



Research Brief - July 2021

This research brief summarizes the findings from the study, *Free Meals for All: Utilization of School Meals and Nutrition Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic* by David Lang & Ben Domingue. During the pandemic, in addition to students not learning onsite, other school-based services were disrupted. Schools and districts across the country engaged in heroic measures to provide essential services that were normally facilitated during daily school operations. These policy interventions were most obvious in the National School Lunch Programs where federal guidance regarding onsite consumption and distribution requirements were relaxed. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) students were allowed to take home weekly meal packs and all students were eligible to participate in this pandemic meal program. The researchers studied SFUSD operations data to understand the uptake and utilization of this program as well as investigate the relationship between participation and other academic outcomes.

The study utilized a mix of SFUSD operational and administrative data from the Fall 2020 semester and the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. Meal utilization data was calculated from SFUSD's point-of-sale system used in the distribution of meal packs. While 52,886 children were enrolled in SFUSD during this time, the analysis related to the Free and Reduced Price-lunch (FRPL) eligibility rate and the link between pandemic meal services and academic outcomes data was based on the 48,990 students who attended SFUSD during both the 2019-2020 and 2020-21 academic years.

### Findings

- **1.6 million meals were served to SFUSD families, but this was substantially fewer than during normal operations.**

At least 10,159 students of 52,886 enrolled students (19 percent) utilized the program. Generally, program utilization grew throughout the fall semester with notable spikes during the Thanksgiving and Winter holidays. However, the researchers estimated that only 26.5 percent of FRPL eligible students participated in the program, suggesting that a large fraction of students who would normally receive school meals did not participate in the pandemic program.

- **Program Retention: Most students came back for service multiple times.**

In general, students who participated in the program would typically participate more than once. The median student would pick up, on average, eight mealpacks, with each mealpack consisting of an estimated 15 meals. Only about 22 percent of students participated once. This suggests that persistence in the program might not be a concern for SFUSD.

- **Who Used the Service? There was substantial heterogeneity by race/ethnicity.**

Asian-American students participated in the meal program at nearly double the rates of other student demographic groups. Asian student participation rate was 31 percent compared to 12 percent for Hispanic students and only seven percent for Black students. Asian students were the only population to participate in this program at rates in excess of the 25.5 percent FRPL eligibility rate.

- **Pandemic meal services uptake extends beyond FRPL Populations.**

One-half of the participants in the pandemic meal services program were FRPL students and one-half were non-FRPL students. The researchers also found that only around 26.5 percent of students who qualified for subsidized meals utilized this program. Concurrently, they found that about 13 percent of students who were not normally qualified for subsidized meals participated in this program.

- **Students who used pandemic meal services were a more engaged population.**

Students who participated in the program had attendance rates that were approximately four percentage points higher than students who did not. The researchers caution however, that this could be due to selection effects – the characteristics of this specific population. In fact, all students saw a relative increase in attendance rates between Fall 2020 and 2019 but relatively little of that gain was associated with participation in meal services. Moreover, the SFUSD criteria for attendance changed during the pandemic such that in addition to attending a live zoom lecture, other criteria such as having correspondence with a teacher, submitting assignments, or engaging in other academic activities would be counted as a student attending a course. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the decoupling of meal services and in-person attendance had relatively little impact on student attendance rates.

### **Implications for the SFUSD**

The research findings indicate that substantially fewer students utilized the pandemic meal services program than one would expect if individuals participated at the same rates as they did by historical eligibility. Further, participation varied substantially by race/ethnicity. In response, the researchers have made the following recommendations to SFUSD:

- **Continue efforts and outreach to provide nutritional support to students.**

To the extent that policy changes are warranted and supported, the researchers found that historically eligible and historically ineligible students participated in pandemic meal services in roughly equal numbers. This suggests that efforts to expand subsidized meal services beyond traditional FRPL criterion are warranted and could have substantial impact on student food insecurity.

- **Focus future research should on interday variation in student behaviors.**

If the effect of meal service is causal, it is expected that the rise in attendance would be higher on days following meal pickup. Subsequent research could expand upon this potentially important finding when data becomes available.

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