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Central actions of the states and the Federal District to preserve the right to school meals during the new coronavirus Pandemic

Principais ações dos Estados e do Distrito Federal para preservar o direito à alimentação escolar durante a pandemia do novo coronavírus

Abstract

Introduction: School meals are the main or only meal of the day for most Brazilian students. As a result of Covid-19, a state of emergency was decreed, and classes in the public school system were interrupted, making it necessary to place around 40 million students without in-person classes. **Objectives:** To verify the main actions of the states and the Federal District concerning school meals during the pandemic and whether they are aligned with Federal Law No. 13.987/2020. **Methods:** We carried a narrative literature review using the information on the main actions carried out by the states and the Federal District, from reports, official bulletins, Ministry of Education homepages, decrees, or state ordinances, between March and May 2020. **Results and Discussion:** The main actions that all 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District carried out during the suspension of classes were different: six Brazilian states opted for the direct transfer of income; nine distributed food kits, five of which included family farming items; and the Federal District carried out the two modalities mentioned above. It is noteworthy that such actions were focused on the beneficiary families of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program. Furthermore, in certain states, the purchase of at least 30% of family farming was not considered. **Conclusion:** Although all states and the Federal District have acted to preserve the right to school meals for students in the public school system, we observed that such actions were heterogeneous and not aligned with Federal Law No. 13.987/2020.

Keywords: Food and Nutritional Security. School Meals. COVID-19. Food and Nutrition Programs and Policies.

Resumo

Introdução: A alimentação escolar é a principal ou a única refeição do dia para grande parte dos estudantes brasileiros. Em decorrência da Covid-19, foi decretado estado de emergência e foram interrompidas as aulas na rede pública de ensino, colocando de forma necessária cerca de 40 milhões de estudantes sem aulas presenciais. **Objetivos:** Verificar as principais ações dos estados e do Distrito Federal em relação à alimentação escolar durante a pandemia e se as mesmas estão condizentes a Lei Federal nº 13.987/2020. **Métodos:** Foi realizada revisão narrativa da literatura, utilizando-se informações sobre as principais ações realizadas pelos estados e Distrito Federal, advindas de reportagens, boletins oficiais, *homepages* do Ministério da Educação, decretos e/ou portarias estaduais, entre março e maio de 2020. **Resultados e Discussão:** As principais ações que todos os 26 estados brasileiros e o Distrito Federal realizaram durante a suspensão das aulas foram díspares: seis estados brasileiros optaram pela transferência direta de renda; nove distribuíram *kits* de alimentos, sendo

que cinco incluíram itens de agricultura familiar; e o Distrito Federal realizou as duas modalidades supracitadas. Destaca-se que tais ações foram focalizadas nas famílias beneficiárias do Programa Bolsa Família. Ademais, em determinados estados, não foi considerada a compra de no mínimo 30% da agricultura familiar. **Conclusão:** Apesar de todos os estados e o Distrito Federal terem agido para preservar o direito à alimentação escolar dos estudantes da rede pública de ensino, observou-se que tais ações foram heterogêneas e não condizentes com a Lei Federal nº 13.987/2020.

Palavras-chave: Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Alimentação Escolar. COVID 19. Programas e Políticas de Alimentação e Nutrição.

INTRODUCTION

Initially called the National School Meals Campaign, the National School Meals Program (PNAE) was implemented in 1955 and is one of the oldest public policies in Food and Nutritional Security (FNS) in the country.¹ In its early years, the program assisted in the most deprived areas of the country to reduce malnutrition by offering food supplementation.²

The 1988 Federal Constitution promoted the universalization of the right to school meals through the transformation of the PNAE into a State policy. This program ensures school meals for students in primary public education (early childhood education, elementary school, high school, and youth and adult education), enrolled in public, charitable schools, and community entities (covenanted with the government). Furthermore, it aims to contribute to biopsychosocial growth and development, learning, school performance, and establish healthy eating habits among students through food and nutrition education actions and meals that meet nutritional needs during the school term. (Law No. 11.947/2009).³

School meals are the main or only meal of the day for most students. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 54 million people lived in extreme poverty in Brazil, and of this total, 14 million were under 14 years of age.⁴ Sturion et al.⁵ paper revealed that school meals were considered the main meal of the day for 50% of students in the Northeast, while this proportion was 56% in the North.

Given the above, the importance of school meals in Brazil was observed, especially in the current pandemic. As a coping strategy for Covid-19 in Brazil, on February 3, 2020, Ordinance No. 188/2020 of the Minister of Health decreed a Public Health Emergency of National Importance (ESPIN). As of March 23, 2020, municipal, state, and federal education systems suspended classroom activities and classes in schools across the country. While it was an expected measure, given that other countries were already facing similar situations, the National Education Development Fund (FNDE) had no guidance on the provision of school meals by schools. Given the situation's urgency, managers took different measures to continue providing food to schoolchildren, putting about 40 million students without school meals in Brazilian public schools.⁶

Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the main actions of the states and the Federal District to preserve the right to food of students in the public education network during the pandemic and whether these actions were consistent with Law No. 13.987/2020.

METHODS

This is an empirical study with an analysis of bibliographic and documental sources. We analyzed information from reports, official bulletins on the Ministry of Education homepages, ordinances, or state decrees published between March and May 2020 to identify the actions taken by the states and the Federal District to mitigate the effects of the pandemic concerning students' meals. The results are shown in Table 1 and refer to the region, location, the measure adopted, beneficiaries, and when the actions were initiated.

Table 1. Measures implemented to preserve the right to food of students in the public school system in the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District in 2020. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, 2021

| Region | State | Implemented measures | Beneficiaries | Date of publication | Publication accessed |
|-----------|--------------------|--|--|---------------------|---|
| Midwest | Distrito Federal | 1° - Emergency School Meal Allowance 2° - <i>Food Kits</i> | Students from beneficiary families of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 05/05/2020 | Decree nº 40.600 |
| Midwest | Goiás | Food allowance (R\$ 150,00) - Vulnerable students (registered in the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program) <i>Food Kits</i> | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 25/03/2020 | Decree nº 9.643 |
| Midwest | Mato Grosso | Addition of 60 reais to the benefit already received (total R\$ 240,00) | Students that already receive the benefit | 30/03/2020 | Decree nº 14.980 |
| Midwest | Mato Grosso do Sul | <i>Food Kits</i> (composed of items previously purchased and included in school stocks and family farming food) | School managers are responsible | 19/03/2020 | Decree nº 15.396 |
| Northeast | Bahia | Food allowance | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 15/05/2020 | Law nº 14.259, which establishes the Student's Food Allowance Project – PVAE. |
| Northeast | Alagoas | Deposit (R\$ 50,00) | All students enrolled in the state public school system who registered | 19/05/2020 | Decree nº 69.845 |
| Northeast | Ceará | Food allowance (R\$ 80,00) | Socially vulnerable students | 09/04/2020 | Decree nº 33.541 |
| Northeast | Maranhão | <i>Food Kits</i> | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 20/04/2020 | Ordinance nº 547 |

Table 1. Measures implemented to preserve the right to food of students in the public school system in the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District in 2020. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, 2021(Continues).

| Region | State | Implemented measures | Beneficiaries | Date of publication | Publication accessed |
|-----------|---------------------|---|---|---------------------|--|
| Northeast | Paraíba | <i>Food Kits</i> | Students regularly enrolled and active in remote activities | 05/05/2020 | Homepage (https://paraiba.pb.gov.br/diretas/secretaria-da-educacao-e-da-ciencia-e-tecnologia/noticias/secretaria-de-educacao-distribui-253-mil-cestas-basicas-com-itens-da-merenda-escolar-para-alunos-da-rede-estadual-de-ensino) |
| Northeast | Pernambuco | Food allowance (R\$ 50,00) | Student registered in the CadÚnico | 10/04/2020 | Decree nº 48.938 |
| Northeast | Piauí | Monthly allowance (R\$ 60,00) | Families benefiting from the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program, with children enrolled in the state education system | 13/04/2020 | Homepage (https://www.pi.gov.br/noticias/seduc-divulga-informacoes-sobre-como-receber-o-auxilio-merenda-escolar/) |
| Northeast | Rio Grande do Norte | <i>Food Kits</i> (composed of items previously purchased and included in school stocks and family farming food) | Not informed | 15/04/2020 | Homepage (https://www2.natal.rn.gov.br/noticia/ntc-32792.html) |
| Northeast | Sergipe | <i>Food Kits</i> (composed of items previously purchased and included in school stocks and family farming food) | Students benefiting from the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 03/04/2020 | Ordinance nº 1758 |
| North | Acre | <i>Food Kits</i> | Socially vulnerable students | 27/03/2020 | Decree nº 5.628 |
| North | Amapá | <i>Food Kits</i> | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 20/04/2020 | Homepage (https://www.amapa.gov.br/noticia/1804/acao-de-governo-conclui-montagens-do-kit-merenda-em-casa-e-orientam-sobre-entregas) |
| North | Amazonas | <i>Food Kits</i> | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 17/04/2020 | Homepage (http://plataformaeducacao.seduc.am.gov.br/merendaemcasa/) |

Table 1. Measures implemented to preserve the right to food of students in the public school system in the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District in 2020. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, 2021(Continues).

| Region | State | Implemented measures | Beneficiaries | Date of publication | Publication accessed |
|-----------|----------------|---|---|---------------------|---|
| North | Pará | Food allowance (R\$ 80,00) | Not informed | 18/03/2020 | Decree nº 609 |
| North | Rondônia | Food allowance (R\$ 75,00) | Socially vulnerable students enrolled | 06/05/2020 | Decree nº 25.008 |
| North | Roraima | <i>Food Kits</i> (composed of items previously purchased and included in school stocks and family farming food) | Families of students benefiting from the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 07/04/2020 | Ordinance nº 0657/2020 and Ordinance nº 0658/2020 |
| North | Tocantins | <i>Food Kits</i> | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 23/03/2020 | <i>Homepage</i> (https://www.to.gov.br/noticia/2020/3/23/governador-mauro-carlesse-determina-aquisicao-de-alimentos-para-estudantes-da-rede-estadual/) |
| Southeast | Espírito Santo | <i>Food Kits</i> | CadÚnico beneficiary students | 31/03/2020 | Ordinance ° 047-R / SEE/ES, of March 31, 2020 |
| Southeast | Minas Gerais | Food allowance (R\$ 50,00) + donation of school lunches left in stock | Student registered in the CadÚnico | 10/04/2020 | Decree nº 47.915 |
| Southeast | Rio de Janeiro | Vouchers made available through a bill payment app (R\$ 100,00) | Socially vulnerable students, attended by the federal government through CadÚnico and beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 08/04/2020 | Decree nº 47.357 |
| Southeast | São Paulo | Food allowance (R\$ 55,00) | Families of students benefiting from the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program and living in extreme poverty | 30/03/2020 | Decree nº 64.891 |

Table 1. Measures implemented to preserve the right to food of students in the public school system in the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District in 2020. Rio de Janeiro-RJ, 2021 (Continues).

| Region | State | Implemented measures | Beneficiaries | Date of publication | Publication accessed |
|--------|-------------------|--|---|---------------------|--|
| South | Paraná | <i>Food Kits</i> | Vulnerable students who are beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 21/03/2020 | Decree nº 4.316 |
| South | Rio Grande do Sul | <i>Food Kits</i> | Socially vulnerable students, attended by the federal government through CadÚnico and beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) Program | 24/04/2020 | <i>Homepage</i> (https://www.estado.rs.gov.br/merenda-escolar) |
| South | Santa Catarina | <i>Food Kits</i> (fully purchased from Family farming) | All students enrolled in the state public school system | 07/04/2020 | <i>Homepage</i> (https://www.sc.gov.br/noticias/temas/coronavirus/coronavirus-em-sc-governo-do-estado-define-a-entrega-de-alimentacao-escolar-aos-alunos-da-rede-estadual) |

Source: Authors

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the actions of the Federal Government to try to solve this problem, Bill No. 786/2020 was transformed into Ordinary Law No. 13.987 on April 7, 2020, which altered that of No. 11.947, of June 16, 2009, authorizing, on an exceptional basis during the class suspension period, the distribution of foodstuffs acquired with PNAE resources to parents or guardians of school students enrolled in public elementary education schools.⁷

Seeking to regulate the application of this law, Resolution No. 2, of April 9, 2020, of the Ministry of Education, authorized in its article 1, “the distribution of foodstuffs purchased under the PNAE to the families of students, at the discretion of the power local public”, complemented in § 1 of art. 2:

[...] foodstuffs that have already been purchased or that may be purchased in bidding processes or in public calls from family farming may be distributed as kits (fresh and minimally processed foodstuffs, seeking to maintain the weekly supply of portions of fruits, vegetables, tubers, and roots, prioritizing those with greater durability), defined by the local nutrition team, observing the appropriate per capita for the age group, according to the period in which the student would be being cared for at the school unit.

The main actions that all 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District carried out during class suspension due to the pandemic are shown in Table 1. The information cited throughout this paper was retrieved from documents published by the state governments through decrees or ordinances.

According to the information retrieved from the publications of each state and the Federal District, we noted that most states (51.9%) opted to deliver food kits, as per the MED/FNDE Resolution. While the PNAE talks about the importance of introducing fresh and minimally processed foods in these kits, their composition was not homogeneous between the different states. Also, the acquisition of at least 30% of family farming products recommended by guideline V, article 2, of the FNDE Resolution (Resolution CD/FNDE nº 38, of July 16, 2009) was not observed either.⁸

It is noteworthy that, in the context of the pandemic, the production and marketing cycle of family farmers should continue in order not to further centralize public purchases in large supermarket chains and the consumption of ultra-processed products.⁹ In the South, we observed that the kit was purchased entirely from family farming products in Santa Catarina.

In a city in Rio Grande do Sul, while containing beans and rice, which are minimally processed foods, the food kit was composed chiefly of processed or ultra-processed foods (crystal sugar, assorted wheat, sugar, and starch flour biscuits, roasted ground coffee, corn flour, wheat flour, powdered milk, spaghetti noodles, ready-to-serve tomato sauce, edible soy vegetable oil, and canned sausage) purchased in a single wholesale, not complying with the purchase from family farming and the parameters of healthy eating provided for in the Brazilian Food Guide.¹⁰

Another point worth mentioning is that a significant portion of the states (44.4%) opted for the direct transfer of income, such as food allowance, bank deposit, or addition to the benefit already received. Managers who opted for this modality noted it is a more agile way to increase income and ensure the FNS of households that previously relied on school meals for part of their members, reducing daily food expenses.¹¹

Some critical issues deserve to be highlighted when the states adopt this measure, namely: 1) FNDE resources cannot be used in strategies of this nature, as they are destined exclusively for the purchase of foodstuffs; 2) family farmers are excluded from supply circuits at a time when they experience enormous insecurity concerning the flow of their production and impoverishment of their families; 3) even when supplemented, the amount transferred by FNDE to the states is negligible as it is calculated for large-scale purchases, which is not sufficient to ensure FNS.

According to the Brazilian Forum on Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security,⁹ the best way to get healthy food to students is through food distribution, and not through cards and coupons managed in a non-transparent way, focused on the households of the *Bolsa Família* (Family Allowance) Program, which also disregard the digital exclusion of the most vulnerable. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, the government made vouchers available through a bill payment application; in Alagoas, the government deposited in the accounts of the students' legal guardians; and in the Federal District, Decree No. 40.523 published on March 15 established the Emergency School Meals Scholarship to serve 70 thousand students from the public education network, registered and beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program, made available by the School Material Card in the class suspension period. The amount was distributed into three ranges, according to the number of meals the student would eat in the network: BRL 59.70 (single meal); BRL 119.40 (two); and BRL 179.10 (three), as shown in Table 1.

Regarding beneficiaries, we observed that food kits or income transfers are being offered in most states (55.6%) only to students from households that are beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program or socially vulnerable. It is noteworthy that this bottleneck revokes PNAE's universality, which concerns servicing all students enrolled in the public school system. If this stratification is necessary, the government must justify this decision-making in a participatory and democratic manner with the School Food Meals Council (CAE) from criteria covering all those who need this right through transparent registrations.⁹

Differences are observed between their implementation between the locations since the interruption of classes occurred, in most states, on March 12, 2020, concerning the date of publication of the measures mentioned above. For example, Paraná, Goiás, Tocantins, São Paulo, and Maranhão started implementing kits or direct income transfer about 15 days after the interruption of classes. On the other hand, the Federal District, Paraíba, and Rondônia only started their processes in May, about 60 days after class interruption in the public education system. Based on the information obtained by the governments themselves, it is impossible to prove the delivery of kits or direct transfer of income, the regularity of the actions mentioned above, and the composition and number of foods in the kits.

Given the above, we observed that all states and the Federal District carried out some action to preserve the right to school meals for students in the public school system. However, the measures implemented were heterogeneous and inconsistent with Federal Law No. 13.987/2020.

Therefore, it is vital to meet at least 30% of nutritional needs when two meals were offered at school units and 20% when one meal was offered part-time during public school class suspension. Achieving this goal through concrete and constant actions until the return of face-to-face classes is of paramount importance to contribute to the nutritional adequacy of Brazilian children attending public schools.

Furthermore, given the actions carried out in the states and the Federal District, it is essential to emphasize the need to distribute food to students through kits that incorporate fresh food, especially from family farming, and that they are offered to all students in the public network considering PNAE's universality principle.

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Contributors

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