



JON J. P. FERNANDEZ
Superintendent of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

www.gdoe.net
501 Mariner Avenue
Barrigada, Guam 96913
Telephone: (671) 300-1547/1536 • Fax: (671) 472-5001
Email: jonfernandez@gdoe.net



July 17, 2021

The Honorable Jim McGovern
Chairman, Committee on Rules
U.S. House of Representatives
H-312 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman McGovern:

Please find my brief testimony below as part of my appearance this coming Tuesday at your roundtable focused on hunger and food security in the U.S. territories. It is my honor to be able to join you in that conversation.

Testimony before the House Rules Committee Jon Fernandez, Superintendent Guam Department of Education July 20, 2021

Hafa Adai, and good evening! My name is Jon Fernandez, Chief State School Officer and Superintendent for the Guam Department of Education (GDOE). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the issues of hunger and food insecurity in our communities.

For context, Guam has a population of just under 170,000 residents. In March of this year, the island reported a 16.5% unemployment rate with 38,359 individuals (13,547 households) participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The poverty rate on island is estimated to be over 20%. Within this broader setting, GDOE consists of a unitary public school district with over 28,000 students attending 41 traditional public schools. There are also over 1,700 public charter school students and just under 6,000 private school students on island. While our educational mission is centered on the academic progress of students, I hope you will agree that schools also play (or have the potential to play) a critical role during emergency response and recovery efforts to support the needs of our students and families, especially in the area of food insecurity.

There are four critical ways in which GDOE has worked in recent years to address food insecurity here on Guam and in our public schools, including during the past 18 months of the

COVID-19 pandemic. These include our full adoption of the Community Eligibility Provision authorized by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-296), full use of the Seamless Summer Option flexibility through the National School Lunch Program, expanded efforts under The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the implementation of the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program.

As a GDOE is a participant in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), our department elected to take full advantage of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which enables schools in high-poverty areas and who meet a minimum direct certification threshold (i.e. 40%) to serve all school meals at no cost to students. In School Year 2014-2015, GDOE piloted CEP at 21 of our 41 schools (14 elementary, 4 middle, and 3 high). We increased the number of schools from 21 to 27 in School Year 2015-2016, to 36 in School Year 2017-2018, and then to all 41 GDOE schools in School Year 2018-2019. Now, all 28,000 of our public school students have access to school breakfast and lunch meals at no cost. This has increased participation in our meals programs, streamlined the administrative processes, and removed the stigma associated with free and reduced meal participation. It is our hope that CEP will continue and further expand as a critical support for food access in schools.

While the CEP has enabled us to increase school meal participation, the pandemic and the resulting shutdown of our schools and entire government in March 2020 created a tremendous challenge in continuing to feed our kids. Our island shut down officially on March 16, 2020, and by March 18, 2020, we submitted a request to the Western Region Office of USDA to be able to implement a “Grab and Go” drive-thru school meals distribution program for our students. Because of our participation in the NSLP, GDOE was automatically eligible for the Seamless Summer Option, which is a program that makes it easier to feed kids during summer and long vacation periods. In this case, we sought the ability to exercise this option to prepare school meals during unexpected school closures to be distributed to families in a drive-thru arrangement on our campuses, and then allowing the meals to be taken off-campus to be consumed. We received USDA approval within 48 hours, and, on March 23, 2020, we began a daily drive-thru school meals distribution at 12 school sites that lasted through the rest of School Year 2019-2020 and through the summer for all children 18 and below. For School Year 2020-2021, with the broad extension of the Seamless Summer Option waiver for all states, we were able to modify our school meals “Grab and Go” program to be able to distribute non-perishable food items at all 41 of our school sites every Friday to families with children 18 and below. Each child received five days’ worth of school breakfast and lunch food items each week. Through this flexibility and modification, GDOE was able to serve over seven million school meals between March 2020 and July 2021. We ended this program on July 16, 2021, and are now preparing for the full reopening of schools in August of this year.

The third support that we have used to address food insecurity and which became a crucial component of our island response and recovery effort this past year was The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which GDOE administers as the state food agency. GDOE’s operation of TEFAP typically involves a twice-weekly distribution of commodities to eligible households out of a warehouse in a central part of the island. When the pandemic first started, in order to avoid the unnecessary congregation of people at the warehouse, we distributed TEFAP

commodities through our non-profit partners, senior citizen centers, and our village mayors for the month of April 2020. In May, with the accelerating and increasing volume of commodities available as part of federal relief, we piloted a “Food to Trunk” distribution at our warehouse and eventually at several larger regional sites. Unfortunately, demand far exceeded our expectations, as cars lined up as early as 2:00 a.m. on the morning of distribution, and traffic remained congested for hours. By September, we had worked out a plan with our village mayors to establish a rotating village-based distribution schedule that enabled us to expand the manpower to assist our operation while expanding the food supports to more families around the island. From April 2020 to present, we have distributed over two million units of non-perishable and frozen food commodities to our community and will continue to do so as long as food commodities continue to flow to the island.

Finally, we are appreciative of the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program that was also approved by Congress to assist with food support for students who have been impacted by school closures during the past school year. Guam recently received approval from USDA for our P-EBT plan which will provide \$36.7 million in food support to approximately 27,900 children based on school closures from August 2020 to May 2021. This includes students who receive free and reduced school meals and were enrolled in Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools during the past school year; this also includes all students enrolled in GDOE public schools. P-EBT cards are scheduled to be distributed to families in late August and loaded in increments through the end of September for a total value of over \$1,200 per GDOE student and approximately \$334 per DoDEA student. The amounts reflect the length of time that GDOE and DoDEA schools remained closed to full-time face-to-face instruction. Guam’s application for the additional Summer P-EBT benefit is pending submission and review.

While Guam and GDOE have worked hard to leverage available federal programs, especially pandemic relief, to address food insecurity on island, it is a concern that, once the pandemic subsides, that food supports will also go away. To help sustain our efforts to address hunger and food insecurity, we would ask for support in the following areas:

- (1) **Support for higher school meal reimbursement rates for Guam, given the high cost of food and transportation associated with our location in the western Pacific.** This would help sustain high-quality nutritious meals to the maximum number of students possible.
- (2) **Continued authorization of the Community Eligibility Provision with consideration for longer renewal cycles and higher reimbursement rates.** This would help support higher school meal participation, allow districts to sustain food access, and support high-quality nutritious meals to the maximum number of students possible.
- (3) **Support for non-profit organizations to assist with ongoing food commodity warehousing, manpower, and transport.** This would help by allow GDOE to work with more community partners to provide expanded and more frequent access to food commodities for families across the island.

- (4) **Support for non-profit organizations to provide after-school and summer programs for children and youth in order to provide more avenues for food support during the times in which schools are out of session.** GDOE has been promoting the involvement of more non-profit organizations in “learning recovery” activities over the summer and after-school as we look ahead to the next two to three school years. As part of these programs, food support could continue to be an option for participating students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and for shedding light on a very important issue for our children, families and communities here in the Pacific region.

Senseramente,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jon J.P. Fernandez', with a stylized, cursive script.

JON J.P. FERNANDEZ