

# Shut down by coronavirus, schools scramble to feed students

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All Northshore public schools closed up to two weeks in response to the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, on March 5, 2020, in Bothell, Washington. The district is operating a remote learning program to continue instruction and is distributing meals daily at several sites around the district. Photo: Karen Ducey/Getty Images

The coronavirus is causing more and more schools to close, forcing school leaders across the country to address another problem. If schools shut down, their students may not have access to meals.

The coronavirus causes a flu-like illness. It started in China and has been spreading all over the world since December 2019.

Millions of students, in school districts big and small, rely on the free or discounted meals they eat at school. Some people worry that as more schools close their doors, more children will go hungry.

Joel Berg is the leader of Hunger Free America, a New York-based nonprofit. "These meals are a very big deal," he said. "Almost 30 million kids a day rely on government-subsidized school meals."

As of March 9, 507 schools throughout the United States have been closed or are scheduled to close, affecting 363,357 students.

Health officials are saying social distancing can help limit the spread of the disease. Social distancing is essentially staying away from crowds and crowded spaces to prevent the spread of a disease. This is why schools are shutting down. This is also why people are being told to stay at home.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is the government agency that oversees the nation's school meal programs. It has instructed schools on how to feed students during these unplanned school closures. However, that doesn't mean it will be easy for schools to ensure that students get the meals they need.

### **Access To Food**

In Fremont, Nebraska, the district decided to shut down schools for the week because of a local resident who may have been exposed to the virus. That means roughly 4,300 students are out of school for at least five days. About 6 in 10 families in the school district qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The school district does not currently have plans to distribute meals to students. However, officials are coordinating with the local United Way and food pantries in the region to ensure children in need are not missing meals.

Christy Fiala is a leader of the Fremont Area United Way charity. "Many families rely on the breakfast and lunch that's provided at school," she said. It is important to make sure families have access to those meals when schools close unexpectedly, she said.

The Agriculture Department allows some districts to offer meals using programs created to feed low-income children during the summer. However, the program requires "congregate feeding," which provides meals to children in group settings. One practice for preventing spread of the virus is to reduce large group gatherings.

Berg said the point of closing schools was to prevent people from gathering in large groups. "That really defeats the purpose if people all have to go to a centralized location to get food," he said.

In a March 5 letter to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, the School Nutrition Association asked the agency to get rid of the requirements for congregate feeding. The letter asked for meals to be served at closed schools and community sites.

The group also urged the Agriculture Department to allow districts to deliver meals to different locations. With more locations, it would be safer and easier for families to get their meals.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is the U.S. health agency. The CDC issued temporary advice in response to the coronavirus. It suggested that schools consider ways to distribute food, such as offering "grab-and-go" bagged lunches or meal delivery, to avoid having students gather in groups.

California and Washington state requested that the government allow meal services to continue during school closures. The Agriculture Department approved the requests in early March.

Chris Reykdal is a government official who oversees how schools are run in Washington state. He said that if schools are not providing breakfast and lunch, many students will lack nutrition.

### **"A Basic Need"**

Coronavirus has caused the most disruptions to schooling in Washington state. Education officials there have said they've struggled to keep meals flowing to students during the closures.

In Bothell, Washington, the Northshore School District closed all of its schools on March 5 for up to 14 days. The district began online classes for its students on March 9. It provided lunches to students, too, offering "grab-and-go" meals at 17 school sites.

Juliana Fisher is the district's food services director. "We're still servicing students as far as education goes," she said. "Food is a basic need and everyone knows that students can't learn if they don't have the nutrition that they need."

The district has 23,500 students, and more than 3,000 of them qualify for free or reduced lunch, Fisher said. One of the first challenges to making meals available was having staff members in place to prepare and deliver them. She said staff members who felt they were at high risk for getting the virus could opt out of work. People who are elderly or have been sick before are more likely to get sick from the virus. Children are less likely to get sick from the virus.

"One of our biggest concerns was making sure that our staff and our community stay safe," Fisher said. "We also had to determine what staff was available." The staff organized into groups and made a plan to deliver meals, she said.

The district offered two meals options on March 9. One was orange chicken with rice and steamed carrots and the other was yogurt with sunflower seeds and granola and a side salad of kale for vegetarians.

Students did not have to pre-order. If they showed up, they received a meal, Fisher said.

"Situations like this really show how important it is and how much some families depend on those meals at school," she said.