



End of K-12 Free Emergency Meals for All Students:
Just as Schools Re-open, USDA Lets Feeding Program Expire,
SGV Superintendents Join Forces

July 30, 2020, Alhambra, CA — During the spring and summer, as the coronavirus health crisis exploded, the government allowed thousands of parents and students to pick up free school meals curbside during the pandemic shut-down without having to prove they were low income.

Now, just as schools are set to re-open for the 2020-21 academic year, the Department of Agriculture says that food program will not continue — news that has flown under the radar and will land as a hard thud on struggling parents in August.

Parents will be required to re-apply for free or reduced-fee meals for their children when they are already grappling with pandemic economic hardships, the juggling of multiple roles, and dealing with state and county rules that require most students to begin the year at home with Distance Learning.

“Not being able to distribute free meals to all students in a pandemic is a crisis for our families and a logistical nightmare for districts,” says Alhambra Unified Superintendent Denise R. Jaramillo. “This will impact hungry kids and scared parents trying to make ends meet.” AUSD distributed over 240,000 free student meals during school closures. More than 70% of the district’s student were eligible for free or reduced-fee meals last year.

According to Kidsdata.org, one out of four California students does not know where their next meal will come from. According to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, one out of four adults in Los Angeles County has lost their job and that number is growing. Forty-six percent of small business owners say they won’t be able to stay in business.

A group of San Gabriel Valley school superintendents from Garvey, Rosemead, Monrovia, South Pasadena, Mountain View, El Monte City, Duarte, Arcadia and El Monte Union agree with Superintendent Jaramillo and join her in showcasing the student hunger problem.

According to Lillian Maldonado French, Superintendent of Mountain View School District, "This is a top priority for Mountain View School District since 94% of our students are in the free/reduced-fee Meal Program — we are an Option 2 district and all of our students eat for free. Not having easy access to these meals would be a significant hardship for an already struggling community." The MVSD district is preparing a letter signed by its Board, Administration, and Union Leaders to send to elected representatives. She adds, "The expiration of such a critical food program will make it extremely difficult to provide meals for our students."

Rosemead School District Superintendent, Alejandro Ruvalcaba, concurs, "One powerful way to look at the child hunger problem is to look at the numbers. From March to May during the school closure, our small district served 252,000 student meals. And we saw such gratitude! We got so many thank you letters and drawings from students." Last year, 75% of the 2400 Rosemead students qualified for free or reduced-fee meals. Ruvalcaba says he expects that percentage to rise, but notes that his parents are so confused, he is worried that they may not apply, "Our parents are paralyzed by their economic situations."

Anita Chu, Superintendent of Garvey School District, said, "Our free and reduced-fee applications are coming in very slowly — too slowly. What worries me most is the whole concept of not understanding that we now have a much higher number of high-need hungry families who do not have the knowledge or the ability to focus attention on applying for the free and reduced lunch and won't therefore be eligible." Eighty percent of Garvey students were eligible for free or reduced-fee meals last year.

Duarte USD Superintendent, Gordon Amerson, said, "This is a critical issue for our scholars and their overall well-being." Other SGV Superintendents who agree that the USDA feeding program is essential for their students include Dr. Katherine Fundukian Thorassian, Monrovia Schools; Dr. Maribel Garcia, El Monte City School District; Dr. David Vannassdell, Arcadia USD; and Dr. Geoff Yantz, South Pasadena USD.

The School Nutrition Association has activated its vast network of local school officials to send nearly 20,000 emails to lawmakers asking them to pressure USDA to approve the

remaining waivers for the rest of the school year. A spending bill on the House side includes language urging USDA to act. There's also a [letter circulating in the Senate](#) on this pressing the issue.

According to Politico, most school cafeteria programs already face much higher food, labor, transportation, and packaging costs, as they have been essentially operating emergency meals programs at scale for months. Nutrition providers had to come up with creative ways to still feed their students with schools shut down. Most districts are now operating some form of meal curbside pickups, and some — like Alhambra Unified — are even dropping meals off at students' homes on a regular basis.

Superintendent Jaramillo points out, "We know hungry kids cannot easily learn. During this time, we want our Food and Nutrition Services staff to concentrate on feeding kids in need instead of spending time dealing with the administrative and operational roadblocks."

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