



# NY FOOD 2025

*The NYC Department of Education (DOE)  
Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS)  
Response to the COVID-19 Emergency*



**HUNTER COLLEGE  
NEW YORK CITY  
FOOD POLICY CENTER**



**LAURIE M. TISCH CENTER FOR  
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Suggested Citation: Cadenhead JW, Koch P. The NYC Department of Education (DOE) Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) Response to the COVID-19 Emergency. NY Food 2025: Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, & Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food Education & Policy. October 2022. Corresponding Author: Jennifer W. Cadenhead, Ph.D., R.D.N.; [jwc2151@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:jwc2151@tc.columbia.edu)



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## NEW YORK FOOD 2025

This research brief is one part of a 5-part series of research briefs published as [New York Food 2025](#), a collective pursuit by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to examine the effects of the pandemic on New York City’s food policies and programs and propose specific policy measures the NYC Mayor and City Council can consider and implement to build a stronger, healthier, more just, and sustainable food system in New York City. This series of briefs builds on our group’s earlier report, [New York Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond](#), on the impact of the pandemic on New York City’s food system and food workforce.

### Background

The Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) is the nation’s largest public school food meal service operation.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the pandemic OFNS operated a \$550 mil annual budget with 5,500 employees and served 980,000 meals following the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) school meal standards.<sup>2</sup> Since 2017, OFNS has been providing universally free meal service to all public school pre K–grade 12 students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which are federally reimbursed meals.<sup>3,4</sup> They prepare these meals to meet the high nutrition quality standards enacted under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA of 2010), while also following additional nutritional standards specified in the NYC School Wellness Policy<sup>5</sup>, along with adherence to any food-related policies applicable

to other New York City (NYC) agencies.<sup>6,7</sup> Public school meals adhering to the HHFKA and USDA standards are known to be among the most nutritious meals that all Americans eat.<sup>8</sup> In addition, public school meals have been estimated to compose nearly ½ of children’s daily caloric intake and a significant portion of fruits, vegetables and essential nutrients.<sup>9,10,11</sup> New York City public school children are from very ethnically/racially diverse homes (< 15% non-Hispanic white), with nearly 72% eligible for free or reduced meals<sup>12</sup>—households tend to be at an increased risk for food insecurity.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, OFNS was and remains integral to providing nutritious meals for over 1 million (FY22) NYC public school children.<sup>14</sup>

In the early weeks of COVID emergency, unemployment and food insecurity soared in NYC. With school buildings closed, families with children were especially vulnerable to increased food insecurity. OFNS began addressing the need to feed hungry children during the pandemic by offering grab-and-go meals at school and community sites, and then modified in-school meal options to accommodate the changing circumstances of the pandemic.

NYC Council and federal policy remains crucial to address hunger for families with children.

### Purpose

The purpose of this research was to review the actions of OFNS, particularly with respect to alleviating hunger among school children, discuss parental comments, and draw attention to future policy considerations.

## Study Overview

We used two data collection methods to develop the results. The first was publicly available information disseminated in NYC and other government-funded reports, news reports, social media, public meetings, or other public sources from March 2020 through October 2022. We created a summary table that contained the major points from each information source and reviewed this table to create major themes. The second was based on focus group responses from parents of NYC public school children who participated in meal service between March 2020 and June 2021. We analyzed the transcripts of the focus groups to determine emergent themes, grouping related themes to explain the phenomena observed.



Photo: Wellness In The Schools

## Results

Our findings fall under three areas: Increased Nutrition Security, Responsiveness to Community and Cultural Needs, and Concerns for the Future.

### I. Increased Nutrition Security

**Despite pandemic challenges, menu diet quality improved.** OFNS introduced Plant-Powered Fridays<sup>15</sup> during the second half of FY22. With Meatless Mondays, there are now two days a week students can choose to eat more plant-based protein (beans and legumes) as the main entree item and less red or processed meats. Salad bars are also being re-installed, while fresh fruits and vegetables continue to be offered daily along with other plant-based options. Cumulatively this shifts the menu towards more health-promoting nutrients, including greater fiber and less saturated fat.

**New emphasis on grab-and-go breakfast service may add to nutrition security.** As schools reopened during the pandemic, OFNS offered more grab-and-go breakfast for children who were not getting breakfast in the cafeteria prior to the start of school. Now children have more breakfast options before and after the bell, and may eat it in the classroom. With the support of school administration, it may increase breakfast participation, and help improve academic achievements.<sup>16,17</sup>

**Summer meals increased nutrition security aided by federal waivers.** There was a substantial jump in summer meal participation in FY20. Although FY21 participation was lower than FY20, it was still higher than in FY19. Due to the lack of continued federal waivers, summer participation will likely be significantly decreased.<sup>18,19</sup>

**Grab-and-go COVID meals filled a crucial need early in the pandemic, but had participation challenges.** Recognizing that school meals improve nutrition security, the Monday immediately after schools closed due to COVID, OFNS began offering grab-n-go meal service across NYC. Participation in grab-n-go meals was 30 to 67% lower than in-person cafeteria service, which likely related to communi-

cation and other barriers.<sup>20</sup> Yet, children of families who were food insecure and continued to get school meals 4-5 times per week maintained or increased fruit and vegetable consumption.<sup>21</sup>

**Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) helped families bridge gaps.** During school closures, including the summer, families of school children also received P-EBT funds, which improved nutrition security and provided additional flexibilities.<sup>22,23</sup> Streamlined policy for administration could assist in having benefits delivered more seamlessly.

**Meal participation percentages had an increasing trend in FY22.** From fall 2022, regular in-person cafeteria line service resumed with corresponding increases in participation. Although school enrollment is down 6.4%,<sup>24</sup> when comparing May 2022 to May 2019 (pre-COVID), breakfast participation was estimated to have risen from 27.9% to 30.1%, while lunch estimates rose from 59.7% to 62.6%.<sup>25</sup>

## II. Responsiveness to Community & Cultural Needs

**Community engagement resulted in more cultural options:** OFNS has worked with the community during the COVID pandemic to increase Halal sites from 6 to over 60 since March 2020. OFNS also increased Kosher options.<sup>26,27</sup> Additional funding is needed for greater expansion. OFNS has also recently partnered with Wellness in the Schools to create a Chef's Council. It will be developing culturally-relevant, plant-based, scratch-cooked recipes and utilizing the service of celebrity chefs to train OFNS employees.<sup>28</sup>

**OFNS increased general community communication and feedback efforts.** Previously, there had been a mobile app for high schoolers to provide feedback. Since FY22, OFNS has made additional efforts to reach additional

stakeholders by attending Community School District and school/community organizations meetings, as well as toward obtaining community feedback and informing stakeholders of their services.<sup>29</sup>

**Completed updates have improved the cafeteria atmosphere through redesigns:** OFNS was able to complete 41 redesigns through the end of FY22, with ~120 more currently in design or progress.<sup>30,31</sup> NYC City Council has set aside \$50 mil in funding for 100 in the current budget.<sup>32,33</sup> Redesigns improve the cafeteria atmosphere, increasing the likelihood of students eating meals, particularly in older grades.<sup>34</sup>

**Plastic Free Lunch Day has been making a growing impact.** After students from PS 15, with the help of Cafeteria Culture, and the Office of Sustainability, piloted the first Plastic Free Lunch Day (PFLD), it was rolled out to all NYC public schools on May 16, 2022.<sup>35</sup> More days are planned for fall 2022, including across the country. This has reduced millions of items of plastic use and landfill waste.

**Additional steps were taken towards reducing the food waste landfill burden.** As over 1/3 of NYC landfill waste comes from organic materials, including food,<sup>36</sup> OFNS has partnered with the Office of Sustainability and GrowNYC, towards additional sustainability efforts. Schools are encouraged to try composting, recycling, and efforts like 'share tables' to reduce the landfill burden.<sup>37,38</sup>

**NYC's standards will make for a healthier, more just, resilient, and sustainable OFNS.** Adhering to Good Food Purchasing Program® (GFPP)<sup>39</sup> and the enhanced New York City Food Standards: Meals and Snacks Purchased and Served<sup>40</sup> aim to improve the healthfulness of foods and beverages served as well as ensure better working conditions for employees, among other goals.

*Photo: Coalition for Healthy School Food*





Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the delicate balance of having NYC public school children rely on OFNS for their nutrition security.

### III. Concerns for the Future

**Purchasing and inventory systems may need updates.** Numerous city agencies, including OFNS, rely on paper-based and antiquated purchasing and inventory management systems. Investment in technology providing real-time assessment for city agencies could potentially improve complex management concerns across numerous locations<sup>41</sup> and ensure transparency in adherence to all standards.

**Inflation, unreliable supply chains, and climate may have a looming impact on operations.** OFNS has total compensation packages significantly less (~20–30% lower) than prevailing market rates<sup>42</sup>—potentially impacting recruitment and retention. Program costs continue increasing, but federal reimbursements have remained relatively low.<sup>43</sup> Supply chain concerns for food and supplies continue. Climate-related threats continue to reveal vulnerabilities including storm-related flooding, aging infrastructure, and lack of air conditioning, potentially closing kitchens and disrupting services.<sup>44</sup>



Photo: Wellness In The Schools

### Conclusions

Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the delicate balance of having NYC public school children rely on OFNS for their nutrition security.

**Early pandemic months were challenging and accurate assessment may still be unknown.** Especially in the initial months of COVID, OFNS was tasked with delivering meals under challenging conditions (e.g. new program, short-staffed, supply chain challenges, and COVID). Their efforts served many, but may have been improved by incorporating timely feedback from the community. However, without a funded mandate, no formal evaluation was conducted. Therefore, the complete reasons for low participation may remain unknown. It is likely there was inadequate communication along with other barriers, including inconsistencies in service due to supply chain and staffing issues. Funding for communication came late and via outside grant money. Still, focus group research suggested that families with greater participation had children who maintained or increased diet quality. Focus groups also showed that some understood school meals to be nutritionally balanced, yet more efforts on nutrition education could be beneficial for children and families. However, sample size of that focus group study is a limitation in determining whether phenomena were widespread.

**OFNS continues to provide new offerings and is addressing growing needs.** In addition, during school closures, OFNS worked on program improvements and developed ways to increase community outreach. With the resumption of in-person schooling and regular cafeteria line service, OFNS has and continues to make improvements which will improve nutrition security of the city's most vulnerable residents—including healthier menu changes, opening additional halal sites, more kosher offerings, cafeteria rede-

signs, greater community outreach, and improved efforts to reduce waste. Encouragingly, once operations normalized post-COVID restrictions, there was a slight uptake in school meal participation rates—while overall enrollment has decreased. OFNS menu changes, adherence to enhanced and new NYC standards, and partnership with the Office of Sustainability and other outside groups will hopefully continue to improve nutrition security, resilience, and sustainability for New Yorkers overall.

**OFNS had pre-existing challenges and will face even more in a challenging environment.** Expiring federal waivers, which provided additional service flexibilities and financial support, along with reduced reimbursement due to declining enrollment may place a further strain on the OFNS budget. To be consistent with the ideals laid out in the GFPP, and competitive in the marketplace, current compensation packages may need to be evaluated. Updates to infrastructure continue to be needed, including modernization of inventory and management systems. The extent to which modernization is required was beyond the scope of this research.

## Implications for Policy

Support for OFNS is critical for the nutrition security of NYC public school children. Three key policy takeaways are proposed:

**1. Incorporate Evaluation. The best laid plans for emergencies may or may not function as expected.** Evaluation can reveal the effectiveness of programs and offer timely corrective action, including providing direction on where resources may be needed or better utilized. For instance, it is likely that funding for additional communication campaigns for grab-and-go meals could have helped to raise awareness of meals, but little funding was available. Planning for evaluation should be incorporated into new programs from the development phase. There should be the establishment of some nominal percentage of funds for ongoing projects and initiatives (1–5%) to be used for outside agencies to perform evaluations of any new initiatives—including the diet quality of menu changes, as well as employee compensation, and equipment and infrastructure modernization needs.

**2. Center the voices of those who are served.** There have been recent concerted efforts by OFNS to provide community outreach. And, although the enhancements to the newest NYC Food Standards also encourage community participation, it is noted that there are no formal means of accountability for community concerns. Further work should clarify these procedures to empower the citizenry.

**3. Recognize the potential vulnerabilities of the system.** Addressing disparities in employee wages and inflation concerns for food and operations should be considered, but are not the only issues. NYC public schools have been under-resourced for many years. Continued declines in enrollment do not diminish the underlying need for an increased need for employees, especially managers, but may exacerbate current difficulties. Future preparations are needed and should account for shocks potentially caused by a changing climate and include ongoing economic and supply chain challenges. OFNS operates in a challenging environment, which includes concerns such as outdated kitchens without air conditioning and old electrical wiring. So, for instance, kitchen conditions may become difficult, if not impossible for workers, without this granular level of assessment and address.

OFNS works diligently to provide for the needs of NYC children. However, it operates under challenging conditions which allow for little margin of error. In order to mitigate the risks to nutrition security of NYC's most vulnerable—its children—consideration should be given to enabling ongoing evaluation, centering the community voice, and investigating potential vulnerabilities and solutions.

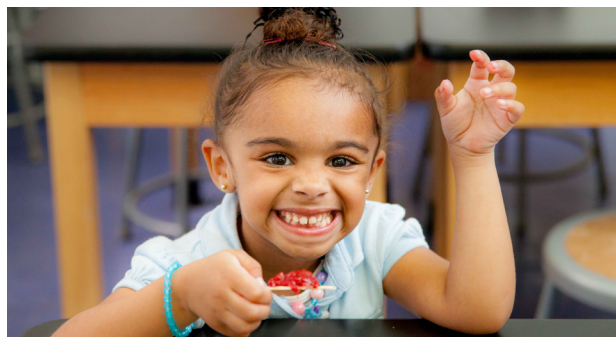


Photo Credit: Jen Harris

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