



**Oregon School Meal Access
During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Barriers, Best Practices, and Policy
Recommendations**

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February 2021

PROJECT PARTNERS

Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon

Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon works with the community to end hunger before it begins. We envision an Oregon where everyone is healthy and thriving, with access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. To bring that vision into reality, we raise awareness about hunger, connect people to nutrition programs, and advocate for systemic changes.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all of the school nutrition staff and community organizations that provided their insights with the intent of making real change for Oregon's students and families. I would especially like to express my gratitude to the three individuals who took the time to be interviewed. Thank you to Alison Killeen and Fatima Jawaid for their assistance throughout the development of this report. Thank you to the Congressional Hunger Center for the opportunity to serve as a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow and use my lived experience with hunger to contribute to efforts to end poverty.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Claflin, Cara. *Oregon School Meal Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, 2021.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2020, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic sent school districts across the country into virtual distance learning or hybrid models. To ensure students in need still had access to school meals, waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed districts to switch from the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to the Seamless Summer Option (SSO). With the passing of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, children 18 and under became eligible for free school meals without the need to meet income limits or provide paperwork. Families could then receive multiple days worth of to-go meals outside of traditional times and were not required to have a child present at pick up.

Before the pandemic, Oregon was on track to have 62% of its students attend schools that offered free meals as part of the 2019 Student Success Act legislation ("ODE"). Due to the USDA's waivers and potential state budget cuts, the implementation of these policies have been put on hold indefinitely. Oregonians faced further difficulties with the September 2020 wildfires that impacted meal service and caused displacement of students.

To examine the pandemic's impact on school meal access and identify gaps in the government's response, 71 participants, including 61 school districts and ten staff members at organizations

from communities across Oregon, provided insights to Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon via both surveys and interviews. They spoke to challenges and successes, strategies used to reach historically marginalized families, and changes seen in meal participation during the pandemic.

Of the 47 districts that provided information on changes in their meal participation numbers, 76% (36 districts) reported a decrease in the number of meals they served during the pandemic. Responses pointed to lack of transportation and time for families, continued barriers for folks from historically marginalized communities, and districts facing operational challenges.

Families have limited time for meal box pickup when balancing their work schedules along with virtual or hybrid learning plans. The "public charge" rule continues to have a chilling effect on immigrant families who should be able to access school meals without fear and confusion. School districts are short on staff and supplies, and at the same time figuring out how to package, store, and transport multiple days of meals in a way they haven't ever before.

Based on the actions many school districts' nutrition staff have taken to respond to such barriers during the crisis, best practices for districts as the pandemic continues were developed and include the following:

Best Practices for School Districts

Lack of Time and Transportation

- Offer meal pick-up directly in the communities where families live, such as apartment complexes or community centers, to reduce travel time
- Provide food at the same time as learning material pick-ups for virtual learners to eliminate additional trips for families

Access for Historically Marginalized Communities

- Conduct outreach to families through liaisons or representatives that support specific communities served by the district, such as unhoused students or migrant worker families
- Develop materials that make it clear families of any citizenship status are eligible and that school meals won't count as part of the "public charge rule"

Districts Facing Operational Challenges

- Seek grants to purchase food service equipment and supplies in larger quantities
- Join efforts for local advocacy regarding anti-hunger efforts in and outside of school

School meals are a crucial support for families experiencing hunger during the pandemic. Still, they cannot be the only solution to reduce food insecurity during this crisis and the years of economic recovery that will follow. Policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

Policy Recommendations

Continue Offering Free Meals to All Students

Maintaining this flexibility for districts will allow them to serve their students' specific needs and acts as a baseline for meal access.

Issue Direct Cash Support to Families

Additional local direct cash support to families would allow them to use the funds to cover food and essentials more efficiently.

Increase Outreach to Historically Marginalized Communities

School districts need support to utilize existing community liaisons or create new positions to support meal access outreach.

Strengthen Support for Immigrant Families

New forms of local financial support should be developed to provide long term relief for undocumented and mixed-status families excluded from pandemic response assistance.

Connect School Districts with Food Service Equipment Funding

School districts should be supported in identifying grants for storage, packaging, and other food service equipment.

The current school meal system is inadequate to provide food security for all children. Directing families to other supports with the same barriers will not solve the growing need. Families deserve the dignity to access nutritious, cultural appropriate food without the burden of combining multiple resources, particularly during a crisis. Implementing the policy recommendations would be a step toward reducing hunger for Oregonian children.

INTRODUCTION

At Least 1 in 6 Oregon Children Are Food Insecure

Feeding America estimates that almost 140,000 Oregonian children were food insecure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis based on the most recent available data from 2018. Despite the hunger they face, 30% of such children are likely ineligible for federal nutrition programs because of their household income ("Child Food Insecurity"). Based on data from the Oregon Department of Education, approximately 65% of Oregon students eligible for free or reduced meals participated in school lunch as of 2019. Even less took part in school breakfast and summer meals, at 35% and 11%, respectively, indicating students with need were already experiencing barriers to school meal access ("ODE").

The historical and current impact of systemic racism and discrimination on children's access to food for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) families must also be considered. These communities experienced higher rates of food insecurity before the pandemic, and the impact of the crisis suggests the gap continues to persist. Data provided by the KIDS COUNT Data Center shows that at the end of 2020, 32% of Latinx adults in Oregon living in households with children reported sometimes or often not having enough food to eat in the past week, while 22% of Black households reported the same last summer. These results are compared to 13-16% of the total child households population in Oregon who reported not having enough to eat during the same period ("Adults living in households with children").

2019 School Meal Access Legislation

Barriers to school breakfast and lunch existed for Oregonian children before the pandemic shut down in-person learning last spring, and 2019 legislation was expected to make school meals free for most students. These Hunger-Free Schools provisions were championed by PHFO and included in Oregon's 2019 Student Success Act.

One provision created a fund to fill the federal reimbursement rate gap for schools utilizing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows schools with a high percentage of children eligible for other support programs, such as SNAP, to offer free meals to all students without the burden of additional paperwork. Another provision raised the income limit for schools without CEP from 185% to 300% of the Federal Poverty Line. Lastly, schools with more than 70% of students eligible for Free and Reduced-Price meals would be required to serve Breakfast after the Bell. With the three provisions' implementation, 62% of students statewide are estimated to be eligible for free breakfast and lunch at school ("ODE").

Due to the US Department of Agriculture's waivers allowing universal school meals to all children ages 1-18 through summer 2021, along with potential changes to state funding in response to the pandemic, implementation of these policies has been put on hold indefinitely.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this report was collected using qualitative methods to obtain insights from school districts and local organizations to gain an additional perspective on the access barriers families face with school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During December 2020 and January 2021, the author interviewed and surveyed school nutrition staff and community organizations connected to families accessing school meals in schools across Oregon. A total of 68 participants responded to the surveys, while three participated in 1:1 conversations. The school district responses included 16 urban districts, 36 rural districts, one frontier district, and eight that indicated they served urban and rural areas. Additionally, ten staff from eight organizations provided their insights on what they've experienced or heard from families across the state. Three were from rural areas, four of urban regions, and three respondents spoke to the experiences of families statewide.

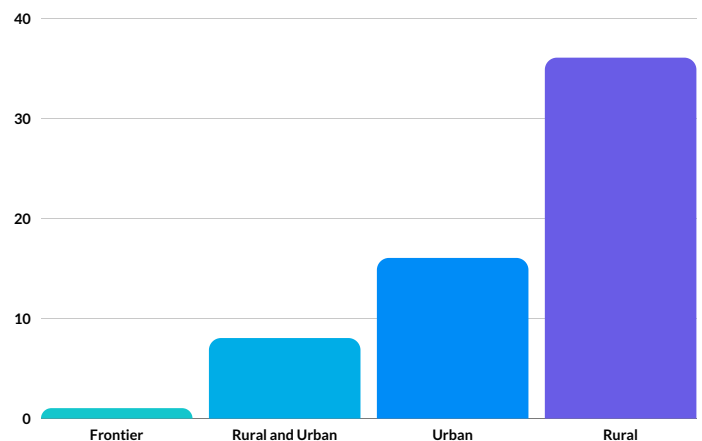
The school districts' survey was shared with program managers on the Oregon Department of Education School Nutrition Sponsor list for the 2020-2021 school year. Interviewed districts were selected based on the county's unemployment rate, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced status for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the percentage of BIPOC students in the district.

The survey for community organizations was shared with listservs of organizations connected to Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon's COVID-19 response. All interview and survey participants responded to a series of questions on challenges and successes, strategies used to reach historically marginalized families, and changes seen in school meal participation since the start of the pandemic.

After completing the interviews and surveys, the number of times participants in each group mentioned a theme or issue was counted, the notes were coded into three barrier categories, and recommendations were developed based on what was heard the most from each participant group.

Although some respondents commented on their personal experience with school meal access, further insights are needed directly from parents, caregivers, and students accessing school meals, especially BIPOC and immigrant folks.

Respondent School District Types



SUCCESSES DURING UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

While further efforts are required to reach more families, the successes and lessons learned from meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic can continue even after all students have returned to in-person instruction.

School nutrition staff have partnered across departments to adapt to rapidly changing requirements, limited supply, and other emergencies such as the September 2020 wildfires in Oregon. The quotes below demonstrate such actions to keep students fed amongst the increasing barriers.

What have been the biggest successes you have encountered with meal service during the pandemic?

"Not even the fires in the north part of our county stopped the feeding, buses ran right up to the evacuation lines."

"Team building, innovating, spirit and gratitude of the community."

"No one has gotten Covid."

"We have continued to feed kids of our community from day 1 in March of the shut down 3 meals a day and most weeks, 7 days a week."

"We have added weekend meals and we did do a "pre order" weeks worth of meals for the first week of the winter break. We have also done a few fun events, such as spirit week and we did a Collector Card event."

"Being able to change over from a NSLP [National School Lunch] program to the SSO [Seamless Summer Option] program where it is free to all students enrolled in school."

DECREASE IN MEAL PARTICIPATION REPORTED BY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Of the 47 districts that provided information on changes in their meal participation numbers, 36 (76%) reported a decrease in the number of meals they served when comparing pre-pandemic numbers to this past spring and fall. Transportation to meal sites, pickup hours, the relationship between historically marginalized communities and the public school system, and operational difficulties for districts have emerged as significant barriers impacting meal service and access during the pandemic. Aside from these main barriers and schools moving to virtual or hybrid models, districts also pointed to displacement caused by the September 2020 wildfires and students being cared for outside the district. Simultaneously, some were unsure why meal participation decreased as district enrollment and families in need continued to grow.

A few responses indicated that participation had gone down for high school students specifically, which may point to additional stigma or barriers facing older students during the pandemic.

Three school districts reported no change in participation, while eight reported an increase. For districts with an overall increase in participation, the federal waivers that have made meals free and the impact on families with small businesses or in the service industry, which the pandemic has disproportionately impacted, were mentioned. For districts where participation numbers remained the same, there were indications that different families were now utilizing the school's meals as the pandemic's economic impact has caused new food insecurity.

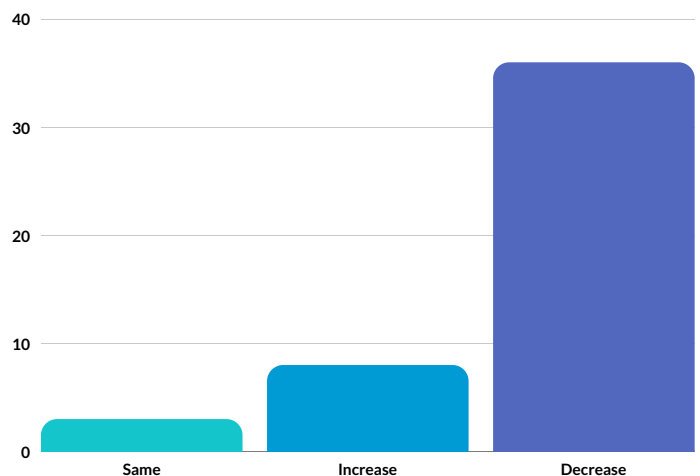
Schools that reported increases when comparing spring 2020 and fall 2020 indicated they offered additional pickup sites for the fall. The new school year increases may also point to more efficient meal service systems as districts have adjusted to their new normal.

METHODOLOGY

The graphic to the right displays participation rate change results collected from the survey and interviews. Responses that include an overall change (breakfast and/or lunch) were included. 14 replies spoke to other types of changes (ex: materials or foods used) or were unclear about the overall difference and thus were excluded.

Participants responded to the following question: What changes have there been in your district's meal participation compared to before the pandemic?

TYPE OF MEAL PARTICIPATION RATE CHANGE DISTRICTS INDICATED COMPARED TO PRE-PANDEMIC RATE



BARRIER 1: LIMITED TRANSPORTATION AND TIME

While the U.S. Department of Agriculture's waivers have made free school meals available to all children during the pandemic regardless of income and allowed pick up by parents or guardians for multiple days of meals without a child present, families are still struggling to access this support. Parents have been stretched thin balancing remote work, virtual learning for students, and caring for other family members, all while at risk of contracting the coronavirus. These added responsibilities leave limited time to travel to school sites for meal box pick-ups and are especially burdensome for families who do not have access to a car.

As folks are encouraged to stay socially distant, depending on public transportation to get to meal sites while lugging back a heavy box of food involves risks some families won't take. As in-person work starts to resume for positions and essential workers continue to serve, pick-up times only offered during daytime hours may conflict with caregivers' availability.

While bringing meals directly to families is reported to be the most effective by local organizations, some school districts struggle to provide individualized delivery while facing already shrinking budgets and supply shortages during the pandemic. Students are dependent on their parents or other caregivers to gain access to school meals, which can't happen with the current limitations.

“Time has been a difficult challenge for families to make it up to school, while juggling kids at home, and jobs. It's a challenge for families to make it during the mealtimes”

"The deliveries to the building were the most effective and reached the most people."

“Without delivery of meals to bus stops, we'd be serving very few of our students.”

Best Practices for School Districts

- Offer meal pick up directly in the communities where families live, such as apartment complexes or community centers, to reduce travel time
- Provide delivery along the bus stop route or to homes for families who cannot access school sites
- Provide food at the same time as learning material pick-ups for virtual learners to eliminate additional trips for families
- For district families that live outside of the community, provide information on alternative food supports or pick-up sites offered by districts closer to their home

BARRIER 2: ACCESS FOR HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Free school meals may not reach all families because of the historical relationship between marginalized communities and government systems. Undocumented families may incorrectly believe that they don't qualify for school meals or that it could count against them in efforts to receive citizenship later on. Community organizations reported that such families might forgo coming to school sites or accessing other food supports like pantries and food banks altogether due to fear of providing information that will be traced back to them.

Sharing posters and social media content on food availability is only useful if families interpret the words, so districts have provided translated materials in common languages. Translation can't stop at written materials as some families might need assistance in person at meal pick-up.

Organizations also raised concerns about if the types of foods available during this time of limited supplies can meet families' cultural needs. Districts reported conducting outreach through community-specific liaisons, positions that may already exist in the district focusing on other student needs. Working together with these staff members, leaders from the community, or other groups working "on the ground" can help build trust in accessing the meal system.

“We have the Paiute Indian Tribe in our community and we have a advocate for those students that comes to the school weekly and we work closely with their youth advocate, which is much like a kids club on the reservation.”

“Our school partners tell us that some families with unclear immigration status have been afraid to go to the school.”

“Our district has hired an on site translator which has been a huge help in so many ways!”

Best Practices for School Districts

- Provide translated materials in person and online as well as offering translators via the phone or in-person for the languages most present in the district
- Conduct outreach to families through liaisons or representatives that support specific communities served by the district, such as unhoused students or migrant worker families
- Develop materials that make it clear families of any citizenship status are eligible and that school meals won't count as part of the "public charge rule"
- Offer multiple meal access options so families can select the one they are most comfortable with utilizing
- Reach out to families to ask their needs via an online form, phone, or teachers

BARRIER 3: DISTRICTS FACING OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

While food insecurity is growing, school districts struggle to provide necessary supplies to store, prepare, and transport meals. Packaging and heating supplies are especially crucial for food being transported long distances in rural areas to provide home delivery. A lack of storage controls the number of meal boxes prepared in advance instead of the estimated need. The food supply availability has also changed due to the shortages, causing some districts to move away from the type of meals they provided before, such as fresh salad bars and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables.

These new methods of meal service have impacted the quality of food that can be provided, as one district noted it "stopped utilizing [their] mostly scratch recipes and [their] commodities to make scratch meals".

School districts are also experiencing difficulties with a shortage of employees. Some nutrition staff have quit or gone on leave due to the risk of contracting the virus as well as the need to care for children at home. Volunteers have helped fill the gap, but keeping morale high has been a struggle for staff who feel unappreciated as they provide this essential labor. While districts try their best to adapt, these operational difficulties may have a ripple effect on getting meals to students in need.

"We had to purchase freezers and utilize space outside the kitchen for assembly lines to accommodate the production increase and maintain social distancing."

"I decided against my heart to not serve kids during the two week winter holiday, so my team could get the break they needed."

"We have had several trucks of food cancelled and due to the foods being offered during this time there are a lot of goods that are either short or non existent."

Best Practices for School Districts

- Build partnerships with contract services companies, other districts, and school departments such as transportation
- Seek grants to purchase food service equipment and supplies in larger quantities
- Join efforts for local advocacy regarding anti-hunger efforts in and outside of school
- Connect with districts of similar demographics to learn from their strategies in response to the pandemic

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As families continue to feel the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, action must be taken to ensure students have access to food and other basic needs. Parents and caregivers have experienced difficulties with transportation to pick-up sites and inconvenient times. Access issues for historically marginalized communities continue to persist, and school districts have faced a lack of operational supplies. Families waiting on unemployment payments or stimulus checks to arrive may be deciding which food, housing, health care, or transportation expenses to cut this time. In response to such barriers that have decreased school meal participation during the past year, policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

Continue Offering Free Meals to All Students

The economic impacts of the pandemic will not be over with the start of the next school year. As more schools return to in-person learning or offer a hybrid model, maintaining such flexibility for districts will allow them to serve their students' specific needs. Such waivers can serve as a baseline for meal access, but further actions are needed to support more folks.

Issue Direct Cash Support

Additional direct cash support to Oregon families would allow them to use the funds in the most efficient way for their needs. Community organizations and mutual aid groups are currently filling this gap with efforts such

as mailed gift cards and arranging grocery delivery app orders. Families deserve the dignity to purchase food and other necessities in a manner that won't create additional barriers.

Increase Outreach to Historically Marginalized Communities

School districts need support to utilize existing community liaisons or create new positions focused on individual historically marginalized communities to support meal access. Translators are needed for the top languages spoken in each district so schools can offer in-person translation instead of only written formats.

Strengthen Support for Immigrant Families

Undocumented and mixed-status immigrant families need additional food supports as they are excluded from many of the federal level supports in response to the pandemic. New forms of local financial assistance should be developed to provide long term relief. In the short term, eligibility for free school meals can be publicized more clearly along with conducting targeted outreach to assist more students.

Connect School Districts with Food Service Equipment Funding

School districts need grants for storage, packaging, and other food service equipment. This would increase the preparation of meal boxes, keep food temperature safe, and expand the variety of foods that can be provided to ensure nutritional and cultural needs are met.

CONCLUSION

The school meal system is not adequate to meet the needs of all Oregon families experiencing hunger. As reported by school districts, the past 11 months have shown a decrease in meal participation even as food insecurity continues to grow with more families experiencing unemployment, illness, and a lack of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the US Department of Agriculture's waivers that offer Universal School Meals during the pandemic, there are still barriers to access schools' food.

A few districts suggested that families received enough food from non-school resources and thus didn't need to utilize school meals. But as reported by community organizations, parents and caregivers experienced the same barriers of time, transportation, and distrust when considering other forms of support such as food banks. New forms of food assistance are needed instead of just directing families to other supports already facing the strain of increased need caused by the pandemic.

Schools play a crucial role in childhood nutrition efforts, but they are insufficient on their own to reach all students experiencing hunger. Families deserve the dignity to have access to nutritious, culturally appropriate meals without the need to scrap together multiple resources or travel long distances in a time when folks are encouraged to stay home and minimize the risk of contracting the coronavirus.

Lawmakers and government agencies have the opportunity to implement such policies and provide dignified access to food for all families.

While this report focused on the insights shared by school districts and community organizations, the experiences of families and students directly impacted, especially those from historically marginalized communities, must continue to be sought out and included in the process of crafting policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A lot of our families that are undocumented don't want to sign up for any [food] support like that to be traced back, or if they're working to get their citizenship. They're told not to do that.”

“We had families who had never needed help needing it desperately.”

“With hybrid classes going on for younger kids, food cannot be delivered anymore and the hours to pick up food are extremely limited. This makes it pretty impossible for rural high school students and school families to get access to school meals.”

APPENDIX: SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY QUESTIONS

First Name
Last Name
Position/Title
School District

School District Type (Select all that apply)

- Rural
- Frontier
- Urban

What are the biggest challenges you have encountered with meal service during the pandemic?

This may include (but is not limited to): Transportation, pickup hours, languages, stigma, storage, staffing, COVID requirements (social distancing/capacity limits, masks, cleaning, etc), weather, and meals during school breaks.

What have been the biggest successes you have encountered with meal service during the pandemic?

How have you ensured equitable access to meals in your service area during the pandemic? What worked well? What would you change?

Please share about the specific strategies you utilized to reach vulnerable or historically oppressed communities.

What changes have there been in your district's meal participation compared to before the pandemic?

An increase or decrease? Any changes in the number of meals you served spring 2020 vs fall 2020?

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Are there ways Hunger-Free Oregon could support you better in the future?

Optional: If you would be interested in connecting with me further about your responses within the next month, please check here.

APPENDIX: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS SURVEY QUESTIONS

First Name

Last Name

Email

Name of Organization

Position/Title

What type of communities does your organization serve? (Select all that apply)

Rural

Frontier

Urban

What are the demographics of the communities your organization primarily works with?

What does access to school meals look like for your community during the pandemic? How easy it is for your community to access school meals during the pandemic?

How has this changed over the spring, summer, and fall?

What are the biggest challenges your community has encountered with school meals during the pandemic?

This may include (but is not limited to): Transportation, pickup hours, languages, stigma, storage of food at home, COVID requirements (experiencing symptoms, masks, social distancing, etc.), weather, and meals during school breaks.

How has school meal access been for historically oppressed communities in your area during the pandemic?

Please share about the specific strategies you've seen utilized to reach vulnerable or historically oppressed communities. What worked well? What would you change?

How has access to other food supports (pantries, food banks, SNAP, Pandemic EBT etc.) been for your community during the pandemic?

Is there anything else you'd like to share - about your organizations experience during the pandemic or your own? Are there ways Hunger-Free Oregon could support your organization better in the future?

Optional: If you would be interested in connecting with me further about your responses within the next month, please check here.

APPENDIX: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the interview conversations.

First, could you tell me a little about the programs at your organization that serve school age children and their families? Are there any big things I should know? How many students? Demographics of the population you serve? What are your big successes or challenges in a typical year? What format has your programming been offered through in the spring, summer, and this fall?

If applicable, has your organization participated in any type of meal service for families and children? What have been the successes and challenges?

What have you heard from families regarding access to food during the pandemic? How has this changed over the spring, summer, and fall?

What have you heard from families about accessing school meal programs pre-COVID vs during the pandemic? Successes and challenges? Examples you could discuss: Transportation, hours, languages, stigma, COVID requirements (social distancing/capacity limits, masks, etc), weather, and school breaks.

What have you heard about equitable access to school meals in your area? Please share about the specific strategies you've seen utilized to reach vulnerable or historically oppressed communities. What worked well? What would you change?

What have you heard from families about accessing non-school supports (pantries, food banks, etc.) pre-COVID vs during the pandemic?

What have you heard about food insecurity from other organizations working with children and families? What support might they need?

Is there anything else you want to share? Is there anything that I've missed?

Is there anyone else that you suggest I talk to?

How could Hunger-Free Oregon support you better in the future? Is there anything you would like from me after this conversation?

APPENDIX: SCHOOL DISTRICT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the interview conversations.

First, could you tell me a little about the nutrition programs at your school? Are there any big things I should know? (What meals do you serve, to how many students, what are your big successes or challenges in a typical year?)

What format is your school district offering learning through this school year? In person, all virtual, hybrid?

Where are meals served? How were the sites selected? Number of sites, locations, bus routes/home delivery; Did you close sites or open additional sites? Why?; How have you advertised meal service during the pandemic?

What have been program successes during the pandemic?

What challenges have you encountered with meal service during the pandemic? Including (but not limited to):
Transportation, hours, languages, stigma, storage, staffing, COVID requirements (social distancing/capacity limits, masks, cleaning, etc), weather, and school breaks.

How did you ensure equitable access to meals in your service area? Please share about the specific strategies you utilized to reach vulnerable or historically oppressed communities. What worked well? What would you change?

Have you seen changes in meal participation compared to before the pandemic? Increase or decrease? Spring vs fall?

What have you heard from other nutrition services staff? What support might they need?

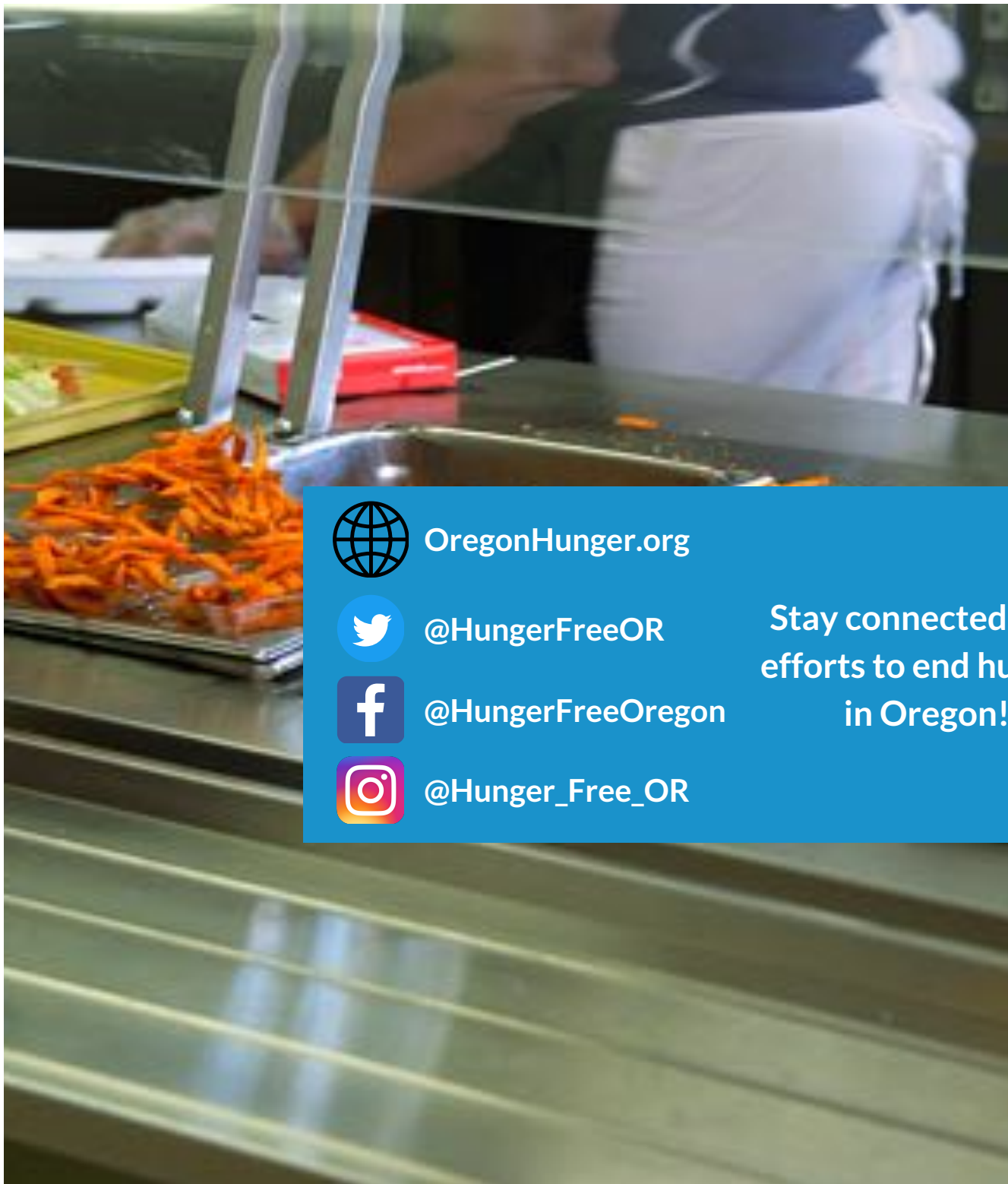
Is there anything else you want to share? Is there anything that I've missed?

Is there anyone else that you suggest I talk to?

How could Hunger-Free Oregon support you better in the future? Is there anything you would like from me after this conversation?

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