

March 20, 2020

Via Email Only

Jason Kamras, Superintendent
Richmond Public Schools
301 North Ninth Street
Richmond, VA 23219
jkamras@rvaschools.net

Re: Food Access for RPS Families

Dear Superintendent Kamras,

The Legal Aid Justice Center is writing this letter on behalf of our client communities in Richmond who are significantly struggling due to impacts related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. While we recognize the significant challenges involved in responding to this unprecedented crisis, it has come to our attention that there are numerous accessibility issues for RPS' food distribution sites, which create unnecessary barriers to food access for Richmond's most vulnerable children and families. Below is a list of demands for increasing accessibility and efficiency. We developed these demands through close communication with community members and partners who are directly impacted by these issues. We strongly urge RPS to consider these demands and solicit additional, ongoing, and robust community feedback in order to ensure true nutrition access for all families within RPS suffering during this crisis.

RPS should immediately partner with local organizations who are deeply tied to communities and have experience with food distribution to maximize access and efficiency.

Community organizations working with RPS or seeking to work with RPS on food distribution have noted limited flexibility, among other issues, as barriers to their ability to provide food to communities they serve. RPS must partner with community organizations that have experience with food access and delivery and deep relationships in the community. RPS has partnered with some organizations, but they must partner with more and provide all these organizations maximum flexibility allowable under to federal and state guidance in meeting the needs of their community members. RPS does not have experience with food delivery to communities in need and should be willing to partner with and learn from community organizations that understand how to deliver food safely, accessibly, and efficiently. The Neighborhood Resource Center of Greater Fulton is a great potential partner. Should RPS choose to partner with these organizations, RPS should focus on ensuring the partner organization is able to access RPS resources (i.e., food) with flexibility in order to maximize community access. *RPS should also prioritize transparency in this process in order to solicit feedback and partnership with organizations it may not know, but who have strong relationships in communities.*

All food distribution sites and delivery models must maximize accessibility for Richmond’s most vulnerable families.

Community leaders have observed a lack of uniformity in process for the various distribution sites. For example, sometimes families are told a child must be present to receive food, but sometimes not.¹ Sometimes people are being turned away if they walk to the site, but not if they drive. Sometimes neighbors who come to the site to pick up food for families whose caregivers may be unable to walk to the site are turned away. Attendance at several food sites is also poor. This may be because families with parents or guardians who are still working may be unable to get to the sites during the limited hours available. Several sites are also inaccessible to families utilizing public transportation because distribution and/or “delivery” sites are not in proximity to bus lines, leaving many without food access. These issues create significant confusion for families seeking to access food and unnecessary barriers for families facing unique and difficult circumstances during this crisis.

For any site or delivery model RPS is administering, or assisting a community organization with administering, RPS must remove unnecessary barriers to food access for families, and clearly communicate the process to all communities, partners, and site workers. Neighbors, community leaders, and community organizations *must be able to pick up food at the sites for families who are unable to get to the sites*. Many children are being cared for by grandparents or guardians who are at high-risk of COVID-19 and are unable to safely leave their homes or walk to the sites. These families must be able to depend on neighbors and others accessing the food at the sites without barriers to ensure they are fed. *This is a vital change that must be communicated as soon as possible*. Moreover, consistent with Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Office of School Nutrition Program guidance, RPS should provide the maximum number of meals per pick-up per student, or two meals a day for one week.² Food provided must also be nutritious and consistent with U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines.

Hours of operation for meal delivery and/or food distribution must also be expanded in order to ensure all families have sufficient access. Some families continue to work during this crisis, and the current distribution hours are all during working times. Having only morning times for distribution does not accommodate individual family schedules. Providing evening hours for food pick up would eliminate a significant barrier for families. This is also noted as a best practice by VDOE guidance on nutrition services during this time.³

¹ This is happening despite guidance from RPS Administration that states that a child does not have to present to access food (see *RPS Direct* email from Superintendent Kamras, March 19, 2020, providing that a child does not have to be present to pick up food).

² See Virginia Department of Education Office of School Nutrition, SNP Memo No. 2019-2020-33, Attachment A, Coronavirus (COVID-19), FAQs and Best Practices, March 13, 2020, available at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/office/covid-19.shtml#school-nutrition.

³ *Id.* See also Virginia Department of Education Office of School Nutrition, SNP Memo No. 2019-2020-33, Attachment B, March 18, 2020, available at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/office/covid-19.shtml#school-nutrition.

Finally, if RPS is able (for example, from funds through its RPS Education Foundation), it should distribute items that families are unable to access through Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, such as trash bags, dish soap, laundry detergent, wipes, and diapers.

RPS must ensure access and perform outreach regarding food distribution for its immigrant and Spanish-speaking families.

Many Spanish-speaking families are not aware of the distribution sites, so are missing out on valuable opportunities for food access. RPS must provide translation services at sites that serve high numbers of English Learner students and their families. RPS must also significantly increase outreach to its EL families in order to ensure that these families are aware of the sites and processes so they do not miss out on vital nutrition access.

RPS should provide specific and targeted outreach to certain populations, such as students experiencing homelessness, to ensure they are aware of food sites and can access nutrition services.

Certain populations of students will be especially vulnerable during this time, particularly students experiencing homelessness. Pursuant to federal guidance, “Students identified as experiencing homelessness should receive information and services from homeless liaisons as it relates to COVID-19, and liaisons should proactively maintain contact with these students and their families to ensure they are connected to school instruction and other school- and/or community-based supports, as needed and appropriate.”⁴ Additionally, “processes for providing school meals and other services should be modified to ensure that unaccompanied youth are able to access meals and services, consistent with applicable McKinney-Vento Act requirements.” (emphasis added). RPS’ McKinney-Vento liaisons should be responsible for reaching out to students to ensure food access and determine other needs.

RPS must solicit authentic and engaged feedback from community members during this crisis in order to continue to identify gaps in accessibility, and to improve food distribution processes.

RPS will be unable to ensure ongoing accountability through this process unless it is willing and able to solicit feedback broadly. RPS must be creative in seeking this feedback from multiple channels and from community organizations and leaders. Building trusting partnerships with those closest to communities is vital to facilitating this process.

⁴ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Supporting Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Outbreak: Questions to Consider,” March 16, 2020, Available at: <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/supporting-children-and-youth-experiencing-homelessness-during-the-covid-19-outbreak-questions-to-consider>.

We acknowledge that this has been a sudden and swift initiative that will inevitably have gaps that need to be addressed. However, we believe that RPS can and should do better. Our families and children need more, and are depending on you to ensure that those needs are met.

Thank you in advance for your attention to these demands, and for your continued work on behalf of our communities in the midst of this uncertain time. Should you need to reach us for any reason regarding this letter, please contact Cassie Powell, Esq., MSW, at (434) 328-0515.

Sincerely,

LEGAL AID JUSTICE CENTER



Cassie A. Powell, Esq., MSW
Attorney, JustChildren Program

Brionna Nomi, Ph.D.
Organizer, JustChildren Program

Rachael Deane, Esq.
Legal Director, JustChildren Program

Cc: Shadae Thomas Harris, Chief Engagement Officer, Richmond Public Schools
(Via Email to sharris1@rvaschools.net)
Michelle Hudacsko, Chief of Staff, Richmond Public Schools
(Via Email to mhudacsko@rvaschools.net)
Linda Owen, Chair, Richmond City School Board, Ninth District
(Via Email to lowen2@rvaschools.net)
Elizabeth Doerr, Richmond City School Board, First District
(Via Email to edoerr@rvaschools.net)
James "Scott" Barlow, Richmond City School Board, Second District
(Via Email to jbarlow3@rvaschools.net)
Kenya Gibson, Richmond City School Board, Third District
(Via Email to kgibson@rvaschools.net)
Jonathon Young, Richmond City School Board, Fourth District
(Via Email to jyoung7@rvaschools.net)
Patrick Sapini, Richmond City School Board, Fifth District
(Via Email to psapini@rvaschools.net)
Felicia Cosby, Richmond City School Board, Sixth District
(Via Email to fcosby@rvaschools.net)

Cheryl Burke, Richmond City School Board, Vice-Chair, Seventh District

(Via Email to cburke2@rvaschools.net)

Dawn Page, Richmond City School Board, Eighth District

(Via Email to dpage2@rvaschools.net)

Jonell P. Lilly, Esq., School Board Attorney

(Via Email to jlilly@hclawfirm.com)

Nicole Thompson, Esq., School Board Attorney

(Via Email to nthompson@hclawfirm.com)

