

Tips for Feeding Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Purpose

To provide information and tips for school districts in providing meals for students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

Many school districts are now faced with providing meals to students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The goals of the school district feeding program should include:

- Protection of food service employees, volunteers, and families from contraction or spread of COVID-19 during school district feeding program;
- Providing safe and nutritious food to students in an efficient and timely manner; and
- Maintaining compliance with the Texas Food Establishment Rules (TFER) and local health regulations.

Protection of Food Service Employees, Volunteers, and Families

The protection of food service employees, volunteers, and families is critical during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Some best practices are:

- Consult with the health authority responsible for permitting food establishments including school cafeterias: <https://dshscpd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=1ee44f988d344b19999d4dd19c56ddb5>. Some health departments and health authorities require special permitting for offsite food conveyance;
- Do not allow food service employees to come to work if they are ill. Section 228.36 (8) (A) of the Texas Food Establishment Rules (TFER) requires exclusion of food employees who have onset of sore throat with fever who serve highly susceptible populations. In the current feeding program, preschool children are considered a highly susceptible population. Schools may want to temperature screen employees and volunteers and exclude anyone with an observed temperature of 100.4F or greater;
- Plan for absenteeism amongst food service workers due to illness or having to stay home to care for children or sick family members. At least one Certified Food Protection Manager should be onsite during food preparation operations. All employees involved in food preparation are required to have completed a food handler training course. Courses are available online and more information can be found on the Texas Department of State Health Services website at <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/food-handlers/training/online.aspx>

- Maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet during food preparation, transport, and delivery. Food service employees should consider operating food preparation stations at least 6 feet apart in the school cafeteria. Utilizing the dining area of a school cafeteria to spread out the food bagging operations and utilizing food beverage carts to move food to bagging areas as well as vehicle loading areas is also a good option;
- Prohibit students and parents from entering school buildings;
- For drive thru option, consider a portable table setup where parents can collect the food bags from their vehicle and maintain social distancing from food service workers and volunteers. Establish traffic cones in front of table to protect vehicles from contacting table with vehicle. Emphasize that occupants of all vehicles must stay inside vehicle while in drive thru lines;
- Walk up conveyance must maintain the minimum 6 feet of social distancing. Distances of 10 or 20 feet are even better if the district has the property layout to provide for the distancing and maintain the safety of food service workers, volunteers, and students/parents. Utilize tape, paint, or chalk to provide social distance spacing on sidewalks or streets;
- Coordinate with local school district and/or local law enforcement to provide safety during feeding events if possible;
- For inclement weather, identify which locations will be open and communicate inclement weather plan to all students/parents;
- For delivery service, identify delivery locations and times along with social distancing needs to prevent lines that do not maintain social distancing standards. Consider utilizing school buses to transport food to delivery locations as the bus is recognizable by students/parents. Consider bringing a portable table that can be set up just outside the school bus door which can provide security and prohibit students from entering school buses and will help maintain social distance requirements to protect bus drivers and staff; and
- Utilize school staff or a volunteer to keep a list of the number of meals provided. If names are required for tracking, utilize social distancing and write down the name and person(s) served. Do not utilize sign in sheets as this provides a vehicle for COVID-19 transmission and puts both students/parents and food service workers and volunteers at risk.

Providing Safe and Nutritious Foods to Students

Although there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted to humans from food (<https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/mcm-issues/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-frequently-asked-questions#5e7064ebd11a2>), special precautions need to be considered:

- Food service employees and volunteers must practice frequent hand washing and glove changes before and after preparing food;
- Food service employees and volunteers must avoid contacting their eyes, nose, mouth, or face and practice good personal hygiene;

- Include frequent cleaning and sanitizing of counters, food carts, tables, paper towel dispensers, door handles, and all other surfaces where hand or glove contact occurs. The EPA has established a list of products that are effective on COVID-19, which can be accessed at this link: <https://locker.txssc.txstate.edu/b47c4bb8ed91d47c879cc579e5420660/COVID-19-EPA-Approved-Disinfectants.pdf>
- Section 228.65 (a) (2) of the Texas Food Establishment Rules (TFER) prohibits bare hand contact with ready to eat foods (foods not requiring cooking before consumption) with the exception of washing fruits and vegetables or if a special written exemption is provided by the local health authority. Food service employees are encouraged to eliminate bare hand contact with food and food contact surfaces. COVID-19 is believed to be viable (contagious) on surfaces from an hour to a couple of days based on limited studies to date;
- If plastic gloves are not available due to shortages, the use of food-grade tissues, utensils, and tongs are to be utilized to the greatest extent possible;
- Where remote feeding locations are at city parks or locations away from the food preparation facility, consider food menus with low-risk pre-cooked TCS foods or low-risk Non-TCS foods since temperature control will be difficult to maintain; and
- Consider options for providing additional meals on Fridays for students to take home to provide meals for the upcoming weekend when the food feeding program will not be operating.

Maintaining compliance with the Texas Food Establishment Rules (TFER) and local health regulations

The Texas Food Establishment Rules (TFER) is the minimum food safety standards that applies to all retail food establishments and school feeding programs. Local jurisdictions may have additional and more stringent requirements. Below are some good tips for maintaining compliance and food safety:

- Food service employees and volunteers must practice frequent hand washing and glove changes before/after preparing food and after touching any non-food contact surfaces such as doors, countertops, tables, clothing, body parts, including the face and hair;
- Include frequent cleaning and sanitizing of counters, food carts, tables, paper towel dispensers, door handles, and all other surfaces where hand or glove contact occurs;
- Time/Temperature Controlled for Safety Foods (TCS) or formerly Potentially Hazardous Foods (PHF) are foods that must have time or temperature control to keep food safe. Examples of TCS foods are raw/cooked meats, cooked vegetables, cut watermelons, cut lettuce, and cut tomatoes. Generally, keep the hot foods hot (135F or above) and the cold foods cold (41F or below) during preparation, transportation, and storage;

- If commercial hot holding or cold holding units are not available for transportation, ice chests may work for holding in heat as well as for cold hold such as transporting milk if the applicable temperatures are maintained for hot or cold food holding.
- Packaged food may not be stored in direct contact with ice or water if the food is subject to the entry of water due to the type of packaging or the placement in the ice or water. TFER Section 228.67(b)(1)
- Ice chests or similar delivery methods should not be used for self-service due to the potential for contamination by students/parents with COVID-19. Remember, eliminate surfaces to the extent possible, that parents/students may touch and transmit COVID-19; and
- Once a TCS food enters the danger zone (42F to 134F), then time is the only control available per TFER Section 228.75 (i)(2) and 228.75 (i)(3). Once a food enters the danger zone the general rule for cooling is to rapidly cool TCS foods to 70F or below within 2 hours and to 41F or below within an additional 4 hours. The goal is to obtain a temperature of a TCS food to 41F or below within a 6-hour period with the first two hours being most critical in rapid cooling. Once hot food enters the danger zone, the general rule is to rapidly reheat TCS foods to 165F or above within 2 hours. Foods that are not brought back to temperature within these time frames should be discarded.

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