

Enhancing Access to Healthy, Affordable Food in ECE Settings

Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida: A Case Study

by Kelly Schaffer and Karen Broussard

Childhood obesity is a growing public health concern, with approximately 23% of children ages two to five nationally overweight or obese. Millions of children are served by early care and education programs, and these children are in the classroom, center, or family child care home up to ten hours per day and eat two meals and snacks a day while in care. Thus, the ECE setting is an optimal place of intervention to help support the healthy development of young children. Improving the

quality of meals and snacks provided to children in ECE programs can also be attractive to parents and result in healthier young children.

Many different food service practices are in place in ECE programs nationwide. While some programs may have parents prepare and bring all of their children's



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Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida is a private, non-profit organization serving the greater Orlando, Florida area. Second Harvest distributes more than 64 million pounds of grocery products annually to food pantries, soup kitchens, women's shelters, senior centers, child care centers, and Kids Cafes. Nemours Children's Health System funded the organization through a generous grant from General Mills Foundation, to explore and pilot providing healthy, affordable meals and snacks to early care and education programs. This flexible, "learn as you go" funding strategy focused on addressing childhood obesity prevention within ECE settings. The goal of exploring this emerging topic was to develop information that could be shared widely with the field for broad impact. Over the course of seven months, Second Harvest provided 16,892 meals to four pilot sites through its healthy, affordable food service model.

food for the day, other ECE programs have on-site kitchens where they prepare daily meals and snacks. Other programs may have full-service catering in-house (e.g. as part of a larger organization), they may purchase catered meals through a vendor, or offer some combination of food service arrangements. Regardless of a program's current food service structure, there is a significant opportunity to rethink the types of foods served to children, including appropriate portion sizes, and how and by whom food is prepared.

Healthy, catered food service is an area in which few best practice models exist. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that ECE providers, regardless of whether they get financial support through the USDA for food, have trouble affording catered meals for their children that are nutritious and appealing. This presents a substantial opportunity to expand the knowledge base and set the stage for others to do the same.

Through a unique funding strategy and flexible partnerships that allowed for an exploratory pilot program, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida looked at whether a community food bank could provide ECE programs with healthy, affordable food service as a childhood obesity prevention strategy. They also set a goal of producing information about how a vended food service model could support the healthy growth and development of young children in ECE settings. Four key principles were identified for ECE programs to consider when interested in enhancing access to healthy, affordable meals and snacks. Taken in part or whole, the following steps will help ECE programs rethink and reshape their food service model to achieve the goal of improved health for children. Insights into Second Harvest's exploration and pilot implementation are included to provide a real-life glimpse into the journey.

Principle 1.
Consider local options for healthy, affordable food service

Buying locally might require negotiating with your existing food service vendor to supply healthier foods. If negotiations prove challenging, find other ECE providers using the same vendor and negotiate together. You might also seek out new relationships with existing community partners, such as your local food bank or public school. And finally, explore new local food vendors that have a willingness to provide healthier foods and food service options (e.g. family-style dining) with ECE programs. Check with other ECE programs, agencies, or schools in your area to learn what vendors they use.

Knowing that access to healthy meals and snacks is a critical component of children's health, Second Harvest explored how to build upon its existing community relationships to provide healthy food service to ECE programs. Second Harvest connected with other food banks and agencies across the country that operate a similar model and found that it truly is an innovative approach for a food bank to serve in this unique role with ECE programs.

Recommendation: Think about untraditional partners for your meal service model; like-minded organizations might be right around the corner and interested in collaborating with you in this way. Also, the mission statement of some organizations may relate specifically to healthy food access and, as a result, they may be willing or able to change menus to expose children to highly nutritious food that is also appealing.

Principle 2.
Plan ahead: Know your staff, children, and families

Addressing the needs of your families is essential to the success of your food

service model. Gather information from families about the food service options that are important to them and whether they are open to new practices and policies about how food is provided at your program. It will be important to educate families on appropriate nutrition and meal patterns for young children, with an eye towards cultural preferences, so they can see the value in the new model. If switching from one model to another (i.e., from parents providing food to catered meals), think about the timing of the changes and any associated tuition increases. Communicate with families early, often, and clearly so they are aware of changes taking place and have opportunities to provide input. Think about different opportunities for information sharing and be open to hearing feedback.

Four ECE programs were chosen to participate in Second Harvest's pilot program and none of them had a kitchen on-site that was utilized for meal service. All transitioned from a food service model in which parents brought children's meals to the program each day. It quickly became evident through observations that children's meals from home were not healthy or nutritious. Questions about the nutrition of the food, communicating about the freshness and quality of the food, and addressing concerns about cost were among the issues most commonly raised by ECE program directors on behalf of their families. Educating parents about the importance of a healthy meal service model was an important aspect of successful implementation.

Second Harvest began by seeking input from ECE program staff and parents, holding 'taste tests' with children and staff at each site. This was an exciting activity for children and a critical opportunity for staff to experience the food and provide feedback on what was well liked. Second Harvest also gathered information about the degree to which programs were interested in and ready to implement family-style dining (an identified best

practice in ECE obesity prevention) so that they could prepare food in appropriately-sized containers. With this information in hand, Second Harvest developed menus, a menu cycle, packaging structure, and delivery plans that would be suitable for each of the program sites.

Recommendation: Be flexible as you think about the types of foods that will be served in your program and how each will be served. Trying new foods multiple times may be necessary before children are willing to eat them. Implementation of family-style dining can enhance the dining experience and provide a valuable tool for the development of healthy mealtime practices.

Principle 3.
Budget carefully and consider all funding mechanisms

When it comes to your program budget, make sure you have a detailed understanding about what your program can afford. Consider whether raising fees will be necessary to cover the costs of higher-quality food and whether your parents can afford it. Be sure to explore how the Child and Adult Care Food Program could be utilized to make healthy food service more affordable; connect with your local/state agency overseeing CACFP for more information. Provide information to families to help them understand the value of considering eligibility for CACFP and how it could benefit their families and the ECE program. While the paperwork initially can seem overwhelming, participation can lead to daily per-child reimbursement for food service.

Second Harvest discovered that the financial aspect of providing healthy food service to ECE programs would be an important factor to consider. Given that some programs access meals/snack reimbursement from CACFP and others do not, the funding approach had to allow for different pay structures. Costs

and price setting were challenging; Second Harvest wanted to be responsive to the limited budgets of ECE programs and balance that with a desire to build a sustainable initiative. In the pilot, only centers not participating in CACFP were included so that any increase in costs of meals was passed along to parents. In the pilot centers, parents were unwilling to pay more tuition to access healthy catered meals/snacks for their children. This created a gap in operation costs for Second Harvest, and that gap could be filled with the funding from their grant.

Recommendation: Work with vendors to provide healthier meals at the CACFP reimbursement rate for your area regardless of whether you participate in CACFP or not. This is a rate that has been deemed by the USDA to be feasible for their recommended meal pattern, which is the minimum best practice for healthy meal service in ECE settings.

Principle 4.
Anticipate the unexpected and set realistic goals.

Be aware of your timeline and set realistic goals. Make sure to set aside sufficient time to explore food service models and plan for implementation. Think about your program's schedule and a logical time to begin a big change such as this. This might depend on when you transition to a new program year, when your existing food service contract expires, or when you are due to adjust program policies and fees for parents. You'll also want to allot time to prepare children, families, and staff for the changes taking place.

Like many new endeavors, pilot implementation of healthy affordable food service was not without challenges for Second Harvest. One factor was the logistics of getting the food to the sites. With ECE programs operating on a similar meal and snack-time schedule, one must figure out how to get the food

to all sites on time and at the appropriate temperature. A courier service was used to pick up prepared food from the preparation site and deliver it to the ECE sites at predetermined times. Regardless of whether or not sites had a refrigerator or kitchen, programs were able to receive hot and cold meals that maintained their temperature in special storage packs that were provided. Second Harvest staff and ECE program directors worked hand-in-hand to understand how the model was working, including sharing feedback from staff and parents and reactions from children.

Recommendation: Adapt as you go and remain committed to overcoming barriers. While there may be challenges inherent in exploring or implementing a new food service model, the opportunity to impact the nutrition of food served to children is profound. The innovative approach of healthy, affordable food service is an investment in children's healthy development — and an important strategy to help prevent childhood obesity

For more information on how your organization could serve as a healthy, affordable food service vendor, or for ECE programs interested in understanding more about how it works, see Second Harvest's newly developed toolkit for detailed information and materials. The toolkit is available on the Let's Move! Child Care (LMCC) website at www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org and provides a step-by-step guide, checklists, and customizable materials for implementation. Other helpful resources available on the LMCC website include a family-style dining guide for ECE programs, resources related to CACFP, as well as other information and materials to support healthy eating in ECE programs.

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