

Texas Rural School District Cohort Year 2022-2023 Report

Nationally, [Texas has more rural schools](#) than any other state, with more than 20% of campuses located in rural areas and over 600,000 students enrolled in these schools across the state. Students and families who are living in rural communities often face unique challenges due to their community's size and region, including restricted access to healthcare, lack of infrastructure, fewer job opportunities, and lack of transportation. This often results in limited access to grocery stores, food pantries, or food banks.

Earlier this year, No Kid Hungry Texas commissioned a poll that found 44% of rural respondents had experienced one or more symptoms of food insecurity in the past month with 25% of rural Texans saying in the last year they worried they would not have enough food for their household. Luckily, school districts are uniquely positioned to address food insecurity among children through increasing access to school meals. This explains the increasing importance in investing in rural school districts through grants, technical assistance, and coalition building to create change on the local, state, and federal levels.

Through the Texas Rural School District Cohort, No Kid Hungry Texas in partnership with the Texas Rural Education Association not only provides grant investments that can create program changes collaborates with rural schools to build their skillsets, strengthen community partnerships, and expand their professional network in a way that will help them operate a robust child nutrition program for years to come.

Recruitment Process and Evaluating Applications

Unlike the pilot cohort, No Kid Hungry Texas chose to share the request for proposals far and wide utilizing external newsletters, partners like the Texas Rural Education Association, in-person recruitment at events like Texas Department of Agriculture's MegaCon, and one-on-one outreach utilizing publicly available data.

For this cohort, No Kid Hungry Texas chose to prioritize school districts that met the following criteria:

1. **Majority non-white students:**
Student population is made up of 50% or more non-white students, as determined by school district data.
2. **Rural locale:**
School districts must be in a community that is considered either rural-remote, rural-distant, rural-fringe, town-remote or town-distant based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.
3. **Percentage of free and reduced student population/eligibility level:**
Districts must have a high eligibility rate which is 60% or more of enrolled students being eligible for F/R meals or a medium eligibility rate, where 40-59.9% of enrolled students are eligible for F/R meals.
4. **Understanding of rural cohort requirements:** Applicants must understand and agree to the requirements of the rural cohort. For the rural cohort, applicants must attend

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bi-monthly meetings to share promising practices and ideas with other cohort members. Additionally, cohort members are required to submit quarterly reports.

Because rural communities are unique, No Kid Hungry Texas chose to be flexible when evaluating applications and utilized a scoring sheet to encourage reviewers to check their biases utilizing the indicators above. Additional indicators to understand how cohort members would utilize the grant, their plans to innovate and challenge the status quo, assess leadership potential, understand racial equity practices, and the diversity of their current funding streams with an eye towards sustainability were included in the scoring sheet as well.

2022-2023 Rural Cohort Members

The 2022-2023 Rural School District Cohort included six school districts from four different regions:

- Bland Independent School District, North Texas
- Brookesmith Independent School District, West Texas
- Henderson Independent School District, East Texas
- Junction Independent School District, West Texas
- Slaton Independent School District, West Texas
- Smithville Independent School District, Central Texas

School District	Total Enrollment	F/R Enrollment	% Non-white students	% of Students in Poverty	Locale*
Bland ISD	727	54%	45%	18%	Rural Distant
Brookesmith ISD	148	100%	18%	11%	Rural Remote
Henderson ISD	4,174	81%	56%	18%	Town Distant
Junction ISD	590	92%	40%	34%	Town Remote
Slaton ISD	1364	94%	71%	23%	Town Fringe
Smithville ISD	1873	61%	46%	14%	Town Distant

*Details on locale classification definitions can be found [here](#).

About Grant Projects

This grant opportunity ensured that every community could address child food insecurity in a way that met their needs. While each project was unique in what strategies they deployed to address community issues, **83% of projects focused on increasing school meal participation.**

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Bland Independent School District increased school meal participation by increasing meal quality and staff capacity. Through grant funding, they purchased new equipment like steamers and a dishwasher that helped reduce staff's hands-on cooking time and implement more fresh fruits and vegetables and scratch cooking opportunities.

Brookesmith Independent School District addressed food insecurity and access by utilizing two different strategies. First, to meet the needs of students' taste preferences, the child nutrition department purchased an industrial air fryer. Additionally, they had the opportunity to partner with Good Samaritan to provide afternoon snacks and weekend backpacks to the 148 students who are enrolled in the district. Through grant funding, they purchased start-up materials for this partnership including food costs and weekend sacks.

Henderson Independent School District chose a truly unique approach to their grant project and worked with school administrators, maintenance, and transportation staff to retrofit an old school bus into a mobile summer meals site that can be utilized in different parts of the community. The bus was paid for by the school, and grant funding was utilized to purchase a custom-made oven, hot/cold warmers, and equipment for the bus.

Junction Independent School District chose to purchase equipment to improve meal quality and cafeteria tables to provide more space for students to sit and eat lunch with friends and to drive participation.

Slaton Independent School District's child nutrition staff focused on increasing breakfast participation in secondary schools by purchasing new point-of-sale machines, breakfast carts, and updates to the coffee bar in the high school.

Smithville Independent School District also implemented a two-pronged approach to their grant funding. First, they focused on engaging students through nutrition education and hosting mobile cooking demonstrations during after-school meal programs. Grant funding was used to purchase pots, pans, and hot plates for these demonstrations. Additionally, Smithville ISD focused on increasing local food consumption by increasing farm-to-school partnerships and utilized grant funding for transportation costs associated with visiting farms.

Call Structure and Discussions

While providing grant funding was one aspect of our cohort, the other was providing technical assistance and 1:1 connection through calls to support the learning of cohort members. The cohort members met six times over the course of a school year and each topic was chosen by cohort members to ensure that their learning experience was personalized and relevant to their needs. Topics and schedule follow:

1. Introductions and Collaborating on Grant Projects
2. Farm to School Partnerships Discussion with Texas Department of Agriculture
3. School Gardens Via Community Partnerships with Farmer Lowery
4. Promising Practices in Summer Meal Service
5. Group Collaboration on Projects
6. Farm-to-School Partnerships Discussion with Sustainable Food Center

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Community Impact

Overall Impact:

Half of the cohort members experienced an increase in participation in one or more school meal programs in the school year 2022-2023 compared to the school year 2021-2022. In a post-participation survey, **100% of rural cohort members reported that they felt that they achieved their goal and actively learned valuable lessons** about their community and operations along the way. For example, one cohort member shared that “having complete systems, with proper tools help staff, students, teachers, and administrators [do] what is best for kids.” Cohort members also expressed that they received community feedback on their grant projects as well. One cohort member shared “The feedback we received was all positive as it relates to the students. Feeding kids is our top priority and we were able to do it bigger and better this past year with our grant project.”

As far as unique community impact, each cohort member shared the following:

At **Bland Independent School District**, the purchase of two steamers, two dishwashers, and a tilt skillet for both the elementary and the high school helped the district increase their scratch cooking. **This increase led to daily participation in school meals from 12% to 60%, impacting over 450 students.**

“No Kid Hungry has made an impact here at Bland ISD – the grant nearly doubled our annual budget. It has made a huge difference in staff operations in both the quality and variety of food we are able to serve. Our staff has made sure that the impact of this grant will be felt by this district for years to come.” Jeff Miley, former child nutrition director of Bland ISD

With the purchase of an industrial air fryer, **Brookesmith Independent School District increased participation in their school meals programs by nearly 25%**. This purchase allowed the district to provide higher quality meals which was met with gratitude from both students and teachers. Additionally, the district’s mid-day snack program provided just over 3,000 snacks a month during the school year. Alline Bolt, kitchen manager at Brookesmith ISD, shared

“Our students are extremely excited about snacks and backpacks at school. If something happens and snacks are delivered late, students let their teachers know about it. It’s an important part of the day for them.”

Through their partnership with the organization Good Samaritan, Brookesmith ISD will continue their weekend backpack program which serves 41% of students each week, providing additional healthy nutrition to kids who experience food insecurity.

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Henderson Independent School District's Tanya Davis, director of child nutrition, shared that there are so many families who struggle to take care of their child's needs, so she loves that the district has the opportunity to provide food for them both during the school year and all summer long. Tanya expressed,

"This grant was a blessing and a dream come true. We would have never had the opportunity to do anything like this if we had not received this grant."

Misty Stewart, child nutrition director at **Junction Independent School District** was brand new to the position when our cohort started. However, she assessed the needs of the cafeteria and students to purchase new equipment that could increase meal quality and increase participation in school meal programs.

Students at **Slaton Independent School District** shared that they were really excited by the new carts that were implemented at each school and commented that they really enjoyed the experience of grab-and-go breakfast in the hallways. This investment helped Slaton ISD serve more students as they provided just over **10,000 more breakfast meals** in the school year 2022-2023 compared to the prior school year (2021-2022).

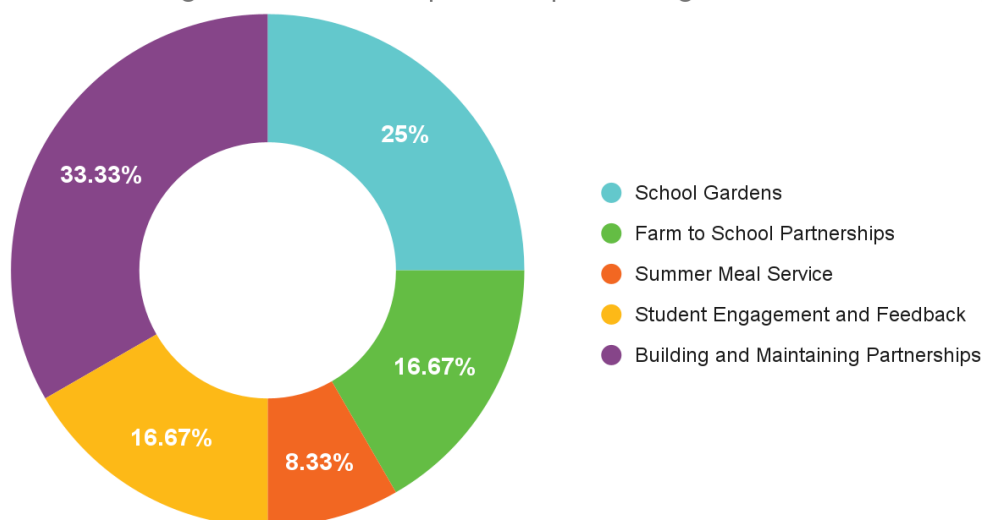
"Kids with a full belly learn better. If bellies are growling all day, they aren't going to be able to study or keep focused," Paula Garcia, child nutrition director, shared, "We don't make a lot of money here so purchasing big items like what we were able to get with the grant made our little program operate on a higher scale."

At **Smithville Independent School District** nutrition education, student engagement, and increasing local food consumption were high priorities. Smithville ISD was able to hold student and parent engagement nights to allow families to have hands-on experiences cooking with healthy vegetables like spaghetti squash, kale, and more. For some families, these vegetables were new to their diets and palates but they had an opportunity to take part in cooking the vegetables, tasting them, and learning about their health benefits. The district also sought to strengthen partnerships with local farms and ranches that could increase local food consumption and help the district bypass ongoing supply chain issues. Since starting the grant project, **Smithville ISD started two new partnerships with local farms** that will be supplying lettuce for salad bars and secondary schools and kale for kale chips – a favorite among students. Candy Biehle, child nutrition director, shared,

"After 25+ years in Child Nutrition I didn't know if I could find anything to keep me excited to continue in this career but working with No Kid Hungry has rekindled my fire about feeding hungry children. This year has been a wonderful experience and I am so happy that so many others will be able to experience this opportunity as well. I am grateful for all that No Kid Hungry does for child hunger."

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Specific Knowledge and/or Skills Improved Upon through Rural Cohort Participation



Collaboration and Learning Call Impact

After the conclusion of our 2022-2023 Texas Rural School District Cohort, a survey was sent out to measure the impact of the bimonthly learning and collaboration calls particularly around increases in knowledge and skills, partnerships, network, and their experience with No Kid Hungry.

Knowledge and Skills

In our bimonthly calls, we wanted to personalize the learning experience of each cohort member to ensure they gained knowledge and skills that would help them improve their programs. **100% of cohort members reported an increase in knowledge and skills in school gardens, farm-to-school partnerships, summer meal service, student engagement and feedback and building and maintaining relationships.** The topics with the biggest gains in knowledge include school gardens, farm-to-school partnerships, and student engagement and feedback. Additionally, **100% of cohort members reported that they agree or strongly agree that the rural cohort enhanced their already existing knowledge.**

Even more importantly, cohort members expressed confidence in applying these skills directly to their program.

Partnerships

We know that creating partnerships to strengthen a school district's child nutrition program can be difficult for any school district but it is especially difficult for rural school districts as they are isolated from many communities. However, cohort members reported that as a result of their participation in the cohort, they formed new partnerships both inside and outside of their school community particularly with teachers, school health advisory committees, the Texas Department

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of Agriculture, and student groups like student council or culinary students. One cohort member shared “I was unaware of the work that the Sustainable Food Center did and the opportunities they had for school districts. I am now working as an ambassador for them. I have always had a strong relationship with the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) but this opportunity has brought me to have more conversations with different individuals in TDA about parts of this grant and my involvement with No Kid Hungry.”

Cohort members also reported that they strengthened existing relationships both inside and outside of their school community particularly with teachers, school health advisory committees, local food banks, the Texas Department of Agriculture, and student groups. One cohort member shared “We worked with our culinary students to enhance our program and gave them opportunities to work with us as well.”

Professional Network

Like partnerships, increasing one’s professional network is important to share promising practices and ideate on shared challenges which can be difficult when your community is isolated. **All cohort members reported that the rural cohort was very impactful in broadening their network of professional contacts and that their professional relationships have grown both in their field and in fields outside of their expertise.** One cohort member shared “I feel very fortunate to meet so many people with No Kid Hungry that I feel have become professional colleagues. I know that I can reach out to any of these new contacts for advice or help in the future.”

100% of cohort members shared that they learned about an idea or solution from another person in the cohort and 75% of them have plans to implement that idea in their own community. Some of these ideas include starting a school garden, reaching out to farmers to increase local food consumption, and starting cooking classes as a way to engage students in summer meals service.

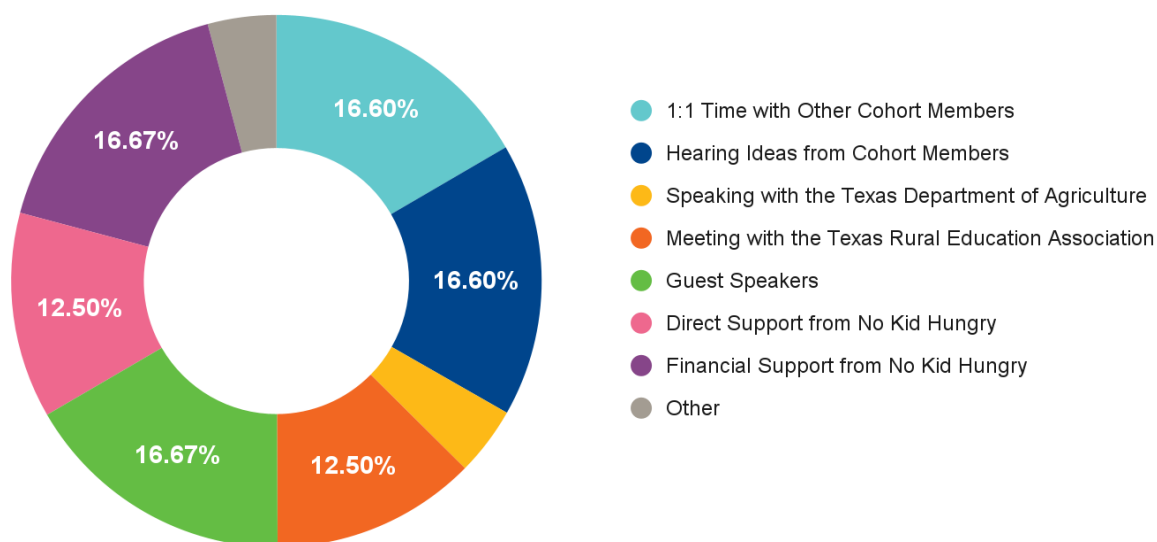
Support and Experience with No Kid Hungry

Cohort members shared that the grant flexibility helped them to achieve their projects as the year went on. One cohort member shared “Being able to have the grant fit our unique needs and not have a specific line agenda that I had to follow allowed me to make something great for our district.”

In addition to grant funding, No Kid Hungry also provided resources and technical assistance – both of which were valuable pieces of the cohort experience.

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What Aspects of the Rural Cohort Did You Find Most Valuable?



All cohort members reported that the rural cohort provided them with the resources and support to achieve their grant goals and that they would like to continue partnering with No Kid Hungry in the future, even if that partnership had no grant dollars attached to it. One cohort member shared “This program helped our small district and I loved everything about it. I never felt any negativity, everything was always so positive and accommodating. Thank you for allowing me this experience and would love to participate in any future endeavors.”

Policy and Advocacy Collaboration and Impact

The 2022 rural cohort program revealed that rural school districts want to be active advocates for their community’s needs at the legislative level. As the No Kid Hungry Texas team pursued legislative changes on the state level this year, we knew that rural cohort members’ voices and lived experiences would be crucial as we sought to eliminate reduced-priced meals for Texas students. Cohort members helped strengthen bipartisan support by sharing rural enrollment data, information on school meal debt, and additional context on the experiences of rural constituents. Through their support, No Kid Hungry Texas successfully advocated for the elimination of reduced-priced breakfast meals for the next two years.

Cohort members were also critical in the engagement of the United States Department of Agriculture around rural non-congregate discussions. Candy Biehle, child nutrition director at Smithville ISD, met with a small group of other rural child nutrition directors from across the country to share her experience in serving summer meals to her rural community, strengthening the case for expanding non-congregate eligibility.

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Next Steps and Ongoing Collaboration

Building and engaging with rural champions will continue to be important in the coming years to decrease food insecurity among Texans. Now that No Kid Hungry Texas has successfully completed two years of the Texas Rural School District cohort and have launched a third, they will be launching a Rural Cohort Alumni group that will give rural school districts a chance to continue to engage with each other, continue their learnings and continue to engage in advocacy efforts so that No Kid Hungry can become a reality in Texas.