

# Millions of children will miss healthy school meals when pandemic relief expires

By ALLISON AUBREY  
National Public Radio

When schools pivoted to virtual learning early in the pandemic, the National School Lunch Program was thrown into chaos. Millions of children rely on school meals to keep hunger at bay, so school nutrition directors scrambled to adopt new, creative ways to distribute food to families. Some of these changes were improvements on the status quo, they say.

And as part of pandemic relief legislation, the federal food and nutrition services agency waived the requirement that schools serve meals in a group setting, increased school-year reimbursement rates to summer levels for school food programs and granted more flexibility in how food is prepared and packaged.

"It was a game changer," said Donna Martin, who heads the school nutrition program, in Burke County, Georgia, a rural district that has a high rate of food insecurity.

Schools started preparing bag lunches and other grab-and-go options for parents to pick up at school and take home for their kids, and even used buses to bring meals, sometimes days-worth, to pickup spots in different neighborhoods.

For Martin, the new flexibility meant that instead of preparing individual meals, as usually required, she used her budget to go all in on healthy ingredients, and she started sending boxes of fresh food home to families, enough for several days.

"We were able to give whole heads of broccoli and whole heads of cauliflower and unusual fruits and vegetables," Martin said. The economy of scale from bulk buying these ingredients was a win. "We could give much better food," she said.

Even though kids are back in school, Martin said many of her pandemic innovations are worth keep-



Karen Ducey/Getty Images  
**Nutritionist Shaunté Fields and bus driver Treva White, left, deliver meals to children and their families in Seattle.**

ing. But the waivers that gave her that flexibility — and a boost in federal funds — are set to expire at the end of June.

Health policy experts say the flexibility has served children well. "When you improve the ability for the country to deliver food to children, to families, you improve the health outcomes of Americans," said physician Ezekiel Emanuel, co-director of the Healthcare Transformation Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on the links between poor nutrition and chronic illnesses such as diabetes and obesity, as well as the risk of serious illness from COVID-19, so Emanuel said initiatives that make child nutrition programs more efficient should continue.

Martin said the expiration of the waivers and increased funding "is going to be a disaster for my program."

For instance, with the summer coming up, and a return to the rules that require kids to be served meals in group settings, much of her budget will be used on transportation costs instead of healthy ingredients — sending buses around to kids' homes

where they will be required to eat on the bus in order to comply with the rules that kids are fed in congregate settings.

"Our county is so rural that the kids do not have a way to get to the schools to eat at the schools so the buses have to take the food to them," Martin said. She describes the effect on her program as "catastrophic."

Bus drivers are in short supply around the country, gas prices have spiked, and inflation has led to higher food prices. "We're going to have to really cut back on the quality of the meals," Martin said.

School food directors and nutrition advocates lobbied lawmakers on Capitol Hill to include an extension of the waivers in the omnibus spending package that President Joe Biden signed last week. But that effort was unsuccessful.

"Congress failed kids, bottom line," said Lisa Davis, who leads Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Campaign. A wide coalition of anti-hunger advocates and school nutrition professionals agree that Congress needs to act.

Because of the failure to extend the nutrition waivers, "many schools and community organizations will have to stop or scale back meals over the summer. ... This puts children at risk of missing more than 95 million meals this summer alone," Davis said. She said her organization will keep working towards a solution.

For now, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has its hands tied. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack does not have the power to renew waivers. That power rests with Congress.

"We are disappointed that we weren't able to secure needed resources and flexibilities to help school meals and summer feeding programs deal with the serious challenges they are facing," a spokesperson for the USDA told National Public Radio.

# Merkley: He called Putin's actions on Ukraine a war crime

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"We're talking about something on a scale far — like, many orders of magnitude — larger with the Snake River dams, and fierce, fierce opposition from many stakeholders in that region in terms of the possibility of removing the dams," he said. "So I don't want to understate what an intensive effort it would take to pursue that mission."

Merkley pointed out that salmon populations have declined in other rivers, as well. "They are having trouble everywhere, so the dams aren't the only issue," he said.

The senator, who has made the environment a priority, said that "we have to drive the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy," such as solar and wind.

"We have to do it really fast," he said. "The amount of carbon dioxide building up in the atmosphere is actually accelerating — that, for all the talk and intensity of everything we're doing, it's not decreasing, it's not slowing, it's accelerating."

Merkley's comments come a few weeks after President Biden announced the U.S. would ban imports of oil, coal and liquefied natural gas from Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine that began in late February.

He called Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions a war crime.

"It is considered a war crime to directly target civilians, and he is targeting schools and hospitals and cities, which is what he did in Chechnya," Merkley said. "But in this case, the Ukrainian people are much more prepared to resist. And we need to do everything we can to help them have those tools of resistance. We need to help them on the humanitarian side."

The conflict, he said, represents a clash between different visions of government.

"Ukrainian people have fought for the vision of freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom to have fair elections," Merkley said.

He cautioned that the U.S. should avoid a direct military conflict with Russia; an escalation could lead, he said, to World War III or nuclear war. "That's the line that we have to carefully tread here," he said.

Rick Gray, of Cannon Beach,

suggested a policy for Merkley to pass along to the White House: "For NATO and the U.S. to accept all of the Russian POWs and deserters and give them warm, comfortable custody for the remainder of the war." He said the policy would relieve Ukrainians of having to guard them while undermining the Russian war effort.

Merkley noted that, under the rules of war, POWs have protected status. Going further and "inviting them and knowing they'll be well treated is not a bad idea."

## Filibuster reform

Laure Caplan, of Astoria, a leader with the progressive group Indivisible North Coast Oregon, asked about cooperation in the Senate.

"It feels like the Republican Party is just determined to block anything so they can make President Biden look bad, and so they can make Democrats look bad, and so they can make democracy look bad and weak — and be weak," she said.

Merkley pointed to his push to reform the filibuster. The senator advocated for a "talking filibuster," where a senator who wanted to hold up a bill had to continually speak in public. The minority party would know it couldn't sustain the tactic indefinitely, the majority party wouldn't want the legislative process stalled, so there would be a two-way incentive to negotiate, he said.

To reform the filibuster required 50 votes — Vice President Kamala Harris would have served as a tie-breaker — but Merkley could only get 48. All Republicans voted against it, and so did U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat, and U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona Democrat, arguing that the filibuster encourages cooperation.

Merkley said the current system rewards a minority party's obstruction and "really encourages partisan paralysis." Failure on the filibuster meant that voting rights legislation never came up for a vote in the Senate.

"I am really disappointed that I couldn't get two more people to reform the Senate last year," he said. "We've got to get there. It is not serving the American people well."

# Restaurant: Couple negotiated for six months

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The Allens opened at the corner of Cottage and Pacific Way in the late 1980s. The restaurant gained favor with locals, visitors and foodies from all over, with glowing reviews from leading food and wine publications.

At the start of the pandemic, the restaurant closed, but the Allens reopened as a bakery and micro market.

Arora felt at home as soon as he entered. "I wasn't interested in flipping it upside down," he said. "I wasn't interested in any radical transformation."

Arora loved what the Allens had created: a social hub with food involved. "There's good wine and beer involved. There's morning coffee involved, but it's a hub," he said. "And all the pieces fit together."

They negotiated for about six months before announcing a deal in February.

While terms were not disclosed, the Allens retain ownership of the building. The family bought the restaurant, the fixtures and equipment. They dropped the "bakery" in the name and will reopen as Pacific Way Cafe and Marketplace.

The Aroras plan to continue serving pastries and coffee in the morning. They'll reopen the former cafe space and expand the micro market with specialty items. One side room will contain cafe seating and the second a wine room. Including dining in the fireplace room and covered outdoor area, the restaurant will have a combined seating of 52. The restaurant will be dine in, takeout or some combination of the two.

"It's going to be a hybrid," Arora said.

To add to the menu, the Aroras purchased the recipes and the trailer from the former Pacific Crab Co., the business founded by Rhene Mady and her husband, David Farrell, who moved to Wisconsin.

The Aroras will bring Pacific Crab Co. to the Portland Seafood & Wine Festival in late March and the Crab, Seafood & Wine Festival in Astoria in late April.

For now, Arora said the career change has invigorated him. He said he can "never say never," but doesn't have the capacity to continue his consulting at present.

"Revitalizing the Pacific Way space in a way that respectfully honors its Gearhart heritage is my No. 1 priority and focus," he said. "I'm getting up in the morning and I can't wait to get to work. I haven't had that feeling in — I don't know how many years."

# Forum: Coming Wednesday

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director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, hopes people stay until the end.

"Because we're going to start out with a lot of, 'Here's what we can't do,' and 'Here's why we can't just sweep the streets and get rid of loitering' and those types of things

that ... people are asking for," Reid said. "But at the end of this, we really want to get to, here's what the police department can do. Here's what the city can do. Here's what we as individual businesses can do."

"I hope that at the end of this we get to individual actions, collective actions, that actually do move us forward."



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