

WASHINGTON FOOD COALITION

Children's Backpack Project

Listening Sessions

Summary Report

Prepared by the Washington Food Coalition | 2026

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About This Report

The Washington Food Coalition conducted a series of listening sessions and one-on-one conversations with backpack program coordinators from across Washington State in early 2026. Group sessions were facilitated by Dana Cordy, Registered Dietitian Nutritionist, and Linda Olivas-Mathews, SNAP-Ed Program Manager for Pierce County (retired). Individual follow-up sessions allowed program coordinators to share their perspectives in greater depth.

This report synthesizes the key themes, primary challenges, and recommended action steps emerging from five sessions involving eight organizations. It is intended to offer guidance and information to program partners, funders, coordinators and the Washington Food Coalition.

Participating Organizations

Second Harvest	~12,500 students/week — Spokane, North Idaho, Tri-Cities; expanding to Yakima & Pasco
Rainier Valley Food Bank	~550 students — South Seattle (13 schools, K–12)
Port Angeles Food Bank	~550 students — Port Angeles School District (K–6)
Sequim Food Bank	~300 students — Sequim area (K–12)
Issaquah Food Bank	~600–700 meals/week — Issaquah School District
We Love Steilacoom	30–40 students/week — Steilacoom/DuPont (small, all-volunteer)
YMCA of Greater Seattle	~225 students/week — 15 schools in Lake Washington/Renton School Districts
Marysville Food Bank	~550 students/week — Marysville & Lakewood School Districts

Sessions included group listening sessions and follow-up one-on-one conversations.

Key Themes

Theme 1 — Balancing Nutrition with Food Acceptability

Across all programs, the most consistently voiced tension is the gap between what is nutritionally ideal and what children will eat. Coordinators described items going uneaten or wasted when unfamiliar, often healthy foods were introduced. This tension is not simply about preferences, but also about the real consequences for whether the food and programming are serving its purpose of keeping children fed, and making best use of funding, staff and volunteer time.

"It seems the more nutritious we make the foods, the less gets used and the more it gets wasted. Trying to balance nutrition versus what people actually use is our biggest hurdle."
— Program participant

One program has developed a practical philosophy in response to this concern by prioritizing brand-name, kid-friendly foods that children recognize and want to eat, while making deliberate nutritional upgrades where possible. Brand name foods may also reduce stigma often associated with generic or commodity foods. Examples from this program include a low-sugar version of Cinnamon Toast Crunch (General Mills), beef jerky bites (Highland Beef Farms), whole-grain Goldfish crackers (Pepperidge Farm), and zero-sugar Gatorade. The goal is high-calorie density foods and getting as much nutrition as possible per bag within a \$5 budget, rather than strict adherence to a formal nutrition policy. As this program noted when asked about a nutrition policy or standard: "I think I know what a good diet looks like. We have too many competing priorities to have a strict policy."

Port Angeles Food Bank described a scenario in which students were eating their food bag contents on the school bus rather than saving them for the weekend. This indicated that the foods may have been enjoyed, but also that quantity may not be sufficient to sustain families over the weekend as intended.

Direct voice from the sessions:

"The trade-off is that we're trying to focus on more nutritional quality, more meal-style bags, not just snack bags and the kids were eating them on the bus before they even got home. That food isn't feeding them over the weekend. It's not sufficient." — Program participant

Theme 2 — Equity of Access and Reducing Stigma

Several coordinators identified stigma as a significant barrier to participation, particularly among middle and high school students. Students were reluctant to be seen picking up food bags in visible school locations. Programs using anonymous/discreet distribution report better participation and higher satisfaction.

A program in this cohort developed an intentional, hands-off approach for suitable for older students. Students at middle and high schools choose up to 10 items from a menu of 25 using their student ID number, completely anonymously. Bags are assembled by student leadership and delivered to a trusted adult of the student's choosing. The school informs an external sponsoring organization if more or fewer students need to be added each week. This model creates an unexpected secondary benefit of allowing student volunteers to learn about hunger among their classmates by way of assembling bags, building compassion and practical skills simultaneously.

Several other programs noted that schools sometimes deconstruct pre-packed bags and distribute items individually or even add fresh produce just in time for distribution which also reduces visibility and gives students some informal choice.

Theme 3 — Program Sustainability and Funding Structures

Most programs face ongoing pressure to balance meeting participation needs with financial sustainability. The private-funding sponsorship/community-adoption model stands out. Businesses, churches, civic groups, or families "adopt" a school for a specific time frame, paying for the food and delivering it weekly. Attrition is low and most sponsors consider it their school and often expand their involvement into reading programs, tutoring, and other community engagement. Of note, this model involves significant administrative oversight and may not be a good option for smaller programs. In addition, the same program also built buying power by joining a co-op with a partner program in Amarillo, Texas, allowing access to better pricing from manufacturers like General Mills.

Another program described having to cap their program at 550 bags per week after previously serving nearly 1,000. This was a financial decision, but emotionally difficult knowing that it meant many children would not be able to be served. Their backpack program is their most expensive program to operate at the food bank at over \$200,000 per year.

"I broke down in tears a couple of times when I had to cap the program at 550. But 550 is better than zero." — Program participant

Smaller programs like one in Pierce County operate entirely from their general food bank budget, with no dedicated backpack funding line. Another program located in south Seattle described being constrained by City of Seattle requirements governing bag format and item quantities, limiting their flexibility to respond to student preferences.

Theme 4 — Procurement, Pricing, and the Power of Partnerships

Access to quality food at affordable prices varies dramatically by program size. The largest program in the cohort with the most resources and capacity has developed the most sophisticated procurement model in the cohort: direct relationships with major manufacturers, co-op purchasing with an out of state partner program, and a separate fresh produce initiative that captures near-ripe produce from stores and farms and redistributes it to partner agencies. This allows the organization to offer summer meal partners fresh produce donations and increase children and family's access to healthy, desirable fruits and vegetables.

Fresh produce distribution remains a challenge and a priority. Shelf stability is a non-negotiable constraint for most programs. Bags are packed one to two weeks in advance and may sit at schools for extended periods prior to distribution. Inclusion of perishable items is only feasible when a trusted school-level partner takes direct responsibility for it. This is consistent with what several

programs described: fresh produce was only possible at one school with a particularly engaged office manager who accepted same-day delivery.

A program on the peninsula learned about JA Foods, a vendor that pre-assembled student food bags for only \$4-\$6/bag. This program also shared their recent partnership with Miss Olive's Meals, a company that offers shelf-stable, no heat required, meals which met their own specific nutrition requirements. Smaller programs, however, cannot always purchase in quantities that meet the minimum volume thresholds of these or other wholesale vendors.

Theme 5 — The Case for Storytelling

Across the cohort, the most effective tool for donor engagement, sponsor recruitment, and community awareness may not be data, but stories. The largest program in the cohort has a dedicated storytelling team member and photographer who conducts student interviews at schools, with parental consent, asking questions about daily life and program impact. The resulting quotes and photographs are used in outreach, and "Putting a face to a quote just grabs people."

Cohort participants see this qualitative data as compelling for increasing sponsor recruitment. Additional storytelling and real-world impact in conjunction with statistics around student food and nutrition insecurity, diet related public health metrics, and poverty is an effective way to communicate the need for these programs and make a case for additional support.

"I would like funders to really understand the positive impact it has on kids and families. I'd love them to know what their dollars are doing. Some of these stories from the kids really impact you." — Program participant

Port Angeles Food Bank echoed this sentiment from a different angle: their biggest frustration is that donors and community members don't understand the administrative labor, logistics, and hard decisions that go into getting bags out every week. The story they want to tell is not just about the children receiving food. It is also about the work required to make it happen. These are time intensive programs to operate which require significant resource allocation.

Theme 6 — Data Collection is Primarily Quantitative, with Significant Gaps

Most programs track bags distributed, students served, and costs. Annual surveys are common but face structural and administrative challenges. Surveys don't always delve into details about the program's impact on family well-being, how well foods meet the cultural food needs of diverse communities or health related metrics. School confidentiality rules limit what data can be shared, school contacts vary in how engaged they are with survey administration, and coordinators have limited bandwidth to analyze and act on results. One program described survey results that were contradictory and hard to act on stating that many families had divergent food preferences, and bags are built the same for everyone.

One of the programs that does administer surveys uses their results to refine its program model in which middle and high school students choose their own items. They continuously refine bag content based on feedback from students, teachers, and counselors. This feedback loop is more actionable than most, partly because the student-choice model itself generates real-time preference data.

Coordinators across the cohort expressed interest in tracking nutritional content of bags, food waste, and family satisfaction, but universally cited bandwidth constraints as barriers. Several noted that data collection is only worthwhile if there is a clear plan to act on what is learned. They report that qualitative stories often communicate impact more effectively than numbers for donors and community audiences.

Theme 7 — Procurement Inequity and the Isolation of Smaller Programs

A structural inequity runs across the cohort: smaller programs cannot access wholesale pricing, corporate donation relationships, or vendor networks available to larger organizations. Corporate donation policies increasingly channel food to large national networks, cutting out independent food banks that lack the required affiliation or scale.

"The bigger food banks already have those contacts. Smaller food banks consistently get hit with the corporate policy of only donating towards the bigger ones. [Retail store name redacted] told me corporate will not allow them to give it away. They have to literally throw it away." — Program participant

This isolation extends beyond vendors. Most coordinators had little to no awareness of what other programs were doing, what items they were distributing, or what vendor resources were available. One of the cohorts listening session itself generated immediate value as Port Angeles Food Bank shared specific contact information for JA Foods and Miss Olive's, which was new information to everyone present.

Theme 8 — Strong Appetite for Peer Learning and Continued Connection

Throughout all sessions, participants expressed genuine enthusiasm for connecting with others doing this work. The group sessions sparked immediate cross-program connectivity as Rainier Valley Food Bank asked to connect directly with another program after learning about their model. Port Angeles Food Bank said the cohort structure was one of the most valuable aspects of participating in this project.

"I'm really excited about the opportunity to connect with other programs and share information, vendors, and creative solutions. Sometimes you can't see your own program because you've been in it too long." — Program participant

One program framed the broader mission simply: "We are all trying to do the same thing and reach kids with food. We just need to crack through and be open to having these conversations to figure out a way." This spirit of openness and shared purpose was consistent across every session and reflects the real potential of this cohort as a foundation for ongoing collaboration. Broadening the reach to include others in a future cohort would likely be well received.

Port Angeles Food Bank offered a specific model for continued connection, referencing a "Boundless" initiative that brought regional distribution organizations together for structured workshops and topic-specific breakout calls. A hybrid model was suggested: alternating virtual and in-person gatherings at a central location, with travel stipend support for geographically distant programs.

Primary Challenges

1. Nutrition vs. Food Acceptance and Sufficient Volume

Healthier options are often unfamiliar, sometimes smaller in serving size, and generally more expensive. Improving nutritional quality without sacrificing palatability and caloric sufficiency is the core programmatic tension. No program has fully resolved it. The most promising approaches combine familiar brand-name products with targeted nutritional upgrades, and student-choice models for older students. Culturally familiar foods that meet diverse community needs are critical to ensuring foods are accepted.

2. Bag Insufficiency for Weekend Food Security

Multiple programs described how bags intended to cover a full weekend fall short, either due to budget limits or because food is consumed immediately or even given away/thrown out. The gap between the stated goal of weekend food security and the actual content of most bags is widely acknowledged and remains largely unaddressed due to funding constraints.

3. Stigma and Student Visibility

Older students avoid participation when pick-up is visible. Anonymity and student agency in the distribution process are critical to reaching those most in need. Programs with anonymous, choice-based models consistently report better outcomes.

4. Funding Fragility and Scale Constraints

Most programs face ongoing pressure to balance service levels with financial sustainability. Several have reduced the number of students served. The lack of dedicated backpack program funding and the prevalence of restrictive grant requirements limit flexibility.

5. Fresh Produce Inclusion

Shelf stability requirements, advanced packing schedules, and variable school-level capacity to handle perishables make fresh produce impractical for most programs at scale. Where it occurs, it depends entirely on a trusted, highly engaged school-level contact. Offering fresh produce is widely identified as the single improvement coordinators most want to make. This is a top priority for families and students too: increasing the availability of fresh produce.

6. Administrative Burden and Volunteer Capacity

Coordinators are stretched across multiple roles. Many programs heavily rely on volunteers. Administrative burdens crowd out time for program improvement, data collection, and peer learning. This capacity gap limits participation in broader initiatives and makes even desirable changes difficult to implement.

7. Procurement Inequity

Smaller programs pay retail prices, cannot access wholesale vendor relationships, and are increasingly excluded from corporate donation programs. This structural inequity constrains food quality and variety for the programs serving the most under-resourced communities.

8. Geographic Reach and Community Awareness

Programs serving large geographic areas face the challenge of building community awareness of childhood food insecurity in new locations. Recruiting local community champions and organizational sponsors requires sustained outreach and education.

Recommended Action Steps

The following recommendations are organized by stakeholder group and reflect the direct requests and expressed needs of cohort participants across all five sessions.

Stakeholder	Recommended Actions	Rationale / Source
Washington Food Coalition	Develop and distribute a Healthy Food Swaps List pairing commonly distributed items with nutritionally upgraded alternatives, prioritizing nourishment, lower sugar/sodium, and whole grain options that children will eat.	Every program requested this. One program's practical approach to use brand-name products within a \$5/bag budget provides a strong model to build from.
Washington Food Coalition	Create and maintain a Vendor Resource List with contact information and pricing guidance, including JA Foods,	JA Foods and Miss Olive's were unknown to most participants before being shared in the group session.

	Miss Olive's Meals, Highland Beef Farms, and other sources offering backpack-appropriate items accessible to programs that cannot meet large volume thresholds.	Vendor information sharing was the single most-requested support from the Washington Food Coalition.
Washington Food Coalition	Explore collective purchasing coordination. Working with Food Lifeline or similar organizations to leverage combined volume for commonly purchased items and extend grant dollars further for smaller programs.	Two programs independently requested this. One program's co-op with a Texas partner demonstrates the model at program scale. "If there was a way to piggyback off orders with other food banks, that would be amazing."
Washington Food Coalition	Build ongoing peer learning infrastructure for backpack program coordinators, alternating virtual and in-person convenings, with travel stipends, modeled on the Boundless initiative format of structured workshops and topic-specific breakout calls.	Multiple coordinators identified peer connection as among the most valuable aspects of this project. "We are all trying to do the same thing. We just need to crack through and be open to having these conversations."
Washington Food Coalition	Develop a Qualitative Storytelling Toolkit: sample interview questions, consent form templates, and a guide to conducting student impact interviews. Make the storytelling model accessible to programs without dedicated communications staff.	A program's storytelling approach (student interviews, photographs, adult alumni narratives) drives donor engagement and sponsor recruitment more effectively than quantitative data alone.
Washington Food Coalition	Widely disseminate the OSPI statistic that approximately 20% of enrolled students experience weekend food insecurity, paired with per-student cost figures, as a standard tool for sponsor recruitment and community awareness campaigns.	One program uses this data point to help potential sponsors understand the scale of need in concrete terms. The data is compelling and underused across the broader network.
Washington Food Coalition	Facilitate advocacy toward corporate food donors whose policies prohibit local food bank partnerships and require stores to discard unsold items rather than donate them.	A program described losing multiple donation sources to corporate centralization policies. One low cost national chain requires their stores to discard rather than donate, a policy with significant local impact.

Funders (Arcora Foundation, WSDA, City of Seattle)	Fund dedicated nutrition quality improvement grants enabling programs to pilot Healthy Food Swaps List items, with a brief follow-up survey to assess family and student reception.	Programs are ready to upgrade items but lack funds to pilot alternatives. The Coalition's planned food swap grant is a strong proof-of-concept to expand.
Funders	Support survey administration capacity; develop a shared survey tool, Coalition staff support, or per-program stipends for structured impact data collection.	Survey response rates are low and engagement is inconsistent. External support for survey design and administration would improve data quality without burdening stretched coordinators.
Funders	Reconsider prescriptive bag format requirements in favor of outcomes-based nutrition standards that allow programs to offer student choice, especially for middle and high school students.	City of Seattle requirements constrain Rainier Valley Food Bank's ability to offer student choice, a model shown to reduce stigma and improve participation.
Funders	Recognize and communicate the true administrative and emotional cost of running these programs in funder reports, advocacy, and communications.	Port Angeles Food Bank: "I wish donors understood the amount of labor, thought, and logistics involved. It's more complicated than it sounds." This story is largely untold.
Program Leaders (Food Banks)	Pilot the anonymous student-choice model for middle and high school students: ID-based ordering, assembled by peer volunteers, delivered to a trusted adult. Consider adopting a no-permission-slip, hands-off enrollment approach to reduce barriers.	This model addresses stigma, improves participation, and creates community empathy. Multiple coordinators expressed interest. Rainier Valley Food Bank asked to connect with another program directly.
Program Leaders	Explore JA Foods (pre-assembled student bags, \$4–\$6/bag) and Miss Olive's Meals (shelf-stable, no-heat-required, 24-month shelf life) as vendors to reduce bag-assembly time and improve nutritional quality.	Port Angeles Food Bank reported significant time savings and improved nutrition after switching to JA Foods kits. Both vendors were unknown to most cohort members before being shared.
Program Leaders	Identify a trusted, highly engaged school-level liaison at each partner school to streamline logistics, standardize distribution, and create the conditions under which fresh	Fresh produce was only practical where one strong school-side contact existed and took direct responsibility. Two organizations confirmed this pattern.

	produce inclusion becomes feasible.	
Community Partners & Donors	Consider the school-adoption model: commit to funding one school for three years, deliver bags weekly, and build a relationship that often extends into tutoring, mentorship, and broader community engagement. Attrition is low; impact is high.	This model is the most resilient, sustainable funding approach in the cohort. By the end of three years, most sponsors describe the school as "theirs" and expand their involvement.

Looking Ahead

The Washington Food Coalition will take the following steps based on what was shared in these sessions:

- Share this summary report with all participating programs.
- Finalize and distribute a Healthy Food Swaps List and accompanying vendor resource list; distribute in 2026.
- Offer cohort members the opportunity to apply for small grants to pilot healthier food alternatives, with a brief follow-up survey to assess reception.
- Explore coordinating a subsequent convening, ideally hybrid in format. Bring cohort members together for peer problem-solving and shared learning.
- Investigate options for collective purchasing coordination in partnership with Food Lifeline or similar organizations.
- Meet with vendors including JA Foods and Miss Olive's Meals to develop the vendor resource list and share it broadly across the Washington State backpack program network.

The participants in these sessions represent programs ranging from 30 students per week to more than 12,500 serving children in urban South Seattle, rural Clallam County, military communities in Pierce County, and the rapidly expanding Spokane region. Despite their differences in scale, geography, and funding structure, their shared challenges are remarkably consistent and so is their commitment to the children they serve.

The most important insight from this cohort may be the simplest: these programs are largely working in isolation, solving the same problems separately, unaware of the resources and models that exist next door. The Washington Food Coalition's most meaningful role is to change that by connecting people, sharing what works, and making it easier for every program, large or small, to put better food in more bags.

A final word from the sessions:

"We are all trying to do the same thing and reach kids with food. We just need to crack through and be open to having these conversations to figure out a way." — Program participant

For questions about this report, contact Dana Cordy, RDN, Washington Food Coalition.