***Introduction/Consent***

Hi, my **name** is **[insert name]** and I’m from **[insert institution]***.* **Thank you** for agreeing to participate in this interview today. I’d like to ask you some questions about your experiences and ideas about providing free school meals to all students under the current federal Seamless Summer Option or SSO program and then talk about offering free school meals to all students next school year under the [ME: School Meals for All / CA: Universal Meals Program]. This will be used for research purposes and also to inform the state of **[Maine/ California]** as it prepares for the future. I want to make sure you know that your participation is voluntary and the interview should take about 30-45 minutes. We’ll combine all the results and you and your school district will NOT be identified with your responses. If you have any questions, you can talk with our Principal Investigator [Juliana Cohen or Wendi Gosliner], and I would be happy to give you her contact number or email if you’d like. I’m also planning to record our interview to make it easier to get all your responses, and we’ll delete the recording after we’ve written down your answers. And again you won’t be identified with your responses. Is it ok with you if I record this interview?

[*If Yes- start recording now*]

This interview is structured to think about different time periods. First, we’d like to talk with you about Serving Free School Meals for All during COVID-19 this year.We know that the past couple of years have been extremely challenging for school food service operations due to the pandemic, and we’d like to hear about your experiences. Then we will ask similar questions, but thinking about next year, when we believe there will still be issues due to the pandemic and we don’t know if there will be waivers. Lastly, we will get your thoughts on the future when we won’t have COVID related issues, when waivers are over, and you are offering universal meals under the CA/ME program.

**Questions:**

Here we go. For this first set of questions we’ll focus on this CURRENT school year and how you think both serving free school meals to all students, as well as the pandemic, have impacted your operations*.*

1. Lets start with your school food service operations right now. [**Domain: current operations]**
   1. How are you currently serving lunch (for example, traditional lunch lines or pre-packaged option)?
   2. Where do students typically eat lunch (such as in the cafeteria, gyms, outdoors or in classrooms)?
2. Now I’d like to ask about challenges and difficulties in serving free school meals for all students this current school year. I’ll start by listing some possible challenges, and for each one please tell me more if you’re facing these issues. Afterwards, you can let me know if there are other challenges that I may have missed **[Domain: current challenges]**
   1. Labor capacity (like staffing issues)
   2. Facility capacity, including kitchen equipment, storage and cold storage
   3. Food sourcing or supply chain issues, including vendors/ local foods/farm-to-school, as well as paper goods, utensils, etc.
   4. Meal quality and menu variety
   5. Food waste
   6. The amount of time students have to eat, including lunch lines and eating time
   7. Were there other challenges serving school meals this year that I didn’t mention?
   8. Which of these has been the biggest challenge?

Now let’s talk about factors that are helping your food service program to be successful this year.

1. Can you talk about anything that your [CA: nutrition services division/ ME: food service program] or your district has done that has made serving free school meals for all students more successful? **[Domain: current facilitators]**
   1. Are there schools within your district that are having an easier time feeding students? ([If Yes] What’s different about those schools?) **[Domain: different implementation]**
   2. Are there schools within your district that are experiencing more challenges with feeding students? ([If Yes] What’s different about those schools?) **[Domain: different implementation]**
   3. Are there innovative or creative methods that your food service division or your district have come up with to address current challenges that can also be used for meal service next school year?
   4. Are there innovative or creative methods that you’ve heard of other school districts using that can be used for meal service next school year?
2. Next I’d like to ask you about what resources and information were available to you to help with serving free school meals to all students. I’ll start by listing some possible resources and information and please tell me know if they were available and helpful. Afterwards, you can let me know if there are other resources or information that I may have missed
   1. Can you tell me about any technical assistance you may have received from your state or from elsewhere?
   2. What about resources or information from professional networks?
   3. What about resources to help with messaging or communications to parents?
   4. Have there been other helpful resources or sources of information that I didn’t mention?
   5. What has been the most helpful?
   6. What were your biggest needs or gaps for resources or information?
   7. Which of these things will be most important to maintain, if possible, to support a successful Universal Meal Program next school year ? **[Domain: resources used/needed]**

We realize that this school year has included many disruptions and challenges for school meal programs. We want to be sure we understand how this is affecting people’s experiences with school meals, even though this year does not reflect typical school meal service. First I’ll ask about parents, then students.

1. What do you hear most from parents about school meals this year?
   1. How have you gotten this feedback from parents (e.g., emails, surveys, calls, etc)?
2. Continuing to think about this school year, what do you hear most from students about school meals this year? **[Domain: student/parent perspectives]**
   1. What do you think are the most important factors that drive students to participate in school meals in your district?

(Note: If response is that meals are free, probe if they think participation is due to actual cost or to reduced stigma [or if there is something else about free meals that impacted participation]).

* + 1. Are there differences for breakfast and lunch?
  1. What do you think are the main reasons students don’t participate in school meals?
     1. Are there differences among different student populations within your district that impact participation?
     2. Are there differences for breakfast and lunch?

1. What do you think you would need to do or to have, in order to increase the number of students who participate in school meals? **[Domain: Factors that influence school meal participation]**
   * 1. Are there differences for breakfast and lunch?
     2. Are there other things you’d like to do, but haven’t been able to do, to increase student participation?
2. Can you describe any marketing or communication efforts you’re doing or plan to do to encourage more students to participate in school meals? **[Domain: Factors that influence school meal participation]**
   1. (If applicable) Which strategies did you think are more successful or less successful?
3. Who have been the biggest school district and community champions or partners who have helped your school food services succeed? **[Domain: school climate/support]**
   1. Do you have a sense of what district administrators or principals think about the [ME: School Meals for All / CA: Universal Meals Program]? Teachers? Your foodservice staff?
      1. Probe if there are differences by grade level, i.e., elementary vs. middle vs. high school
   2. Do you feel that in general school administrators and teachers consider school meals important for student learning? (probe for details, including academic and behavioral)

10) Historically, household eligibility for free and reduced-priced meals has been used to identify poverty levels in schools.

* 1. In your school district, have free and reduced-price meal applications continued to be collected this school year?
  2. (*If YES to question c*) If you collected meal applications or alternative income forms, what approaches did you find successful this school year to encourage families to complete and return those applications?
     1. Do you have an estimated return rate this year? How does this compare to pre-COVID? [**Domain: poverty measures**]

11) I also want to talk a little bit about [ME: school meal program finances/CA: your Cafeteria Fund]. Can you tell me how your meal program finances have been impacted this year while you are providing free school meals for all students with the increased reimbursement rates and other waivers in place?

1. How do you expect your school meal program finances to be impacted NEXT school year? **[Domain: financial impact]**

Now let’s continue to talk about school meals NEXT school year.

13. Do you think you’ll be able to provide the kinds and quality of meals that you would like to next year? **[Domain: meal quality]**

1. [If yes] What will allow you to do that?

[If no] Why not?

* 1. Are there other potential challenges that you’re concerned about for your service program next school year? How do you think you’ll address those issues next year?

1. As you think about next year and serving free meals to all students under

[ME: School Meals for All / CA: the Universal Meals Program], does your SFA have the capacity to serve two full meals if there is full participation?

* 1. Probe about storage, staff, service space, kitchen equipment, meal service logistics such as time to eat, anything else that limits the ability to achieve full participation
  2. (If no) What would it take?

1. Thinking about how the state can help, what do you think is needed to make free school meals for all students through [ME: School Meals for All / CA: the Universal Meals Program] as successful as possible statewide next year?
   1. What resources and information do you think would be most helpful for your nutrition services division in supporting a successful program next year? **[Domain: future needs]**
2. The last thing I’d like to talk about briefly is looking ahead to future school years, imagining that COVID-related challenges are over and waiver flexibilities are gone.
   1. Do you think you will be able to provide the kinds and quality of meals you’d like to?
   2. Do you have any other concerns about providing free school meals to all students?
3. I’d like to end by hearing about your dream food service. Would you be able to tell me what that would look like to you, such as the type of food, procurement relationships, equipment needs, serving environment, staff, etc. you think would be needed.
   1. How much reimbursement do you think would be required to serve these types of meals? *Ask about lunch, breakfast.*
   2. What would you like to see for lunch period lengths and seated time for students to eat?

**Wrap up:**

* That was the last question I have for our interview today.
* Is there anything else you would like to discuss? I want to give you a chance to share any comments or ask any questions that you have.
* Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your ideas today.