

## National Office Program Evaluation Brief

# Understanding Feeding America Elementary School-Based Food Pantries

Full report<sup>1</sup> by A. Snelling, A. Jackowitz, M. Maroto, S. Kalamchi, and A. Brannegan  
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### Purpose:

This study evaluated three different school pantry program models (mobile market / client choice, permanent space / client choice and pre-bagged) and compared client participation and satisfaction across models. The method of evaluation applied during the study was process evaluation which focuses on examining and analyzing program delivery, procedures, and operations of a program model.

### Context:

In 2012, 16 million children lived in food insecure households.<sup>2</sup> To address household food insecurity, food banks are partnering with schools to operate school-based pantries. School pantries provide nutritious food to low-income families with school-age children, typically on a monthly basis. School pantry offerings are for home meal preparation. School pantries are at school sites that parents know, trust, and can easily access. As of 2012, 57 Feeding America food banks operated school pantries at 583 sites<sup>3</sup>, across the nation.

### Study Overview:

This evaluation examined eight Target-sponsored school pantries in three different geographic regions. During the spring of 2012, researchers interviewed six food bank staff and fifteen school pantry staff to learn about school pantry start-up and administration. Researchers also surveyed 208 school pantry participants and 47 non-participants to learn about their participation, barriers to participation, and satisfaction with school pantry models (Table 1).

Table 1: Data Collection

Food Banks in Study	Food Bank Staff Interviews	School Pantry Staff Interviews	School Pantry Participant Surveys	Non-Participant Surveys
3	6	15	208	47

<sup>1</sup>Find the full report on Hungernet: <https://www.hungernet.org/ProgEval/Documents/School%20Pantry%20Evaluation.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., Singh, A. 2013. "Household food security in the United States in 2012". United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

<sup>3</sup> See Feeding America's Network Activity Data Center: <https://www.hungernet.org/planning/data/Pages/home.aspx>

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### Select Key Findings:

Each of the school pantry models has strengths and weaknesses. Overall, clients were highly satisfied with food distribution, diversity, and quality in all models.

- 1) **Mobile Market / Client Choice Model:** A refrigerated food bank mobile truck brings food to the school site. Clients choose their groceries, and the food bank recovers unused food.
  - **Strengths:** Clients have a choice and options for food selections. Refrigerated trucks can carry more perishable food offerings. Schools do not have to store food. Waste is reduced since unconsumed food returns to the food bank.
  - **Weaknesses:** Trucks are on a set schedule coordinated by the school and the food bank, so it is hard to accommodate clients outside of specific distribution hours. Truck distribution requires food bank personnel and equipment on site; compared to the pre-bagged model, the mobile market / client choice model requires more staff or volunteers for distribution.
- 2) **Permanent Space / Client Choice Model:** The school has a permanent space to store pantry items, and clients can choose their groceries.
  - **Strengths:** Clients have a choice and options for food selections. Clients can arrange to pick up food outside of specific pantry hours.
  - **Weaknesses:** Schools must store food. Without refrigeration, it is a challenge for schools to offer perishable foods.
- 3) **Permanent Space / Pre-Bagged Model:** The school offers pre-bagged groceries to clients. Food bank personnel or school pantry personnel may prepare bags.
  - **Strengths:** Clients can arrange to pick up food outside of specific pantry hours. All clients get the same items, which clients perceive as fair. Distribution is faster and easier than client choice models.
  - **Weaknesses:** Clients do not have a choice or options for food items. Schools must find a place for food that is not distributed. Schools have limited perishable food options.

### Program Delivery Highlights by Food Bank and School Pantry Staff

Food bank and school pantry staff perceived pre-bagged school pantry models to be easiest to administer. In fact, food bank interviewees stated that they often used the pre-bagged model during school pantry start-up; some school pantries have transitioned to mobile market models and others expressed interest in transitioning in the near future. From the perspective of food bank and school pantry staff, the preferred program model is the mobile market / client choice model because it accommodates client choice and fresh produce.

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### School Pantry Program Considerations

1. **Food banks assess need, school capacity, and partnerships when selecting school pantry sites.** In order to assess need, food banks first examine schools' eligibility rates<sup>4</sup> for free and reduced price lunches (FRPL) through the National School Lunch Program. In this evaluation, all sites had FRPL eligibility rates above 75%. In order to assess site capacity, food banks consider whether or not schools have the space, personnel, financial resources, and managerial support to sustain a school pantry. Furthermore, food pantries often leverage existing school partnerships to establish sites. They also work with supportive donor and community organizations that have connections to local schools.
2. **Principal support for school pantries is essential for program development and sustainability.** Food bank and school pantry staff emphasize that supportive principals are key to school pantry success. Principals provide credibility to programs by attaching their name to outreach efforts. Principals can also ensure that school pantries are integral to schools' strategies. Since principals are often unable to oversee school pantries, it is critical that they dedicate staff to pantry oversight.
3. **When faced with limited resources, food banks and schools often establish a screening process for selecting school pantry participants.** Some school pantries are open to all student families that demonstrate need. However, other school pantries must limit participation based on resource constraints at the school site. Therefore, schools facing constraints may select specific families to participate based on level of need factors such as unemployment, housing instability, illness, etc. Researchers learned that these decisions were often informal, and school sites may benefit from a formal referral process with specific criteria. Schools may also choose to serve families on a rotational basis, to meet a wider client base.
4. **Outreach to parents is critical to increase awareness.** Fifty-one percent of school pantry non-participants in the study said that they did not use school pantries because they did not know about them. This evaluation emphasizes that substantial, continual communication with parents is critical to school pantry participation. Sometimes schools try to give school pantries a low profile to protect the privacy of clients, but some school pantry interviewees suggested making school pantries more visible (e.g. by having pantries on an open house night). Visibility may increase pantry participation and sense of community.
5. **School pantry scheduling should consider client availability.** Nineteen percent of pantry non-participants reported that inconvenient hours prevented them from using school pantries. School pantries may attract more clients if pantry times align with school events like open houses. Regular, predictable school pantry schedules allow parents to plan ahead. Permanent space / client choice and pre-bagged school pantry models may allow clients more flexibility to pick up food.
6. **School pantries provide the opportunity to share food assistance information with participants.** In the evaluation, very few schools officially provided information to clients about other food assistance programs, but 50% of clients reported receiving this information. This feedback suggests

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to FRPL eligibility rates, absolute numbers of FRPL-eligible students can be useful for school pantry need assessment. A large school with a low FRPL eligibility rate may still have a large number of FRPL eligible students in need. For more information on FRPL Eligibility, see the USDA website: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program>.

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that clients and school pantry staff may be informally sharing information, and that clients may be interested in receiving this information. Food banks can help schools formalize and bolster this information exchange. Nutrition and cooking information may also be helpful.

### Summary & Conclusions:

The school pantry program is growing and developing within the Feeding America Network. Between FY2011 and FY2012, the participation rate of food banks operating school pantries increased by 58% and the number of school sites increased by 65%. This program not only addresses child hunger, but also household food insecurity. Key findings from the evaluation study suggest that the three unique models have distinct strengths and weaknesses; however, each is well received by clients. Pre-bagged models may be easiest for beginning programs, but some programs aspire for client choice. Supportive principals are critical to pantry success. A dedicated school pantry operator is also very important since principals may be too busy to oversee programs. Finally, marketing the program to parents is key for high participation at school pantries. Other findings-based recommendations include:

- Food banks and schools should **clearly divide school pantry responsibilities**.
- School pantries should **establish guidelines for the appropriate poundage per family**. In the study, school pantries provided from 13 to 70 pounds of food per family— a wide range. As school pantries develop, narrower poundage guidelines will be important for maximizing the impact of limited inventories. Guidelines should consider food bank resources, participants' food needs, and participants' ability to transport food home.
- School pantries should **offer food for complete, balanced meals** according to Foods to Encourage nutrition guidelines.<sup>5</sup>
- Food banks and schools should **evaluate school pantries continuously** to improve pantry processes and to ensure that families continue to access and benefit from school pantries.

### Study Limitations:

This evaluation study reveals common themes that may guide school pantry program design or future research. However, the results are not generalizable to school pantries across the Feeding America Network. The data represent only eight school pantry programs at one point in time. Interviews and surveys represent a sample of convenience. The interview and survey samples may not accurately represent all school pantry programs and their clients. The researchers surveyed clients and non-clients in person, so some clients may have told researchers what they thought researchers wanted to hear. Researchers also relied on translators for about 15% of surveys, and translation issues may limit data accuracy.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Foods to Encourage nutrition guidelines, visit HungerNet: <https://www.hungernet.org/nutrition/Pages/FoodstoEncourage.aspx>