funding local food shares for K-12 and early care and education (ECE) students, their families, and the community. While logistics varied, the programs highlighted in this brief relied on multi-organization community partnerships to effectively launch and operate their food shares. New programs were quickly established in communities with existing collaborative networks –between school districts, non-profits, food policy councils, farms, farmers' markets, extension offices, food banks, and others.

Power In Food Policy Councils

For example, in Massachusetts, the **Springfield Food Policy Council** (SFPC) and **Springfield Public Schools** (SPS) have a longstanding collaborative relationship. They have successfully

advocated for policies such as universal free breakfast, lunch, and breakfast after the bell. In addition, they have implemented programs resulting in school gardens, salad bars in every school, and a multimillion-dollar Sodexo-run culinary center designed to increase the amount of fresh, local food served to students. At the beginning of the pandemic, World Farmers in Lancaster Massachusetts, a farming cooperative that provides land, resources, trainings, and markets for over 300 immigrant and refugee farmers, began distributing food boxes to Springfield families through the USDA Farmers to Food Box program.

In addition to providing a supplement to school meals, working with World Farmers allowed SFPC and SPS to support 300 farmers of color, include food items in the boxes that were culturally appropriate to families, and led to many of the farmers becoming authorized for the Massachusetts Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), which allocates additional funding to households for authorized local fruits and vegetables. World Farmers delivered 450 boxes of produce each week to the culinary center where it was stored and refrigerated by Sodexo and delivered to school meal pickup sites. By the time funding for that program ended in June, it was clear that many families were reliant on it as a food source. "We had to keep fresh food in front of people, that's all we knew," says SFPC Director Liz Wills-O'Gilvie of the additional $90,000 they raised to keep the program running through the growing season. Of that funding, $20,000 went to building 58 garden beds for community members (many of whom were also receiving boxes). That effort employed four low-income residents far above minimum wage and the remainder went directly to World Farmers.

Starting in mid-April, the **District of Columbia** began contracting with **DC Central Kitchen** and **Martha's Table** (two organizations with extensive experience in emergency food distribution) to bring 3,000 grocery bags of fresh, local produce to 10 different DC Public School meal sites each week. With support from the **DC Food Policy Council**, the Emergency Operations Center chose ten sites based on the geographies that would serve the greatest number of people and reach the areas with the highest levels of food insecurity. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DC Food Policy Council regularly worked with District agency partners from DC Public and Charter Schools, the emergency food sector, The Department of Human Services, and others working to increase food security and access across the city. These relationships allowed the Emergency Operations Center to leverage the subject matter expertise of staff in place to quickly identify geographic areas that would most benefit from their services.

When speaking about the program, Director of Food Policy for the District, Ona Balkus said "We were thrilled to be able to contract with local emergency food nonprofits who could provide high quality, fresh groceries to our residents. It makes sense to meet people where they are, providing fresh food and supporting local organizations through a difficult time."

While available to anyone in the city, the grocery bag program was strategically co-located with public school feeding locations to best serve students and their families. Starting in April and ending in October, the program served almost 90,000 bags of food to anyone in DC that needed them. "A big part of this was about keeping food as local as possible," DC Food Policy Council staffer Tariq Sheriff says of the nearly 1 million pounds of food distributed. "This is a big part of why we contracted with these non-profits who were already sourcing local. It keeps dollars in the District, keeps folks employed, and helps address food insecurity."

Building on Powerful Partnerships

East of Springfield in Lowell Massachusetts, nonprofit **Mill City Grows** (MCG) coordinates a Youth Food Justice Program, runs an urban farm, and manages the gardens at 13 schools in the district of **Lowell Public Schools** (LPS). At the beginning of the pandemic, Mill City Grows turned three of those school gardens into production spaces, growing produce for 300 school garden shares. Notably, 60% of the produce was sourced from the gardens and the remainder came from local farms. Using Mill City Grows' commercial kitchen, the produce was vetted for quality, washed, and packaged for distribution at summer meal pickup sites over a period of ten weeks. The shares were free, with no questions asked, for any family or community member. "Beyond food distribution, one exciting effect of this program was the re-galvanizing of teachers and administrators around their school garden spaces," says Lowell Farm to School Manager Maggie Nowak, "especially during the summer, a [traditionally] difficult time for maintenance and engagement for school gardens."

Since 2019, **Concordia Charter School** in Mesa, Arizona has partnered with **Sun Produce Cooperative** on a food share program that is available to students and their families as well as other community members. During a normal school year, the program is largely run by the 6th grade class who sort wholesale lots of produce sourced from growers across Arizona into the individual food shares. Students use the program to raise money for extracurricular activities like science camp and gardening activities. While the food share program shut down in the early weeks of the pandemic when students left school, Wellness Coordinator Rachel Gomez Acosta soon realized that there was a huge demand in the community for the service the program provided —weekly home delivery of fresh, local foods.

While Rachel didn't have the students to help with packaging, she was still able to relaunch the program quickly thanks to the strong existing relationships with Sun Produce Cooperative and the community network of customers. Relaunching the program provided Sun Produce Cooperative another outlet for wholesale orders that Rachel then packaged herself into individual shares. It helped support the Cooperative mission to "create viable alternative distribution streams for Arizona's smaller-scale producers." The shares are designed to include Arizona grown produce staples that families are familiar with and to showcase unique products from smaller farms in the community.

The CSA program is open to and promoted to families at the school and to local community members. CSA shares are SNAP-EBT eligible and anyone paying with EBT receives 50% off the bag price through the Double Up Food Bucks program. The shares also include educational pamphlets with nutritional information, storage recommendations, and recipes. As food insecurity in Mesa accelerated dramatically amid the pandemic, more families are relying on EBT just as more families are cooking at home with limited access to school meals. Access to locally sourced food boxes (and cooking and preparation educational materials) became an important resource for families in the community.

Caring Early & Often with Local Food

Early care and education (ECE) sites, which focus on the education and growth of children under the age of 5, also leaned on innovative partnerships to keep families fed during the pandemic. Depending on the state and jurisdiction, many early care sites remained open and continued to serve families, even as public schools closed. Early care sites often provide wrap-around services and resources for families. Amid the pandemic, they continued to work to meet the needs of the families they serve.

CentroNía, with locations in Washington DC and Maryland, provides early childhood education, professional development to educators, and family support services in a bilingual and multicultural environment to more than 2,400 low-income children and families. Since 2018, DC's CentroNía, has partnered with **FRESHFARM Markets** to provide families with farmers' market vouchers and highlight local food on their menu. During the pandemic, CentroNía leveraged funding from the **National Farm to School Network** COVID-19 Relief Fund and the **Mid-Atlantic Food Resilience and Access Coalition** (MAFRAC) to initiate several new programs to connect families to nutritious, local food.

CentroNia's programs included distribution of gift cards for the **Crossroads Community Food Network Farmer's Market** so families could access local foods in their neighborhood. CentroNía's DC location distributed 5,600 lbs of local produce to 280 families from July to October 2020. The Maryland location distributed USDA Farm to Families food boxes to 55 families over a 10-week period in June. These local foods initiatives were layered into the many other services that CentroNía provided for families including access to USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meals, grocery gift cards for people who tested positive for COVID-19, food cards and financial resources for families with undocumented status, and diaper distribution. Connecting families to local markets and continuing to build relationships with producers and mission driven distribution partners, even in times of crisis, addresses immediate community needs, and moves CentroNia towards long term goals of increasing local food procurement for their programs.

From Emergency Need to Long Term Solutions

The programs discussed above are only a sample of the innovative ways school systems and their partners across the U.S. adapted existing farm-to-school initiatives or built new ones to keep students and their communities fed during the Spring and Summer of 2020. By the fall, it became clear that the need for supplemental fresh, local food was not a short-term need and many of these programs are now looking for ways to sustain, expand, or transition to long term operations.

Start as you mean to go on

Concordia Charter School's community food share program existed before COVID-19 and will continue to operate after the pandemic. Rachel Gomez Acosta, Wellness Coordinator for Concordia Charter School, says there has been an uptick in interest due to the pandemic as well as an increase in additional financial support. An increasing number of families used their Pandemic EBT benefits to purchase the school's food shares. Acosta anticipates this trend to continue as long as Pandemic EBT is available and hopes that families will continue to purchase the local food shares now that they've had the opportunity to purchase and use the fresh produce. In addition to their long-term partnership with Sun Produce, collaborations with other local organizations have helped position the program for long term

implementation. The local SNAP-Ed implementing Cooperative Extension agency provides food safety and handwashing training for students working on the project. They also furnish nutrition education materials, recipes, and storage tips to include in the CSA shares. The food share program is also well integrated into school activities. It supports the school wellness policy goals of creating healthy food environments, offering nutrition education opportunities for children and families, and establishing community partnerships that support school health initiatives.

Recognizing the success and impact of their Summer Share Program, Mill City Grows and Lowell Public Schools Food and Nutrition Service are developing a long-term strategy for integrating the school garden share with year-round, city-wide fresh food initiatives. The goal is to create a suite of wrap-around programming between food shares available at summer meal sites, winter/fall CSA and farmers markets, and other food programs such as virtual cooking and garden education classes. While the MCG community CSA shares are available to purchase, about half of participants are supported by SNAP and WIC benefits, and many use incentive funds through the Massachusetts Healthy Incentives Program (HIP). By 2022, MCG anticipates being able to defray most of the school garden share costs with SNAP benefits from the programs throughout the year.

Long term solutions need long term support

SFPC Director, Liz Wills-O'Gilvie, is eager to replicate the food box program in 2021 but is clear-eyed in observing that "What every marginalized community needs is funding for these programs." Throughout 2020, the program provided 450 local produce boxes a week, with 3,000 families participating on a regular rotating basis. Based on the cost and volume of the 2020 program, SFPC estimates they need to raise $150,000 to continue to serve these and other families through 2021-22. If funding is secured the World Farmers cooperative has committed to continuing to deliver boxes to Springfield, and the program could expand to include additional local farmers. In the meantime, SFPC continues their work to build gardens, distribute seeds, amend school wellness policies, distribute fresh food, and advocate for policies that will contribute to long term solutions for a more resilient and racially just food system. "Everything we do, I'm thinking about what policy could come from this," Liz says.

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Liz Wills-O'Gilvie, SFPC Director

For others, while the initial emergency food share programs may have ended, the work of feeding their community is hardly over. The grocery bag program coordinated by the DC Food Policy Council ended at the end of October for a number of reasons, including the end of public funding and the seasonality of local produce. However, the city and its Food Policy Council have continued to offer other ongoing programs such as their GetHelp Hotline, which provides home-delivered shelf stable food items to residents who are having trouble accessing food due to COVID-19. "I think we know where the emergency food needs to go now and it helped us realize where there are residents we haven't been connecting with and serving fully," says DC Food Policy Council's Tariq Sheriff, "Part of our big struggle is the amount of long term funding it takes to keep these things operating." With DC public schools fluctuating between in-person, remote, and hybrid learning (as of the end of 2020 they had returned to 100% remote), the city will determine if they will reinvest in a grocery bag program in the Spring

of 2021. Since they created a training program and operating manual for the grocery bag program in 2020, Tariq believes it will be relatively easy to get the program up and running again with little notice.

Conclusion

As the examples presented in this brief clearly demonstrate, existing farm to school and community-based food security networks were able to mobilize quickly in a time of acute need to not only feed their communities, but also provide healthful foods that further contribute to the resilience of the local economy. These initiatives also underscore the importance of building and maintaining long-term collaborative networks between local food system stakeholders and community food security networks. By connecting school and childcare systems, local food organizations, local and state governments, and emergency food networks, these programs were able to quickly deliver targeted support to children, their families, and other vulnerable members of the community. Through collaboration, quick action, and firsthand knowledge of the specific dynamics and needs of their community, these initiatives addressed acute needs of those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and underserved by federal initiatives. A key question for food system leaders moving forward is how to build on the farm to school successes realized prior to the pandemic and leverage the invaluable lessons learned about the vital links between local food systems and emergency food security during this time of adaptation and innovation.

Building Better Beyond:
opportunities and considerations

Key Considerations for Connecting Communities to Local Food through Schools and ECE Sites

- **Partnerships** - The height of an emergency is not the time to start developing partnerships between schools, community organizations, and local producers. Strong, well developed partnerships established before the COVID-19 emergency helped communities pivot to connect families to food in creative ways. Partnerships across sectors highlighted in these examples include farmers markets, food hubs and farmers cooperatives, Extension agencies, and food banks and pantries.

- **Funding** - Because of the uncertainty of emergency funding streams, many organizations layered different funding sources to support their initiatives and create sustainability. Funding ranged from federal emergency support, including CARES Act funding and Farmers to Families program, national non-profit funding streams such as No Kid Hungry and National Farm to School Network, local philanthropic and foundation funders, and individual community donations.

- **Distribution** - A frequent challenge of emergency and local food distribution is the "last mile" to families. One advantage of working through a K-12 or early care site are the existing distribution pathways these programs are using to get meals to children. Communities were able to meet people where they were by leveraging existing food distribution sites, developing community pick up sites, and using door-to-door drop off, often in partnership with the district transportation departments and the help of school bus drivers. Partnering with other organizations, such as non-profits or food hubs, that have existing delivery infrastructure also helped programs reach families.

- **Leveraging federal nutrition programs** - In addition to leveraging the infrastructure and partnerships of child nutrition programs, many programs also encouraged participants to use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Double Up Food Bucks to purchase local food boxes and CSA shares. Pandemic EBT distributions meant more families were utilizing SNAP dollars. These programs created opportunities for those SNAP dollars to be used on local food and to be reinvested into the local community.

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Thanks for reading!

For more information and resources on *Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Building Better Beyond,* **visit: https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/** where you can sign up for our project listserv, read other innovation briefs, and check out resources put forth by other sectors of the local and regional food system.

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