

# Student Nutrition in the Time of COVID-19

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Spreading the word on crucial pandemic food benefits to NYC families

**The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted access to nutritional programs and services for many New Yorkers. We worked with Community Food Advocates (CFA), a food policy advocacy organization, to use behavioral design to help students in Brooklyn, New York continue to access free lunch benefits despite school closures and adjust to an unfamiliar classroom lunch format once schools reopened.**

## Summary

Community Food Advocates (CFA) is a policy advocacy organization that works to improve food access for New Yorkers through a combination of community organizing and coalition-building, grounded in policy and budget analysis. One of CFA's largest campaigns led to the [introduction of Universal Free School Lunch \(USL\) in all NYC public schools](#), which provides over 1 million students with access to free school lunches. The program aims to reduce the [stigma](#) of eating free or reduced-price lunch, and ensure all students have access to healthy and nutritious food at school.

Like many organizations, CFA had to abruptly adjust its focus to addressing new challenges to food access during the COVID-19 pandemic. ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) worked with CFA to achieve two goals within their aim of maintaining access to nutritional benefits during the pandemic.

First, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 authorized the disbursement of \$420 per student, called Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), to reimburse families for the meals students missed during school closures. In order to maximize the impact of this benefit, the BDC's project aimed to develop an effective means of informing a diverse population of public school families about P-EBT, so they knew what to expect when the card arrived by mail and did not discard it as junk mail or a scam, which was [an issue with federal stimulus payments](#).

Second, when schools reopened in NYC, one COVID safety precaution included moving lunch from the cafeteria to the classroom. This change presented new barriers to participating in free school lunch, which, even before the pandemic, was not fully utilized by all students. We provided guidance to CFA to encourage lunch participation in this new classroom context at Lafayette Educational Campus, which houses five high schools in Brooklyn.

## Highlights

- ▶ When schools closed due to COVID-19, New York State announced a plan to distribute emergency food benefits, called P-EBT, to make up for free lunches students missed.
- ▶ Community Food Advocates (CFA) was concerned that families who needed the benefit the most wouldn't use it and enlisted our help creating a flyer and outreach strategies to raise awareness.
- ▶ As reopened schools shifted lunch to classroom settings, we helped CFA identify potential barriers to Universal Free School Lunch participation, and strategies to address them.

## Uncovering why people might not use P-EBT .....

The New York State Office of Temporary Disability and Assistance distributed the pandemic food benefit to families in three waves between July and September. In the first two, families already enrolled in SNAP, public assistance, or Medicaid received their payment on an existing EBT or Medicaid card, making it fairly likely that they would use the money. CFA was most concerned about families in the third wave, who were not enrolled in other EBT programs and therefore would receive the funds on a new EBT card by mail.

We generated ideas about the potential barriers to card usage for families in this wave based on existing P-EBT materials from CFA and other organizations, and news stories about P-EBT distribution in other states. We outlined reasons that parents might miss the P-EBT card in the mail, or misunderstand what it was and not use it, including:

1. Parents who were never eligible for public benefits in the past (many of whom are immigrants, or people with incomes above typical benefit ceilings) may assume they don't qualify, and/or don't believe they should access them.
2. Parents may misunderstand the effects of using the benefit on their tax liability, eligibility for other benefits in the future, or on their immigration status (e.g., concern about being classified as a public charge).
3. Families who aren't familiar with the state agency sending the letter may overlook the mail or assume it is junk or a scam.

CFA wanted to ensure that all families understood their right to the benefit, recognized the notice when it arrived in the mail, and used the funds. One potential channel identified was the school-aged children of impacted families, especially in immigrant communities where students may often serve as linguistic and cultural brokers. Thus, we decided to create a student-friendly flyer that simplified the who, what, when, where, and why of the P-EBT benefit. The goal of this communication was to give students enough information to explain the benefit to their parents, dispel misconceptions about it, and encourage usage. The flyer was also designed as a digital document to make it more widely and easily available to parents and families.

## Creating and distributing the flyer .....

The flyer was designed to include information relevant to parents but delivered through students. Specifically, we wanted to design it in a way that would capture students' attention, and enable them to understand and explain P-EBT to their parents. Because we believe co-design is an effective way to create impactful interventions and materials, we encouraged CFA to lead virtual design sessions with members of their Youth Food Advocates group in grades 7-12 from all over the city. The students discussed what P-EBT information a communication piece should include and created sketches of flyer designs that would appeal to them. We drew on the students' ideas and preferences to create the final flyer. We learned that students were:

- ▶ Mainly interested in knowing when and how families would receive the money, and where and what they could spend it on.
- ▶ Attracted to designs with vibrant colors, and preferred graphics to plain written text where possible.

Highlights how families in different waves will receive the benefit, with the option for families receiving it by mail appearing first. It also describes the specific agency that will mail the card.

Informs readers that this is a benefit that they have a right to use as opposed to something they need to earn. It also provides info on the parts of the benefit that students in the design session were interested in (eligible food items and stores that accepted EBT).

**USE \$420 from P-EBT Program TO BUY GROCERIES!**

New York State is **sending your parents \$420 to spend on food.** It's called P-EBT. Every student attending a NYC public school receives this money. Students in parochial or charter schools that offer free/reduced-price lunch through the federal lunch program are also eligible. Family income and immigration status don't matter. The money covers the cost of the school meals you missed while school was closed due to COVID-19. You have 1 year to use the money, from the day you get it.

**You get the money in one of three ways:**

- 1** **By postal mail** on a new card for each student, if you do not receive SNAP and/or Public Assistance or Medicaid. Check your mailbox in July or August for a letter from a New York State agency called OTDA. It will refer to this money as "P-EBT" and will include instructions on how to create a PIN to use the card.
- 2** **On your current EBT card.** if you receive SNAP and/or Public Assistance (PA). The money was added in early July. Check your balance at [www.connectebt.com](http://www.connectebt.com) or call 1-888-328-6399\*
- 3** **On your Medicaid CBIC card,** if you are on Medicaid, but not SNAP and/or Public Assistance. The money will be added in July. When you receive the notification letter in the mail, call 1-888-328-6399 to set up a PIN number\*

\*Contact the NY state agency (OTDA) by email ([otda.sm.eisp.PEBT@otda.ny.gov](mailto:otda.sm.eisp.PEBT@otda.ny.gov)) or phone (1-833-452-0096) if you think you should have received money on your current EBT or Medicaid CBIC and haven't yet.

**Remember, this is your money to spend! You can use it:**

- At any store that accepts SNAP/EBT, like your local supermarket, farmers' market or bodega! Just swipe/insert the card at the register, add your PIN and you're good to go!
- Find your favorite stores at [bit.ly/SNAPstores](http://bit.ly/SNAPstores) or look for signs like these:
- On popular food items like cereal, poultry, fruits and vegetables. Check the full list at [bit.ly/SNAPfoods](http://bit.ly/SNAPfoods)

**Using this money does NOT:**

- Require an application, personal information or submitting forms
- Affect your parents' taxes
- Affect your or your parents' immigration status or access to other programs like summer meals, WIC or SNAP

**TO LEARN MORE:**

- Visit these FAQ Pages: [bit.ly/CFA-PEBT-FAQ](http://bit.ly/CFA-PEBT-FAQ) | [on.nyc.gov/p-ebt](http://on.nyc.gov/p-ebt)
- Contact OTDA: [otda.sm.eisp.PEBT@otda.ny.gov](mailto:otda.sm.eisp.PEBT@otda.ny.gov)
- Call the OTDA P-EBT Hotline: 1-833-452-0096 (8:30 AM to 5PM)

Information brought to you by:

**COMMUNITY FOOD ADVOCATES**  
FOUNDED BY PARENTS & STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY

**YOUTH FOOD ADVOCATES**

Describes the "What" and "Why" of the P-EBT benefit for a student audience: What the benefit is and why families are receiving it. It also emphasizes that families receive it regardless of income or immigration status.

Dispels myths about the benefit to address concerns parents may have about the requirements to access the benefit and the effects of using it.

**Image of CFA flyer for students**

CFA distributed the flyer through their website, general newsletter listserv, and emails to school principals and over 150 school administrators during the first week of September, who then forwarded the flyer to their student bodies. As of January 2021, over 200 people had clicked on flyer links about participating stores and/or eligible food items and the link to the FAQ page.

In addition, it is common for groups in CFA's network to include or refer to its educational materials in their own outreach. For example, the flyer was displayed at a meeting of the **Presidents' Council** (a support group for local Parent Associations and Parent-Teacher Associations) of a district serving over 40,000 students.

In addition to the flyer, we recommended other ways CFA could publicize P-EBT to specific audiences (parents, principals, etc.), including WhatsApp posts, template messages for principals to disseminate to parents, and signage for stores, schools, and other community locations. We provided follow-up messaging CFA could use to help parents contact the appropriate state agency if they were having problems using the card or hadn't received it despite being eligible. Since parents have a year from the issue date to use the P-EBT benefit, ongoing outreach will be critical.

## Adapting to the classroom lunch context .....

Before the pandemic, CFA had originally sought our assistance to increase school lunch participation at the Lafayette Educational Campus in Brooklyn, where participation rates for the first half of 2019 ranged between 36% and 74% across the five schools within the campus—even though lunch was free. (Others likely bring lunch from home or wait until school ends to eat.) However, school closures in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused us to pivot our focus, since students were no longer eating lunch at school.

When the New York City Department of Education announced its plans to re-open schools for in-person learning (on various blended schedules) in Fall 2020, we re-visited our preliminary thinking about potential barriers to school lunch participation. To minimize COVID risks, schools planned to deliver meals to classrooms, particularly for younger students, or have pick-up stations on each floor. In order to encourage free lunch participation in this new environment, we created guidelines to help CFA, along with its school partners and interested students, identify potential barriers.

We identified the following barriers to lunch participation that could emerge in classroom settings, such as:

- ▶ Vocal negative comments from peers about the food may make students reluctant to be seen eating it, especially if friends who would usually eat lunch with them in the school cafeteria aren't there to support their choice.
- ▶ Students who had negative experiences with or opinions about cafeteria lunches may apply these views to classroom lunches, especially if the food looks and is packaged the same.
- ▶ Students may be reluctant to remove their masks to eat in classrooms due to COVID-related concerns, especially if they live with family members who are at high risk for severe illness.

Then we drafted sample questions for different research methods (interviews, surveys, or observations) that CFA, school staff and students could use to identify these or other relevant behavioral barriers in classrooms. We also provided design ideas to address these barriers, including:

- ▶ Incentivizing school lunch participation by holding contests among classrooms on the floor. Classrooms with the fewest leftover meals by the time staff return for cleanup get a prize at the end of the month. This turns an activity that may be perceived as “uncool” into something that involves group participation toward a shared goal.

- ▶ Creating small opportunities for students to share creative ideas to make the lunch experience more fun. This could involve an art contest where students recreate the package designs for the school meals, or encouraging students to bring a favorite snack or condiment each Friday to add to their lunchtime meals, and discuss what they enjoy about it.
- ▶ Creating and posting student posters at lunch pick-up stations that explain the new safety measures in the food preparation process and offer tips on eating safely in classrooms. Schools could also send emails or letters to parents about safety measures.

## What's Next? .....

Since P-EBT card distribution ended in mid-September, Community Food Advocates has shifted its efforts to focus on troubleshooting issues with P-EBT usage. They have prioritized the resources and messaging on the P-EBT section of their website to emphasize assistance with receiving or using the benefit. If New York State receives approval from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to issue P-EBT food benefits in 2021, CFA intends to draw on our recommendations when reaching out to families again about the additional funding on their cards/accounts.

To encourage classroom lunch participation, CFA is hoping to involve teachers and other school staff in the research to identify barriers or behaviors that students may encounter in the classroom. Since September 2020, CFA has recruited 14 students from 13 school campuses across the city to become “school food experts” who can participate in this research. Their perspective will be particularly valuable in uncovering behavioral barriers and motivating design elements that adults may not consider.

Starting in 2021, the students will launch a campus publication that includes a school lunch report card with survey questions, based on the types of barriers outlined in our guidelines, to gauge their reasons for not eating the school lunch. The responses will help students and CFA identify common barriers to lunch participation across schools and to design solutions tailored to the problems and preferences at their individual campuses.

The economic strain created by the pandemic is making it even more critical that available assistance is reaching as many New Yorkers as possible. Problems with food access in the context of the pandemic will continue to evolve as city agencies and non-profits like CFA adjust their programs and outreach. We anticipate that the behavioral design principles reflected in the flyer can help increase public awareness of P-EBT, and that the tools and guidance we provided will help Community Food Advocates adapt its ongoing efforts to expand access to nutritious food for New Yorkers in the months and years ahead.

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