

The Prince George's County School Meals Initiative

Executive Summary



Initiative Overview:

The Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) and the Prince George's County Food Equity Council (FEC) are currently engaging with students, parents and school leadership to learn of the perceptions and barriers influencing participation in the school nutrition. We would like to partner with the Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) Food and Nutrition Services to develop and implement strategies to increase school meal participation across the county. The FEC will also leverage other key food and community health partners to expand and execute the identified strategies. The intended impact includes improvements to both student health and academic outcomes, promotion school wellness and environmental sustainability. This initiative is funded by Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign.

Background:

A recent survey conducted by the Capital Area Food Bank found that 45% of Prince George's County residents experienced food insecurity in 2023 (1). This is also cited as the highest prevalence rate in the DMV region. Furthermore, communities located in the Inner Beltway of Prince George's County experience the highest rates of food insecurity (9.3%), obesity (40%), and living below poverty (9.6%) compared to other regions in the county (2,3,4). In 2020, the Prince George's County Council contracted with the FEC to support the launch of a [Food Security Task Force](#) (5). Increasing school meal participation emerged as an important priority for the Task Force and is a foundational component of a healthy resilient food system. The FEC partnered with the Riviera Group and Lagniappe Partners in Health, LLC to listen to the experiences and opportunities for PGCPS parents and students to promote participation and amplify support for the school meal program. School meal programs are essential and often the first and only point of access for nutritious food during the school day. Unfortunately, in the 2023-2024 school year, only 59% and 34% of eligible PGCPS students ate school breakfast and lunch (6). Research shows that improving school meal participation rates among students are associated with better nutritional and health gains and increases in school attendance, improvements in school food finances, and reduction in school suspensions and expulsions (7,8,9). These findings were shared amongst schools that adopted the Community Eligibility Provision, an opportunity to ensure every child was eligible for free and reduced school meals (10).

Initiative's Objective:

We seek to collaborate with organizations and individuals to uplift promising practices to further engage students and their families with school nutrition programs. In SY24-25, we hope to partner with school leaders, administrators and other key decision-makers to gather input of the proposed strategies to ensure they are realistic, timely and aligned with overall goals for PGCPs Food and Nutrition Services.

To inform the study, an exploratory phase was conducted involving a literature review of 38 resources and six preliminary key informant interviews. This research identified barriers and facilitators to school meal participation, strategies to increase consumption, and transferable practices from COVID-19. Additional web-based research and interviews with experts, school staff, and parents shaped the development of tailored focus group guides. Participant recruitment for focus groups used email, phone scripts, and snowball sampling to engage parents and students, ensuring cultural and linguistic representation. Data collection included semi-structured virtual focus groups with parents and students, grouped by ethnicity and language, and individual interviews with school staff, each lasting 30-60 minutes. Written consent and verbal assent were obtained for all participants.

The Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) Food Equity Council (FEC) presents a robust set of recommendations to address persistent food insecurity and improve the quality, accessibility, and cultural relevance of school meals. These recommendations aim to ensure that all students thrive academically and socially by providing consistent access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and financially sustainable school meals.

The report identifies key challenges, including underutilization of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), participation gaps in school breakfast programs, barriers to meal accessibility for diverse populations, and a lack of engagement with community stakeholders. In response, three primary recommendations and associated strategies are proposed:



1. Elect the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for All Schools

- Increase the District's Identified Student Percentage (ISP) through targeted collaboration with community organizations, schools, and county agencies.
- Maximize revenue by improving participation in school meal programs like breakfast-after-the-bell and after-school nutrition initiatives.

2. Center Diversity and Preferences in School Meals

- Improve food quality and safety through regular kitchen inspections and staff training.
- Expand culturally relevant menu offerings to reflect the district's diverse student population.
- Market school meals using culturally responsive strategies to dispel myths about healthfulness and promote participation.

3. Develop Capacity–Building Partnerships and Engagement Strategies

- Integrate school meal promotion into district policies and teacher training programs.
- Leverage nonprofit partners to increase funding and support innovative programming like farm-to-school initiatives.
- Strengthen volunteer and partner engagement through improved systems and multilingual access.

By addressing these challenges through evidence-based and community-informed strategies, PGCPs can enhance its meal programs, increase student participation, and reduce food insecurity across the county.

Call to Action: Next Steps for Implementation

PGCPs is at a critical juncture to champion food equity and student well-being. By implementing these strategies, the district can not only reduce food insecurity but also position itself as a national leader in equitable, culturally relevant, and sustainable school nutrition programs.

Short-Term (0–6 Months):

4. Convene a task force of key stakeholders, including school administrators, FNS staff, nonprofit organizations, and parent representatives, to finalize the strategy implementation plan.
5. Conduct equipment assessments in school kitchens and secure initial grant funding for critical upgrades.
6. Identify and prioritize schools in high-need areas for targeted ISP improvement campaigns.
7. Begin piloting culturally relevant menu additions and solicit student and parent feedback.
8. Launch a parent engagement campaign to address concerns and share information on school meals and wellness policies.

Medium-Term (6–18 Months):

9. Roll out breakfast-after-the-bell programs in targeted schools, testing multiple models to identify the most effective for diverse age groups.
10. Partner with local nonprofits to train staff, support grant writing, and implement farm-to-school initiatives.
11. Conduct comprehensive staff training sessions to improve food preparation and handling practices.
12. Develop a multilingual, culturally responsive volunteer system with clear roles and recognition opportunities.

Long-Term (18 Months–3 Years):

13. Evaluate the impact of CEP and breakfast-after-the-bell participation on financial sustainability and student outcomes.
14. Expand partnerships to include local universities for research on tray waste and climate-friendly practices.
15. Update district wellness policies to include stronger commitments to promoting school meals and modeling healthy behaviors.
16. Scale successful strategies to additional schools, ensuring alignment with district-wide objectives.

Initiative's Objective:

The Prince George's County Food Equity Council (FEC) is a local food policy council supporting residents in growing, selling, and eating healthy food. Since 2013, the FEC has been a voice for county residents at the policymaking table for justice in the Prince George's County food system. The FEC is the only organization in the county that is focused on systematic and sustainable food systems change at the county and state-level. The FEC specializes in:

- 1) Convening key stakeholders to increase advocacy and transparency to local food system challenges and
- 2) Serving as database, technical support and evaluation resource for local food system in Prince George's County.

The Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) serves as the incubating agency and fiscal sponsor for FEC. IPHI's role is to ensure that the FEC has the capacity and support to be productive and sustainable. As an IPHI initiative, IPHI provides financial and administrative support.



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- (10) Andreyeva, T., & Sun, X. (2021). Universal school meals in the US: What can we learn from the community eligibility provision? *Nutrients*, 13(8), 2634. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13082634>



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