

# USDA extends free school meals program amid pandemic

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced on Monday that it would extend its flexible free school meals program through the fall, to help keep millions of kids fed as the coronavirus pandemic continues to hold the country in its grip.

The program, which allowed parents and caregivers to collect free meals for their kids at any school this summer, was set to expire at the start of September but pressure had been mounting on the agency to continue the program, the *Washington Post* reported.

In mid-August, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue said that extending the full scope of the free meals for kids program beyond August would go "beyond what [the] USDA currently has the authority to implement and would be closer to a universal school meals program which Congress has not authorized or funded."

However, Perdue said in a statement released Monday that his agency was "extending summer meal program flexibilities for as long as we can, legally and financially." The statement said the millions of families that rely on the program would be able to do so until as late as the end of the year.

"We appreciate the incredible efforts by our school foodservice professionals year in and year out, but this year we have an unprecedented situation," Perdue said. "This extension of summer program authority will employ summer program sponsors to ensure meals are reaching all children whether they are learning in the classroom or virtually—so they are fed and ready to learn, even in new and ever-changing learning environments."

School nutrition experts applauded the move.

Speaking in the USDA news release, Reggie Ross, president of the The

School Nutrition Association, said his group "greatly appreciates USDA addressing the critical challenges shared by our members serving students on the frontlines these first weeks of school."

"Today's announcement brings a huge relief to our school meal program and the community we serve," Lindsay Aguilar, director of Food Services for Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, added in the statement. "Many of our families who might not qualify for free meals are still going through a tough time and are worried about how to keep food on the table. Now their children will have one less thing to worry about as they adjust to evolving in-school and remote learning scenarios. These waivers also eliminate a massive administrative burden for our [school](#) nutrition staff, allowing them to focus on feeding children."

## **New report shows COVID-19 spreading fastest among kids, teens**

Even as schools reopen, a new report shows COVID-19 is now spreading at a faster rate in children and teenagers than among the general public.

The troubling data, from the American Academy of Pediatrics, comes just as schools and universities around the country are reopening for fall classes.

Since the start of the summer, every state in the country has witnessed an increase in the number of young people who have tested positive for coronavirus. In late May, about 5 percent of the nation's cases were recorded in minors, the *Times* reported. By Aug. 20, that number had risen to more than 9 percent.

Young children seem to catch and transmit the virus less often than adults, but Dr. Sean O'Leary, vice chairman of the American Academy

of Pediatrics' committee on infectious diseases, told the *Times* that community spread in many parts of the United States this summer has corresponded with more infections among children.

After reports of outbreaks at summer camps, it is clear that the virus can spread among children under certain circumstances, Dr. William Raszka Jr., a pediatric infectious disease expert at the University of Vermont's College of Medicine, told the *Times*. He worries about opening schools in places where infection rates are high.

"One of the challenges is that you just can't separate schools from the community," Raszka said. "When there's a really high prevalence rate in the community and you open schools, there's going to be a lot of transmission in schools."

Debunking the theory that more testing is the only reason why more kids are now being diagnosed with COVID-19, O'Leary told the *Times* there is evidence that minors are truly being infected at a higher rate now than earlier in the year because hospitalizations and deaths among children had increased as well.

"Anyone who has been on the front lines of this pandemic in a children's hospital can tell you we've taken care of lots of kids that are very sick," O'Leary told the *Times*. "Yes, it's less severe in children than adults, but it's not completely benign."

## **FDA approves new rapid coronavirus test**

In some positive news, the first rapid coronavirus [test](#) that doesn't need special computer equipment to produce results was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last week.

Made by Abbott Laboratories, the 15-minute test will sell for \$5, giving

it an edge over similar tests that need to be popped into a small machine, the *Associated Press* reported. No larger than a credit card, the Abbott test is based on the same technology used to test for the flu, strep throat and other infections.

On Thursday, the White House announced a \$760 million deal with Abbott to produce 150 million of the rapid tests.

BinaxNOW is the fourth rapid test in the United States that detects COVID-19 antigens, proteins found on the surface of the coronavirus, rather than the virus itself, the *AP* reported. It's considered a faster, but less precise, screening method.

Abbott's entry into the rapid COVID-19 test market offers yet another option to expand testing, the *AP* reported. The FDA also recently gave its blessing to a saliva test from Yale University that bypasses some of the supplies that have led to testing bottlenecks, the wire service said. Neither test can be performed at home.

But several companies are developing rapid at-home tests, though none have yet won FDA approval, the *AP* reported. Abbott's new test still requires a nasal swab be taken by a health worker, like most older coronavirus tests. The Yale saliva test eliminates the need for a swab, but can only be run at high-grade laboratories.

Since the start of the pandemic, nasal swab tests that are sent to a lab have been the standard for COVID-19 screening. While considered highly accurate, the tests rely on expensive, specialized machines and chemicals. Shortages of those supplies have led to repeated delays in reporting results, the *AP* reported.

"Those [rapid] screening tests are what we need in schools, workplaces and nursing homes in order to catch asymptomatic spreaders," Dr.

Jonathan Quick, an adjunct professor of global health at Duke University in North Carolina, told the wire service.

## Cases keep mounting

By Tuesday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 6 million as the death toll passed 183,400, according to a *Times* tally.

According to the same tally, the top five states in coronavirus cases as of Tuesday were: California with over 712,000; Texas with more than 640,000; Florida with over 623,000; New York with more than 439,400; and Georgia with over 254,000.

Elsewhere in the world, the situation remains challenging.

India has surpassed Mexico in the number of deaths caused by the coronavirus. The nation of 1.3 billion people now has the world's third-highest death toll at 65, 288, according to a Johns Hopkins tally. It is behind only Brazil and the United States. With India's new infections exceeding 75,000 for the past five days, the virus appears to be tightening its grip on that country, the *Times* said.

Brazil is also a hotspot in the coronavirus pandemic, with over 3.9 million confirmed infections by Tuesday, according to the Hopkins tally. It has the second-highest number of cases, behind only the United States.

Cases are also spiking in Russia: On Tuesday, the country's coronavirus case count passed 1 million, the *Times* reported. Cases continue to rise by about 5,000 per day despite an official declaration in early August that the country had a vaccine.

The death toll in Russia is officially now 17,299. When President Vladimir Putin announced the vaccine, health officials said mass

vaccination would start in October. But the country's health ministry on Monday pushed back that timeline to November or December.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 25.5 million on Tuesday, with over 851,000 deaths, according to the Hopkins tally.

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [new coronavirus](#).

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