

**North American Regional Learning Exchange on School Meals**  
**Global Child Nutrition Forum**  
**November 9, 2020 Meeting Summary**

On Monday, November 9, 2020, participants joined the [Global Child Nutrition Foundation](#) and [Breakfast Club of Canada](#) to explore and share experiences of implementing school meal programs during COVID-19 under two different country models - the US and Canada. Participants represented industry partners, school districts, and non-profit organizations. Results from an initial poll indicated that most respondents had little to no familiarity with how school meal programs operated in the other country.

Judith Barry of Breakfast Club of Canada and Heidi Kessler of Global Child Nutrition Foundation each provided a brief overview of school meals and how operations have changed during the pandemic.

Before proceeding with a set of pre-arranged topics, participants were offered the opportunity to ask participants of the other country questions about their programs. Numerous questions were offered and addressed including nutritional standards (varies by province or territory) and procurement methods (group purchasing; food hubs; direct purchase; regional distributions systems - varies depending on location) in Canada, and state involvement (federal funds flow through states to school districts) in the United States. A few questions were left unanswered and will be tracked to be addressed in a future meeting.

The first planned topic addressed partnerships and collaborations. School districts articulated the importance of collaborations and listed several that made their work possible including state agencies, food banks, non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and industry associations. Some share examples of successful collaborations include:

- Louisville KY: At times during the pandemic, the [Jefferson County Public School District](#) was only able to reach 12-18% of the student population it has previously been serving and they were facing the possibility of significant amounts of food waste from their stores. They engaged local food banks to redistribute the food. The district is also beginning a new partnership with [Lee Initiative](#), a non-profit engaging out of work kitchen staff and chefs to provide food to the community. They will utilize the school district distribution methods to get food out that they are not able to distribute. These meals will be in addition to the meals the schools provide.

- In [Oakland County, Michigan](#), a partnership with United Way of South East Michigan allowed for expansion of the school breakfast program and allowed for the provision of personal protective equipment.
- [Kids Eat Smart Newfoundland](#) provides 31,000 meals (approximately 50% of the student population) each school day in Newfoundland, Canada. They relied on partnerships with the provincial government and Breakfast Club of Canada to leverage over \$300,000 of additional funds from local partners. The money funded community centers in social housing to reach the most vulnerable populations. Food was delivered directly to doorsteps.

Participants articulated ways they are working to ensure they are good partners: Listen well, identify gaps, practice agility and flexibility; Identify needs of partners and work to meet those needs; Communicate clearly; Say thank you!; Establish responsibilities and deliverables from each side.

To allow participants to drive the agenda, the next section was designed to allow participants to vote on the next discussion topic, selecting from operational changes, procurement, access/equity, and nutritional quality. A technical complication resulted in procurement automatically being the next topic.

The majority of participants have faced significant procurement challenges during the pandemic.

- Accurate forecasting is nearly impossible causing problems all along the food chain. Participation numbers are changing daily. Some districts are re-examining their education models (in-person/virtual/hybrid) every two weeks. When the learning model changes, so do the foodservice models. Established patterns have not yet been set and with ongoing variables in learning models, it's unlikely that forecasting will be possible until the majority of kids are back in school.
- Program operators are serving more packaged and shelf-stable items due to labor shortages. Supplies are having trouble keeping up with demand. Foodservice operations have to carefully balance limited storage space.
- Alabama procures food through a statewide bid (one of only a few states who operate this way). Products typically available on the bid have not been available so they've had to

order off-contract which is atypical. Difficult to write new bids because numbers are so variable.

- Transportation and supply issues have been especially challenging in Newfoundland and in many other remote areas in Canada.

A closing poll asked participants if they had the energy and interest to meet again. All respondents said yes. To our knowledge, there is not currently an existing group conducting a cross-cultural exchange of school meal collaborations, practices, and innovations between the United States and Canada. Global Child Nutrition Foundation and Breakfast Club of Canada will work together to develop a strategy for convening the group again.

**For more information on this meeting or to offer suggestions for future meetings, please be in touch with us! We would love to hear from you.**

Heidi Kessler: [Heidi@GCNF.org](mailto:Heidi@GCNF.org)

Judith Barry: [Judith.Barry@breakfastclubcanada.org](mailto:Judith.Barry@breakfastclubcanada.org)