

# Planning for the 2021–2022 School Year: Considerations and Checklist

As communities continue to recover from COVID-19, school districts, out-of-school time program providers, and community partners have an important role to play in ensuring that all children have access to nutritious breakfasts, lunches, and afterschool snacks and suppers during the upcoming school year. While there are still many unknowns when it comes to the 2021–2022 school year — including what the school day will look like in every district — the recent extension of key nationwide waivers provides school districts and community sponsors much-needed consistency and time to plan for success.

This resource provides information on options available for serving meals in the 2021–2022 school year as well as a checklist to guide program implementation. This will be updated as more information is available.

## Overview of Key Nationwide Waivers Available During 2021–2022 School Year

- **Seamless Summer Option through School Year 2021–2022.** This waiver allows school districts to serve meals through the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) in place of the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Through this flexibility, schools can serve meals to all children at no charge. Meals served through SSO during the 2021–2022 school year must follow the school breakfast and lunch nutrition standards and are reimbursed at the higher Summer Food Service Program [reimbursement rates](#).
- **Meal Service Options.** The non-congregate, meal service times and parent pick-up waivers allow schools to continue to use meal distribution methods that work best for their students, including home delivery, “grab and go,” curbside pick up, multiple meal distribution, and bulk meals. This is important as many schools continue to rely on hybrid or remote instruction models. While these waivers are not available to Summer Food sponsors, schools can serve community-based sites.
- **Meal Pattern Flexibility.** Allows state agencies to grant requests for flexibility on the meal pattern requirements, including serving at least one whole grain-rich item daily across all meals; crediting grains by ounce equivalents by October 1, 2021; and offering low-fat milk that is unflavored only. Schools must request and receive

approval to implement these flexibilities on a case-by-case basis.

- **Afterschool Suppers and Snacks.** Schools and community programs are able to apply for and serve free meals and/or snacks regardless of the location during the 2021–2022 school year. Additionally, flexibilities for non-congregate (including multiple-day and bulk meals) remain available during the pandemic.

**For more information on the available waivers, use the Food Research & Action Center’s resource: [Summary of USDA’s Nationwide Child Nutrition Waivers in Response to COVID-19](#).**

## Transitioning to SSO

While schools are not required to use SSO during the 2021–2022 school year, it offers many benefits. It allows schools to serve *all* children breakfasts and lunches at no charge, which reduces the administrative burden on school nutrition departments, ensures that all children have the nutrition they need to succeed in school, and eliminates unpaid school meals fees. Schools that continue to operate NSLP and SBP under the normal rules are reimbursed based on the student’s eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, and charge students who have not been certified for free school meals a school meal fee (schools can only charge students certified for reduced-price meals a maximum of \$0.30 cents for breakfast and \$0.40 cents for lunch; prices for paid meals are set by each school district). Meals served under NSLP or SBP will be reimbursed at the applicable NSLP and SBP rates, which is lower than the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) rate available through the SSO waiver in the upcoming school year.

Here are some considerations when moving from NSLP/SFSP to SSO:

- **Contact your state agency to determine the paperwork required to operate SSO.** Many state agencies will require some kind of paperwork, which may be as simple as an addendum to a school's NSLP application. The SSO waiver is available beginning July 1, 2021; schools may find it advantageous to switch over to SSO before the beginning of the school year.
- **Revisit Menus.** Breakfasts and lunches served through SSO must meet the SBP and NSLP meal patterns. It may be necessary to simplify and shorten cyclical menus. For example, a district could identify the top 10 entrees and use that list as part of a two-week cycle menu.
- **U.S. Department of Agriculture Resource: [Seamless Summer Option: Providing Multiple Meals at a Time During the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#)**

## Checklist for Success in School Year 2020–2021

- ✓ **Use the available summer nutrition waivers to ensure students are able to access meals regardless of their learning model.**
- ✓ **Adopt [community eligibility](#) to ensure students and families have access to free school meals for the next four school years.** While school districts can offer free meals to all students in the 2021–2022 school year through the summer nutrition waivers, the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) encourages schools to elect community eligibility this year to lock in their current identified student percentage (ISP) — which might be higher than normal given the economic impact of COVID-19 on families — for the next four years through the 2024–2025 school year.

**Deadline:** Through a nationwide waiver, states can extend the deadline to adopt community eligibility through September 30, 2021.

### Resources

- [Take a Fresh Look at Community Eligibility for the 2021–2022 School Year](#)
- Use [FRAC's grouping tool](#) to group schools together to increase an ISP and maximize claiming percentages.

- Use FRAC's [financial calculators](#) to determine the participation needed to break even and compare implementing the Community Eligibility Provision to your current operations.
- Learn more about community eligibility at <https://frac.org/community-eligibility>.

- ✓ **Maximize participation in your school nutrition programs.** There are proven strategies and best practices for expanding the reach of school breakfast and school lunch that schools can implement as they return to more normalized school nutrition operations. These include
  - [restructuring school lunch time](#) to give students enough time to eat;
  - [implementing breakfast after the bell models](#);
  - [increasing the appeal of school meals](#) through offering locally sourced foods, scratch-cooking, culturally reflective menu items, and engaging students;
  - [enhancing the cafeteria environment](#) to provide well-designed spaces;
  - [market and brand the school meals program](#) to create awareness around the program and the initiatives the district is participating in; and
  - [providing robust nutrition education](#) to make the cafeteria an extension of the classroom.

### Resources

- Guide on [How to Start a Breakfast After the Bell Program](#)

- ✓ **Create a School Meal Application Outreach Plan.** With school districts across the country offering free meals to all students through the summer nutrition programs, many schools have found it more difficult to collect school meals applications. These forms often are used for more than just certifying students for free or reduced-price school meals; they also help with linking families to other benefits, e.g., waiving testing fees and participating in the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, and are used in some cases to distribute some types of education funding. Even though students are able to receive free meals through the summer nutrition programs through school year 2021–

2022, submitting school meals applications remains crucial to ensuring that students and their families are able to access these key benefits, and for this to happen, schools must continually encourage families to submit applications.

#### Resources

- [Strategies to Increase Applications for School Meals Toolkit](#)
- [Customizable School Meal Application Outreach Resources](#)

#### ✓ Run a robust Afterschool Meals Program.

Offering afterschool suppers and snacks provides an important opportunity for school districts to support the nutritional needs of their students while drawing down more federal dollars that can help support the financial viability of their school nutrition operations. Additionally, there are a number of waivers that support schools and community afterschool meal sponsors during the pandemic, such as allowing programs to operate in areas that don't meet the 50 percent area eligibility threshold, sending meals home if programming is limited, and meeting the enrichment requirement virtually. Schools and sponsors should connect with their state agencies to learn more about available flexibilities before making any changes to their operations.

#### Resources

- [Develop an Afterschool Meals Outreach Plan](#)
- [Eight Ways to Increase Participation in Afterschool Suppers](#)

✓ **Ensure eligible students and families access P-EBT benefits.** P-EBT provides critical assistance for families with children when they miss out on free and reduced-price school meals due to virtual learning or hybrid schedules that reduce the number of days or hours that students are in the school building or during the upcoming summer break. As a trusted partner to students and families, school districts can help spread the word about P-EBT through established communication channels.

#### Resources

- [P-EBT Communications Toolkit](#)  
(Updated January 2021)
- [FRAC's Customizable P-EBT Outreach Materials](#)
- [FRAC's P-EBT Communications Resources Shared Drive \(includes sample outreach materials\)](#)
- For more information on P-EBT, visit [FRAC's P-EBT page](#).