

Fueling Growth: The Impact of CACFP in Head Start Programs

ROUND ROCK, TX, UNITED STATES, May 15, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As Head Start celebrates its 60th anniversary, the program continues to provide crucial child care and early education for nearly 800,000 children across the United States. Beyond education, Head Start has always played a key role in ensuring children have access to nutritious meals, which is especially vital for families in high-need communities. Through participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Head Start programs serve healthy meals that support children's growth and development, especially for those who are struggling with food insecurity.



Acelero Learning Monmouth Middlesex (Acelero) exemplifies the ongoing impact of Head Start's mission. Serving over 800 children across eight Head Start centers, Acelero provides nutritious meals under the leadership of Food Service Coordinator Stephanie Manchester. Stephanie and her team are dedicated to ensuring that every child in their program receives healthy, balanced meals every day.

"My goal has always been to feed our kids well and help take care of their families too," said Manchester. "Many of our children come from low-income households and rely on us for consistent, nutritious meals. We take that responsibility seriously."

In recent years, Stephanie led efforts to incorporate more local, fresh foods into Acelero's menus. By shifting from large distributors to USDA commodities and visiting local farmers markets, Acelero now offers locally sourced produce that benefits both children and the local economy. The weekly produce pick-ups have been so well-received that the team plans to expand these offerings this summer.

Stephanie and her team also actively engage families in the meal planning process. During National CACFP Week, they hosted a taste-testing event where over 6,000 food samples were

distributed across their sites. This gave children and parents the chance to provide feedback on new foods and even inspired the inclusion of pickles and olives- suggested by Stephanie's own son, a Head Start participant.

Introducing new foods can be a challenge, but Stephanie found a creative solution by pairing unfamiliar items with familiar favorites. For example, children might enjoy chicken strips, apple slices, and milk alongside a small portion of sugar snap peas. This strategy allows kids to explore new tastes while still ensuring they receive a balanced, nutritious meal.

The team's dedication extends beyond the classroom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Acelero staff delivered thousands of meals directly to families' homes across 20 towns—ensuring no child went hungry, even while centers were closed.

"We weren't open, but we didn't stop," Stephanie said. "Our staff packed meals every day and drove from town to town, delivering them to doorsteps. That's how important this is."

As Head Start celebrates its 60th anniversary, it's clear that programs like Acelero continue to make a lasting impact on children and families. Research shows that Head Start participants have healthier eating habits, lower Body Mass Index, and better long-term health outcomes compared to non-participants. The recent memo from the Office of Head Start emphasizes that participation in CACFP ensures children receive nutrient-dense meals while reducing intake of ultra-processed foods, added sugars, and saturated fats (ACF-OHS-IM-25-03).

Head Start's participation in CACFP continues to have a positive impact on the communities it serves. With dedicated leaders like Stephanie Manchester, Head Start is not only fostering early childhood education but also ensuring that children are nourished and set up for success.

Since 1986, the [National CACFP Association](#) (NCA) has been a leading national organization offering support to thousands within the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) community. Its overarching goal is to ensure nutrition security for families by facilitating access to vital food programs.

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