



How Are School Food Companies Responding to COVID-19?

COMPANY RESPONSES TO COVID-19 SUPPLY CHAIN AND SAFETY ISSUES

The importance of healthy school meals took on new urgency during the ongoing coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. With more than 72,000 school closures affecting the 30 million school children who participate in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Programs, ensuring that students had continued access to healthy school meals was—and continues to be—more critical than ever. Economic hardship throughout the pandemic has resulted in more students qualifying for the programs. For many of these students, these are the only nutritious meals they receive in a day. At the same time, school food manufacturers faced unprecedented challenges beginning in March 2020 when companies were forced to deal with unexpected supply chain and distribution issues; unfortunately many issues persist.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest conducted in-depth interviews of five large K-12 school food manufacturers between April and May, 2021 to identify some of the problems they faced in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and company efforts to overcome them. We selected companies based on a number of factors including: top K-12 companies according to national sales data, existing partnerships with CSPI and other non-profits, companies that are featured regularly in the media on school food issues, and companies that are active in shaping school food policy. We found contacts at the companies via LinkedIn and Google searches, or through existing relationships, and identified senior employees who have government or public affairs functions within the companies. Contacts were invited via email and agreed to participate in a one-hour interview. Our questions included how companies were addressing COVID-19 supply chain issues.

Here we describe some of the initiatives these companies undertook during COVID-19. Please note the following information reflects the depictions of each company, and not necessarily that of CSPI, and only focuses on company practices related to COVID-19.

Danone North America (NA)

In response to the pandemic, Danone NA invested heavily in protecting their employees. For protecting staff in-person, they purchased a mask-making machine; required and provided masks for anyone entering their buildings; increased ventilation in plants and offices; closed off portions of plants; executed rotating schedules to ensure social distancing; implemented a travel and visitor ban; enacted extra cleaning procedures; ran simulations of what to do in case an employee tested positive for COVID-19; and implemented automatic temperature sensing. On testing and vaccinations, they piloted virus and antibody testing, and incentivized vaccinations. For additional support to staff, they increased factory worker pay and provided childcare support for employees.

General Mills

To support schools during the pandemic, General Mills accelerated new product innovation for grab-and-go feeding models and provided home preparation instructions for individually wrapped items. They also provided financial and in-kind support, donating to the School Nutrition Foundation to fund grants for personal protective equipment and curbside equipment; donating bags of food; and granting \$1.75 million to No Kid Hungry through the General Mills Foundation.

Kellogg Company

To help distribute school meals during the pandemic, Kellogg Company donated \$60,000 in school grants in partnership with No Kid Hungry. To support school foodservice directors, they held a virtual expo with webinars, culinary demonstrations, interactive training, and professional development opportunities. They also came up with operational innovations, like the thaw-n-serve Eggo, which helped school nutrition programs with breakfast service. At the time of the interview, Kellogg was planning a cafeteria-to-classroom pilot program in the fall of 2021, which would include ten STEM lessons that teach kids how to look at the environmental and nutritional impact of food and use culinary math skills necessary in recipe development.

PepsiCo

At the time of the interview, PepsiCo did not experience supply chain interruptions as a result of the pandemic, but they did have to come up with innovative solutions to meet schools' needs—like delivering meals directly to

kids' homes through the mail. PepsiCo participated in the program Meals to You, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global. This program shipped two-weeks' worth of breakfasts and lunches directly to households (the program ended in 2020). Fresh foods were prioritized when possible, but some cases required shelf-stable options. This built on PepsiCo's existing program—PepsiCo Foundation's Food for Good initiative—a partnership of community and non-profit organizations along with local and state government agencies that launched in 2009. That initiative, which started by delivering school meals to kids during the summer, pivoted to provide fresh, hot meals during the pandemic.

Revolution Foods

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic when Congress authorized and the USDA provided schools the option to waive the school meal nutrition standards, Revolution Foods continued to provide two million meals per week that met the standards. For instance, at the start of the pandemic, schools needed shelf-stable proteins and milk, which were hard to come by. To meet schools' needs and stay within their strict internal ingredient standards, Revolution Foods contacted vendors outside the traditional K-12 market and obtained the documentation needed to be able to offer their products in schools. Though schools were demanding shelf-stable foods to aid with distribution, the company insisted on helping distribute fresh foods to students, even if that meant loaning out their refrigerated trucks.

For questions about school foods, please contact policy@cspinet.org.

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