



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**March 30, 2020**

## **Pennsylvania Department of Education Receives USDA Waiver to Allow All Children to Qualify for Free Meals**

**Harrisburg, PA** – The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) announced today that it received waiver approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to allow schools to provide free meals to all children during statewide COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

Prior to receiving this waiver, schools that did not meet area-based free or reduced-price meal eligibility requirements were unable to offer free meals community-wide. This waiver eases those requirements and helps ensure all children have access to food.

“Schools and community organizations can now use recent and local economic data, including unemployment claims and business closures, to request approval from PDE to qualify as an open meal site,” said Vonda Ramp, PDE state director for Child Nutrition Programs. “Once approved, they can provide meals to all children in their community, age 18 and under, for free.”

Local education agencies (LEAs) – school districts, charter schools, intermediate units and career and technology centers – can operate their sites under the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) or Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). LEAs can begin applying to PDE for a waiver immediately, and the department is prepared to expedite reviews and approvals.

There are already approximately 1,600 food distribution sites across the state, which is expected to increase as a result of this waiver.

Since schools were closed earlier this month, the [department has been providing ongoing guidance and information to school communities on its website](#). Last week the department added [a map to help Pennsylvania families locate food distribution sites](#) in their communities.

The waiver builds on the USDA approval [announced Saturday](#) for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture to provide critical food supplies through the state’s network of food banks, food pantries, and pop-up distribution sites. The approval allows the Department of Agriculture and

its partners to more efficiently distribute a variety of foods – including meats, vegetables, fruit, canned goods, cereal, rice, pasta, eggs, and more – to those most affected by the closure of non-life sustaining businesses in Pennsylvania.

Visit the commonwealth's [Responding to COVID-19 guide](#) for the latest guidance and resources for Pennsylvanians or the Pennsylvania Department of Health's dedicated coronavirus webpage [for the most up-to-date information regarding COVID-19](#).

For more information about Pennsylvania's education policies and programs please visit the [Department of Education's website](#) or follow PDE on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Pinterest](#).

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