

Georgia schools adapt their nutrition programs

When schools across Georgia began closing in mid-March to stop the spread of the coronavirus, the school nutrition directors jumped into action. They knew their students would still need access to breakfast and lunch, especially in counties with high levels of food-insecurity.

For many school districts, it was a schoolwide effort: Staff began packing bags, teachers pitched in to distribute meals and bus drivers lined up to run food-delivery routes.

“It was an impressive shift. Schools had to adopt a whole new service model within a couple of days,” says Linette Dodson, the state director for Georgia’s school nutrition program.

During that weekend in mid-March, Dodson coordinated more than 185 waivers that allowed school districts to have meal-service flexibility while the school directors decided what menus to create and how to reach as many students as possible.

“School meals really are a mainstay for a lot of children,” she says. “We thought about the busy families with new challenges facing them. We wanted this to be one thing they didn’t have to worry about.”

During the end-of-school-year stretch from mid-March to mid-May, Hart County Schools served more than 114,000 meals. The schools delivered meals on bus routes, and parents could pick up bags at the elementary schools. Staff handed out sacks with enough food for two or three days and often were overwhelmed by the appreciation from the students and their parents.

“Kids would run to the buses and carry their big bags back to the house,” says Courtney Hart, the district’s director of school nutrition. “I think it made as much of an impact on staff to see parts of the county they had never been to before.”

After the official school year ended, many counties switched to a summer nutrition program to make sure students still could receive meals in June and July. Some districts, like Calhoun City Schools, also partici-



Barbara Corcoran, a nutrition staff member at Hartwell Elementary School, prepares bags of food for parents to pick up at the school and for staff members to deliver on bus routes.

COURTNEY HART



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pated in the Farmers to Families program, which distributed boxes of produce to the community at large.

“In Calhoun, which is largely textiles and carpeting, many parents lost their jobs, and this was much-needed relief,” says Kim Kiker, Calhoun City Schools’ director of school nutrition. “People gave us cards and flowers, and it meant so much to see the expressions on their faces.”

Of course, the biggest question that loomed was how to handle nutrition for the fall.

Dodson, Hart and Kiker served on a statewide committee that developed several scenarios for school districts in the 2020-21 academic year based on the level of precautions needed. In some schools, students are picking up meals from the cafeteria and eating in their classrooms or outside. In others, nutrition staff deliver the meals to classrooms. For students doing virtual learning, meals are available for pickup.

“It’s an ever-changing environment right now for everyone in education,” Dodson says.

“At all the different levels of restart, we’re working together to help our children.”

—Carolyn Crist