



## ***The Kid Angle***

*Kid-focused news from First Focus on Children*

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### **Fixing the severed school lifeline**

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### ***Lessons from the pandemic***

In the chaotic onset of the coronavirus pandemic, school nutrition leaders appealed to the Trump Administration to let them handle the crisis as if it were a natural disaster, a change that would have allowed more food to flow to more children and to their families. The answer was no.

“We need to sit down and figure out how to do this not if but when it happens again,” **Katie Wilson, Executive Director at Urban School Food Alliance**, told [First Focus on Children’s Kids and COVID Conversation panel on Education and Nutrition](#) this week. “There is a way, we do it with natural disasters, why we thought this was different, I don’t know. So many families were in need, almost instantaneously. They were looking to schools as a safe place.”

For millions of children, schools provide a lifeline — to education, food, health care and other services. As they scrambled to reach students and their families during the pandemic, school officials entered uncharted territory. **During our final [panel on Kids and COVID](#), educators examined what went right, what went wrong and how to help the nation’s schools — and its students — recover.** Their recommendations include:

- **Leverage school meal programs**

School nutrition employees began feeding students curbside within 24 hours of school closures, Wilson said. To leverage the full potential of school meal programs, now and during future disasters, she recommends **eliminating the income test for school meal programs and providing universal school meals**. “It’s the only thing in a school building where a child’s family income impacts whether they get access to a service,” she said. In addition, during future disasters, the government should allow schools to serve the community as a whole, rather than adhere to **per meal reimbursement and other restrictions of school meals**, she said, which would allow them to reach more people more efficiently.

- **Cultivate a school-based health care workforce**

The majority of school-based health centers remained open during the pandemic, **School Based Health Alliance CEO Robert Boyd** told the panel, and provided critical primary care, mental health care, COVID and vaccine education, and shot clinics. Many centers also **initiated or expanded telehealth services**, he said, including for mental health. To maintain and build on this success, Boyd recommends cultivating a steady workforce by **channeling students into the profession as early as middle school and using the public university infrastructure to train them**. Workforce is the No. 1 issue in health care in schools — as in other health care settings — Boyd said.

- **Create more community school coordinators**

Community schools — which are public schools that partner with local organizations to connect students, families and the larger community to each other and to resources — played a critical role during the pandemic, said **José Muñoz, Director of the Coalition of Community Schools**. In places like Asheville, N.C., Oakland, Calif., Skokie, Ill. and Cincinnati, community schools rallied to provide family food boxes, resiliency kits for kids, vaccine clinics, after-school programming and other needed services. To build on that success, Muñoz said, the **country needs more “community school coordinators,” which he described as the equivalent of a director of operations**. “Think about the power of the public school,” he said. “Every single day you have access to people that live in a broader community. We’re way under-utilizing the power of the public school community. But it has to be someone’s job every day.” Muñoz cited a study in Albuquerque that found that **every \$1 invested in community school coordinators delivered a \$7.11 return on investment**.

In the end, panelists offered one overarching takeaway from their pandemic experience: **“Feed all kids. Educate all kids. Provide free health care to all kids who need it,”** Boyd said. **“It’s that simple. We’re the greatest country in the world. It’s a sin. It’s a shame. It’s a travesty to not take care of our kids. Let’s keep the focus on the kids. They’re the future.”**

***[To view the full discussion, visit this link.](#)***

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