



Promising Practices for Starting & Maintaining a School Food Pantry

School pantries are another resource beyond school meals to support students and families who are experiencing food insecurity. This resource highlights promising practices for launching and maintaining a school pantry.

Types of School Pantry Setups

There are different types of school pantry setups. Consider the unique needs of your school community, the building/campus layout and what staffing capacity is available to support the pantry. These are three common setup models to consider:

- **Permanent Space** – With this model, there is a dedicated space for the pantry inside of the school building, on the campus or at a nearby offsite location. Sizes can vary and range from a few shelves to a mini-market place. This type of setup is generally utilized with a set schedule of “open hours” when volunteers, school staff or students are present to operate the pantry. Drive thru pantries often utilize this setup.
- **Mobile/Pop-Up** – The mobile/pop-up pantry is brought to or near the school. It can also be set up in a common space such as the cafeteria. The mobile pop-up pantry is promoted ahead of time so that the school community knows when it is coming and where to find it. Typically, food bank staff and/or external volunteers staff this model and the distribution schedule is determined by both the school and community partners.
- **Backpack Program** – This model engages school staff, volunteers or community partners to pre-package food into backpacks or other bags. The food items are usually non-perishable and typically consist of two meals per day for the weekend. Meals may be sent home with students each weekend and before long school breaks.

Spotlight: Baltimore County Public Schools

Baltimore County Public Schools in Baltimore, MD started a partnership with the Office of Title I to identify applicable students to mail them a gift card to the grocery store. They received positive feedback from participants. Finding ongoing financial support can be a challenge.

Food Distribution Methods

Once you've selected the best setup for your school pantry, consider how you'd like to operate food distribution: client choice or volunteer/staff packed. Note: client choice is the recommended distribution method and is generally more effective at increasing participation.

- **Client Choice** – This method uses a client-centered approach to distribute food. Typically, there are grocery store-style elements included in the pantry, such as racks and tables to display food for clients to choose. The student or their parent(s)/caretaker(s) chooses the food items that they want which leads to decrease in waste. Other benefits of this method include a sense of dignity and control and decreased stigma, reduced food waste, increased social support, and the ability for clients to choose culturally appropriate food items.
- **Volunteer/Staff Choice** – With this method, volunteers/staff pre-pack the food into bags or boxes for distribution to students and families. Each bag or box typically contains the same variety of items. A benefit of this method is that it ensures all food is distributed equally among clients.

Food Sources

Food for a school pantry can come from a variety of sources. Many schools rely on partnerships with community organizations or local businesses to support their pantry, including food banks, places of worship, grocery stores and local charities. It may take some time to build these partnerships– reach out to a variety of community organizations and local businesses to explore how you can work together. Each partnership/relationship might ultimately look different. There is also the option to solicit donations from within your school community or the surrounding community. Consider engaging the PTA to host a food drive to stock the pantry.

Promising Practices for Sourcing Food

- Work within your school community and the surrounding community to establish a year-round food drive. Include culturally appropriate foods and specify the types of food items that you're seeking to collect (i.e. fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables and non-perishable items like canned vegetables, jarred sauces, and cereal).
- Repurpose individually wrapped foods that have been contributed to post-lunch share tables.
- Work with your local food bank, places of worship and community organizations to have food donated.
- Work with school leaders, teachers and other partners to solicit donations.



Checklist for Starting a School Pantry

- ❑ Decide how many people you hope to serve per week/month. Consider starting small and expanding later.
- ❑ Solicit feedback from other school stakeholders to select which pantry model will work best for your school community (mobile/pop-up, permanent or backpack). Questions to consider:
 - What kind of space is available?
 - Do you have equipment to help organize the food and maintain quality and safety?
 - Do families need transportation to and from the pantry?
 - When will food distribution occur and at what frequency?
- ❑ Determine who your partners are. Questions to consider:
 - Who can you partner with?
 - What role will each partner play?
 - Who will manage the overall pantry operation?
- ❑ Determine how the pantry will be staffed.
- ❑ Determine where the food will come from and what kind of food the pantry will offer.
- ❑ Determine how you will maintain the privacy of those who utilize the pantry.
- ❑ Consider what educational materials can be available at the pantry to connect families with additional resources (i.e. info about WIC, SNAP and free & reduced-price meal applications).
- ❑ Plan for how you'll promote the pantry once it has launched. Consider:
 - Having information about the pantry available at back to school night, during parent-teacher conferences and at other family-focused events.
 - Including distribution dates on the school calendar and on the district website.
 - Note: if the pantry is closed during holiday breaks and the summer, let families know about other resources for food that are available to them.
 - Informing school counselors and nurses about the pantry so they can encourage students and families in need to visit the pantry.



Spotlight: Hays Independent School District

Hays Independent School District in Kyle, TX started a school pantry program called [HaysHope 2Go](#) in March 2020 to support their students who are food insecure. Through partnerships, the pantry provides resources for students and families like food, clothes, personal products and diapers. Families can fill out an online request form that will direct them to a location for drive thru pick-up. They involve all community members to help run the program, including the superintendent. A former teacher and board member, Esperanza Orosco, encourages community members to serve at the pantry to learn more about how this program is helping families throughout the community.

Ways to Provide Food Assistance to Identified Students and Families

If your school/district doesn't feel ready to launch a pantry, consider these other options for assisting students and families in need.

- Offer assistance with SNAP, WIC and free and reduced-price meals eligibility.
- Connect families with local agencies (including food banks and community pantries) by providing a list of emergency food distributions and helpline assistance phone numbers or websites.
- Host a nutrition night to educate families on healthy eating and/or offer a cooking demo.
- Connect families with counselors that may assist with other helpful resources



Spotlight: Caroline County Public Schools

Caroline County Public Schools, in Denton, MD partners with the Maryland Food Bank and a local foundation to support their school backpack program, which is in its fourth year of operation. When considering program sustainability, Food Services Director Beth Brewster believes it's best to partner under another larger organization for long term support. They work with local volunteers and students with special needs to fill the backpacks every Wednesday. They started small by providing 100 backpacks to children and are now serving 9 schools for a total of 675 backpacks to kids. The district also has a mobile pantry and a few pop-up pantries. In addition, they connect local pantries to their backpack programs. To learn more, visit: <https://www.carolineschools.org/student-life/food-services>

For more information and resources please visit the Center for Best Practices <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs>