

NUTRITION HUBS: HOLISTIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR CONNECTING FAMILIES WITH MEALS



What are Nutrition Hubs?

Schools and community organizations working together to offer central hubs where families can access meals are what No Kid Hungry refers to as a “Nutrition Hubs.” This partnership model between school districts and community organizations has been utilized in communities for decades, but its importance became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (pandemic) when many schools closed, and school meal service was significantly disrupted. During the pandemic, these nutrition hubs supplied families with school meals, as well as afterschool and summer meals. These nutrition hubs were able to holistically meet the food needs of families in the community by providing opportunities for families to access meals, and by connecting with families via outreach efforts.

As part of No Kid Hungry’s pandemic support efforts, No Kid Hungry supported 24 nutrition hubs made up of school districts and community organizations. Support came in the form of grant funding, programmatic expertise and guidance, and peer-to-peer connections. Many grantees started in a position where they saw reduced numbers in meal participation due to the pandemic. After one year of the grant and utilizing the nutrition hubs model, the school districts and community organizations improved their relationships with each other, they established better connections with families in the communities, and working collaboratively allowed the majority of the teams to increase meal participation in their communities.



Framework and Best Practices

While the traditional framework of the school district providing meals to students in the community may reach the majority of students, there can still be students who are unable to access the meals. When a school district combines efforts with a community organization, their capacity is expanded due to the additional staff contribution from the community organization; the family reach is expanded because of the trust and connections the community organization has often already established; and the financial burden for the school district can be lessened if the community organization can contribute funds to the meal programs, e.g., logistics, staff capacity, supplies, etc. The efforts of these two (or more) organizations combined mean that more students have access to the food they need throughout the year. And, if appropriate and allowable, community organizations can provide meals to families. This can be in the form of community organizations dropping off meals to families at drop spots or at homes, or distributing meals at their headquarters.

Any school district or community organization can become a nutrition hub. The school district most often serves as the backbone and leads the collaboration. However, a community organization can spearhead these efforts as well. The partnership roles in this setup can be adapted to meet the needs of the community and the entities involved.

Based on No Kid Hungry's work with nutrition hubs, we most often saw schools providing the meals, while community organizations stepped up to support meal distribution efforts, conduct family and community outreach, add staff capacity, and use their own funds to support these joint efforts.

No Kid Hungry also observed several characteristics of nutrition hubs partnerships, that when implemented, were more likely to garner success:

- Utilizing data to guide strategy.
- Incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion into every aspect of the work.
- Viewing partners as assets rather than competition.
- Pivoting and changing strategy to meet the ever-changing needs of communities.
- Designating or hiring a team member to drive the work, coordinate efforts, and hold partners accountable.
- Having access to funds that can go towards capital improvements, such as vehicles, staff capacity, etc. in order to scale operations to meet the needs.



Sustainability

Sustainability is an important part of this work because the needs of communities change, as does the capacity of organizations to support them. Some nutrition hubs operate for a finite amount of time, while others intend to operate long term. Each nutrition hub that No Kid Hungry worked with had a different sustainability plan that was designed to fit the unique needs of their communities. Here are a few best practices pulled from those plans:

- Raise local funds to help sustain program advancements.
- Work with community partners that enhance and add to the meal programs and vice versa. For instance, some community partners provide labor, funding, equipment, etc. that help relieve the school district of some of the burden of keeping these programs going.
- Make the most of the school nutrition budget. In some circumstances, a school nutrition department can have an excess fund balance, and they are able to create spend down plans that support their long-term programmatic goals.
- Stay abreast of additional grant prospects from a variety of organizations.
- Keep focused on meal participation. The sheer act of serving more meals means school districts receive more funding, which supports continued operations and possible expansion of their programmatic reach.

Note: These best practices are applicable to nutrition hubs partnerships on a case by case basis.



Major Takeaways

- Collaboration between school districts and community organizations can look a variety of ways. It's up to the stakeholders in the collaboration to determine how they want to create their operating framework.
- Collaboration efforts need leadership – either the school district or a community partner must take the initiative and spearhead efforts and hold stakeholders accountable.
- Success comes in many forms. Nutrition hubs may experience big and small wins along the way. Successes might look like increased meal participation, better connections and communication between the school district and community partners, or getting buy-in from families in the community.



More About No Kid Hungry's Nutrition Hubs Grants

No Kid Hungry granted to 24 teams of school districts and community organizations. Grant funding was used for a variety of purposes, but most commonly for:

- Administrative or management staff to lead programmatic efforts.
- Meal marketing and promotion efforts.
- Food for the meal programs that went to families in the community.
- Vehicles used to transport food to individual families or to drop-off locations.
- Supplies, e.g., food containers and cutlery, storage items such as coolers, etc.

Additionally, grantees utilized funding to support expenses related but not limited to:

- Meal pre-order via app, phone, or online form.
- Walk-up meal distribution.
- Drive-thru or curbside meal distribution.
- Direct home delivery.
- Take-home meals (for students alternating between in-class and distance learning).
- Distribution along bus or mobile routes.
- Food or groceries for families.
- Meals for adults/families.

Nutrition Hubs can be an effective strategy to help broaden the reach of in-school and out-of-school time meals to families. Nutrition Hubs can also be a method to improve community connections and relationships.

For additional information and more resources, visit the No Kid Hungry [Center for Best Practices](#) website.