



OPPORTUNITY AREA

SCHOOL BREAKFAST: ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS TAKE CENTER STAGE

Serving school breakfast — especially through alternative options such as Grab and Go and Breakfast in the Classroom — is possibly the easiest, most cost-effective and most directly helpful step schools can take to improve school and student wellness.



Healthier School Communities addresses why healthy schools matter today: what's at stake, what progress has been made, what challenges we face and what key opportunities exist. As a society we've learned a great deal over the past two decades about what's needed to create and sustain healthy schools and exactly what's at stake for students and for society if we don't. The report — and this related "opportunity area" brief on school breakfast — provides information and inspiration to spur continued commitment and momentum to create the healthy school environments that whole child success demands.

What's the Issue?

SCHOOL BREAKFAST IS IMPORTANT

Breakfast is linked with numerous health and educational benefits — including improved academic performance, school attendance and dietary intake.¹⁻⁴ Additionally, schools receive federal reimbursement for each meal served, supporting the financial bottom line.

WHY KIDS MISS BREAKFAST

Time constraints and the lack of appetite early in the morning are among cited reasons. But in many cases, it's strictly economic. More than 13 million American households with children under age 18 are food-insecure, with insufficient family funds to buy adequate food during at least some periods.⁵ Breakfast is the first meal to be sacrificed.

ENTER THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM

The School Breakfast Program (SBP) is an important solution that provides a healthy morning meal to millions of students across the country. But many millions more students are missing out. In fact, only 57.5 low-income students participate in school breakfast for every 100 who participate in school lunch.⁶

THE POWER OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL BREAKFAST MODELS

The Food Research & Action Center's annual [School Breakfast Scorecard](#) recognizes breakfast after the bell that moves breakfast out of the cafeteria as the most successful strategy for increasing school breakfast participation.⁶

What's at Stake?

NOURISHING KIDS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST

As hunger and poor nutrition persist among children and youth, the need for school nutrition continues to grow. This has been acutely evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which school nutrition programs and staff have shown amazing creativity and commitment in their efforts to address hunger in their communities. Innovation in school nutrition is evident in times of calm, too, from the expanding popularity of food trucks to comprehensive summer and after-school feeding



The Urgency Around School Breakfast

- ▶ 1 in 7 children in the U.S. is food-insecure⁷ (with even higher rates due to COVID-19).
- ▶ A school meal may be the only nutritious meal many American children eat on some days.
- ▶ As many as 18 percent of American children skip breakfast, and more than half of teenagers don't eat breakfast daily.^{8,9}

“Breakfast after the bell service models overcome timing, convenience and stigma barriers that get in the way of children participating in school breakfast and are even more impactful when combined with offering breakfast at no charge to all students.”

— Food Research & Action Center School Breakfast Scorecard 2018-2019

programs. But nothing trumps school breakfast in importance.

Notable studies continue to make the case for school breakfast. For example, a study of public elementary schools in a large U.S. urban district reported that Breakfast in the Classroom was linked with increased breakfast participation throughout the academic year as well as potentially improving overall school attendance rates.¹ Research on the association between school meal consumption and overall dietary intake frequency demonstrated that

“The emergence of new breakfast options has been great, with some districts starting as early as 6 a.m. This particularly helps homeless students, which is an issue in many districts. Other districts are letting kids order food ahead, using apps. Food trucks, kiosks and Grab and Go breakfast carts are extremely effective new options.”

— **Katie Wilson**, Executive Director, Urban School Food Alliance

eating school breakfast and school lunch every day by U.S. schoolchildren was associated with healthier dietary intakes, connecting the potential nutritional benefits of regularly consuming school meals.²

ONGOING SCHOOL BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS ISSUES

In 2020, children depend on school meals for a remarkable amount of nourishment. For 7,800 children aged 5 to 18 years participating in a 2016 study, almost one half (47%) of the day’s energy intake was provided by the two school meals. “For the major food groups,” the study found, “the contribution of school meals ranged from between 40.6% for vegetables to 77.1% for milk.”¹⁰

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is the newest of the federal provisions available for high-poverty school districts to offer breakfast (and lunch) at no cost to all students, resulting in higher participation rates. Community eligibility also reduces administrative burdens on school districts in terms of paperwork required from families and schools. In the 2018-2019 school year, over 28,600 schools in nearly 4,700 school districts participated in CEP, representing nearly half of all eligible schools nationwide. The program is expected to grow as more school districts understand the program and its benefits.⁶

Today, universal free access to school breakfast is available in many public schools in the U.S., including large urban schools, although participation rates among low-income students are more than one-third lower than what they are at lunch. One qualitative study looked at the discrepancy between access and participation in school breakfast in a low-income, urban school district. It concluded that “future research aiming to improve participation in

the breakfast program should examine the impact of student involvement in school menu planning and environmental modifications to reduce the social stigma associated with the program.”¹¹

Another study found that breakfast skipping and selection of foods of low nutritional quality in the morning are common, regardless of household food security status. It concluded, “Additional novel implementation of the SBP and addressing students’ breakfast preferences may be necessary to further reduce barriers to students obtaining a free, healthful breakfast.”¹²

Food waste tied to school breakfast, as well as other school feeding, is a related issue of growing concern. A study of waste in a universal-free-breakfast district revealed that the reasons were food-related (palatability and accessibility), child-related (taste preferences and satiation) and program-related (mealtime duration, food-service policies and coordination). Meat and fruit were singled out as foods especially susceptible to waste.¹³

What’s Needed?

SCHOOL BREAKFAST: SMALL STEP, BIG IMPACT

There is little debate that the School Breakfast Program has positively influenced food-insecurity outcomes¹⁴ and that children who eat school breakfast demonstrate improved concentration, alertness, comprehension, memory and learning and show improved attendance, behavior and scores on standardized achievement test scores.³

Meanwhile, researchers have found that students who eat breakfast regularly reported higher school connectedness, which is associated with improved social-emotional well-being and learning. “Encouraging youth to eat breakfast regularly,” they contend, “may help improve school connectedness and academic performance.”⁴

Encouragingly, school district nutrition departments continue to innovate ways to make school meals more accessible and interesting, developing creative ways to provide dairy, fruits and vegetables and whole grains. But barriers remain: administrators cite busing schedules, time constraints and a lack of flexibility within the school schedule to accommodate breakfast as the primary structural barriers to participation in the School Breakfast Program.¹⁵

“Breakfast after the bell service models overcome timing, convenience and stigma barriers that get in the way of children participating in school breakfast and are even more impactful when combined with offering breakfast at no charge to all students.”

— Food Research & Action Center School Breakfast Scorecard 2018-2019

What We Can Do

► The annual School Breakfast Scorecard from the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) recognizes breakfast after the bell that moves breakfast out of the cafeteria as the most successful strategy for increasing school breakfast participation.⁶ Grab and Go breakfasts — in which students pick up a nutritious morning meal from mobile carts strategically placed in high-traffic areas in school buildings or on campus — are especially easy and effective, allowing students to eat on the way to class, during class or in designated areas.



► Grab and Go breakfast overcomes hurdles like timing, inconvenience and stigma of participation associated with traditional breakfast in the cafeteria. In fact, research has demonstrated that when breakfast is available to students (adolescents in particular) in an unrestricted hallway, more students receiving free and reduced-priced meals choose to participate.¹⁶ And Grab and Go breakfast meets the government school meal requirements developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



“If we address opportunity gaps students face — food insecurity being a huge one — then their readiness to learn is dramatically increased. Access to food is a right that students possess.”

— Alberto Carvalho, Superintendent, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Florida)

RESOURCES

Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom

implementation tools for alternative breakfast, <https://breakfastintheclassroom.org/implementation/>

Food Research & Action Center school breakfast reports and briefs, www.frac.org

USDA Food and Nutrition Service “Energize Your Day with School Breakfast” toolkit, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/toolkit>

AASA reports on *Feeding Hungry Minds: Stories from the Field*, and *Health and Hunger Through the Lens of Race, Ethnicity and Culture* and *Leaders Matter: Superintendent Leadership for School Breakfast*

GENYOUTH’s “A Breakfast Solution that Works” with information and case studies on the turnkey Grab and Go Breakfast System, www.genyouthnow.org

ENDNOTES

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GENYOUTH empowers students to create a healthier future for themselves and their peers by convening a network of private and public partners to raise funds for youth wellness initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools and communities. We believe that all students are change-agents who deserve the opportunity to identify and lead innovative solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity and success. www.genyouthnow.org



AASA, the School Superintendents Association, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA members range from chief executive officers, superintendents and senior-level school administrators to cabinet members, professors and aspiring school system leaders. AASA members advance the goals of public education and champion children's causes in their districts and nationwide. As school system leaders, AASA members set the pace for academic achievement. They help shape policy, oversee its implementation and represent school districts to the public at large. www.aasa.org



National Dairy Council (NDC) is the nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing to life the dairy community's shared vision of a healthy, happy, sustainable world — with science as the foundation. NDC provides science-based nutrition information to, and in collaboration with, a variety of stakeholders committed to fostering a healthier nation, including health and wellness professionals, educators, school nutrition directors, academia, industry, consumers and media. NDC has taken a leadership role in promoting child health and wellness through programs such as Fuel Up to Play 60. Developed by NDC and the National Football League (NFL), Fuel Up to Play 60 encourages youth to consume nutrient-rich foods and achieve at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. www.USDairy.com



The Urban School Food Alliance consists of 12 of the nation's largest school districts, which represent 3,600,000 students, serving 635 million meals annually. School districts include: New York City Public Schools; Dallas Independent School District; Baltimore City Public Schools; Chicago Public Schools; Orange County Public Schools (Fla.); Boston Public Schools; Los Angeles Unified School District; Broward County Schools (Fla.); Palm Beach County (Fla.); Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Fla.); The School District of Philadelphia; and DeKalb County School District (Ga.). These districts work together to leverage their collective voice to transform school meals and make sure all students have access to high-quality, healthy meals. www.urbanschoolfoodalliance.org

For a copy of the complete report, *Healthier School Communities: What's at Stake Now and What We Can Do About It*, visit www.genyouthnow.org.

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