

Rural Schools: Challenges and Opportunities for School Meal Programs

Research Summary, November 2021

Background

Children and adolescents living in rural communities are at increased risk of obesity and food insecurity. Schools can play an essential role in addressing diet-related disparities, but multiple factors can impact the cafeteria environment and student participation in school meal programs. This summary of the research review [Rural Schools: Challenges and Opportunities for School Meal Programs](#) highlights how school meal operational characteristics in rural schools compare to urban and suburban schools; identifies challenges that impact the operation of rural school meal programs; and presents opportunities for innovation.

Operational Characteristics

Operational decisions made by School Food Authorities (SFAs)—which manage the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program at the local level—often differ across rural, suburban, and urban schools.

- There are numerous strategies to procure school meals in a cost-efficient manner that are not being used to their fullest extent in rural schools, including: food purchasing cooperatives; the Department of Defense Fresh Produce Program; utilization of tools for selecting and purchasing healthier foods; school gardens; and procurement of locally grown or produced foods.
- Kitchen and cafeteria equipment can save schools time in preparation and improve efficiency and storage capacity, but rural school districts tend to have smaller SFA budgets, and thus less money for purchases and repairs, than suburban and urban districts.
- Wellness policies can play an important role in creating a school environment that promotes students' health, but rural districts have lower rates of involvement by important stakeholders, including food service staff, dietitians or nutritionists, and parents.
- School nutrition promotion can play a key role in obtaining buy-in from students, parents, and school staff, but fewer rural schools report engaging in outreach activities and initiatives to engage these key stakeholders.

Challenges

Rural schools face many unique challenges when operating school meal programs.

- Rural schools may experience higher costs to provide school meals, which may lead to reduced revenues (and thus fewer opportunities to enhance the food service program, such as purchasing new equipment). These higher costs often translates to higher meal prices for those students who are not eligible for free/reduced-priced meals, thus discouraging their participation.

- Schools in rural regions may have limited staff size and capacity, which can limit schools' abilities for promotional activities, procurement strategies, and applications for external grants (e.g., equipment, improved infrastructure, and programming).
- There may also be challenges regarding students' socio-cultural food preferences and exposures, especially in areas where families may have financial constraints and decreased access to healthier foods.
- Lastly, in rural regions, student populations often live in sparsely populated areas, which can result in more time spent in transit thus limited time for students to participate in school breakfast programs or after-school snack programs, and lower participation rates.

Opportunities

There are multiple opportunities for rural schools to address these challenges.

- Policies—such as Universal Free School Meals (including participation in the Community Eligibility Provision)—can support greater participation among students and can also address some of the financial challenges that schools face.
- Child Nutrition Agencies can provide technical assistance, resources, and trainings that are tailored to meet the needs of rural schools.
- Further opportunities for training, as well as nutrition education, school gardens, or other programming, can be supported by regional collaborations with external partners, such as parents, nonprofit organizations, county Cooperative Extension agents, and institutions of higher education.
- SFAs can also create cooperatives to procure foods at lower costs and increase access to a greater variety of foods.
- Lastly, increased involvement in the development and implementation of wellness policies can support a healthier school food environment and increase buy-in for participation in school meals.

