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SCHOOL DISTRICTS' EFFORTS TO REDUCE FOOD INSECURITY IN CALIFORNIA'S SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research Statement / Objectives: To explore best practices and challenges in school meal provision during COVID-19 in a low-income, predominately Latinx, rural region of California.

Background School closures to reduce COVID-19 transmission have disrupted U.S. child nutrition programs. Amidst rising poverty during the pandemic, school meals are of paramount importance in reducing food insecurity, which is associated with poor physical and mental health, particularly among children of color.

Methods: From June to August 2020, we conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (district superintendents, school nutrition directors, partner organizations) and focus groups with parents from school districts in California's San Joaquin Valley. We explored the following domains: food service during non-instructional periods; community partnerships; children's and families' needs; the Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer program; transition to future; and school reopening. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The study was conducted in partnership with two community organizations that recruited participants and provided input on research design, implementation, and analysis.

Community partners: Dolores Huerta Foundation www.doloreshuerta.org and Cultiva La Salud www.cultivalasalud.org

Results: Participants included 11 stakeholders and 29 parents across six school districts. Parent participants all identified as Latinx and were Spanish speaking. Primary challenges districts faced during COVID-19 included logistics for safe meal distribution, maintaining participation in programs, and staying informed on pandemic policies. Strategies to respond to challenges included bus-stop meal delivery, supplementing meals with supplies from partner organizations, and communicating meal logistics to families using diverse media. Parents expressed gratitude for meals but noted barriers disincentivizing participation including transportation difficulties and safety concerns. Parents preferred meals with fresh, varied, and culturally appropriate options.

Conclusions: A focus on fresh, more appealing meals and improved communication between school officials and parents could boost meal participation to reduce food insecurity. Districts that leveraged external partnerships were better equipped to address challenges of providing meals during COVID-19.

COMMUNITY PARTNER

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