

School Breakfast Supports Improved Student Outcomes, Behavior and Health



Research makes a solid case for students to eat breakfast, whether at home or at school. The study, “Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis,”¹ indicates that students who eat breakfast achieve an average 17.5% higher scores on standardized math tests and attend 1.5 more days of school. Students who attend school regularly are 20% more likely to graduate from high school. High school graduates make greater than \$10,000 more than kids who don’t graduate.

In its research brief, “The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior,” the Food Research and Action Council (FRAC) found that “School breakfast participation, especially breakfast offered at no cost to all students, positively impacts children’s mental health, including reductions in hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression.” The brief goes on to say, “Providing students with breakfast in the classroom is associated with fewer disciplinary office referrals, lower tardy rates, and improved attendance rates.”²

The benefits also extend to students’ overall health. In a separate research brief, “Breakfast for Health,” FRAC found that “School breakfast participants are more likely to consume diets that are adequate or exceed standards for important vitamins and minerals (e.g., vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, phosphorous)... Eating breakfast regularly has been linked with greater intake of fiber, calcium, iron, vitamin C, and other vitamins and minerals, and lower intake of fat, cholesterol, and sodium.”³

By moving from cafeteria-served breakfast to breakfast-in-the-classroom (BIC), districts in Maryland reported a four-year drop in chronic absenteeism by as much as 7.2 percent and their students were up to 12.5% more likely to achieve proficiency on standardized math tests.⁴

Despite these demonstrated benefits, 3 of 4 teachers reported having students who regularly come to school hungry.⁵

Not only is school breakfast great for kids, it’s also inexpensive and convenient for parents. Because the government subsidizes a portion of school meals and districts purchase large quantities of food at discounted prices, schools can serve the same food kids may eat at home for less cost. Better yet, the nutritional content of school breakfasts often surpasses breakfasts eaten at home. Parents can ensure their kids are well-nourished while saving themselves money on groceries and time and clean-up work in their morning routine simply by delegating breakfast to their child’s school.

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- Food Research and Action Council

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Working to Increase School Breakfast Program Participation

Every school day, more than 90,000 schools/institutions participating in the USDA’s School Breakfast Program provide a nutritious, balanced breakfast to 14.71 million kids – 2.42 billion breakfasts annually.⁶ School breakfasts deliver the nutrition students need to concentrate on their studies and fuel them until lunchtime.

While the School Breakfast Program is widely available, student participation lags significantly behind the National School Lunch Program, which serves 4.9 billion meals annually. Among low-income students, 22 million eat school lunch whereas about 12 million eat school breakfast.⁷

Many districts have found that increasing student breakfast participation is a relatively easy way to increase foodservice revenues. The 2019-2020 federal reimbursement rate for school breakfast is as high as \$2.20 in “severe need” schools. With proper planning and smart purchasing, districts can source breakfast for much less, with the difference helping fund other foodservice operational costs.

NutriStudents K-12 works with each of our client districts and schools to raise breakfast participation quickly. By providing operational, marketing and menu creation support, our goal is to raise each school’s breakfast participation to at least 50 percent in its first year with NutriStudents K-12 and 80 percent in the second. Our proprietary Breakfast Menu Builder simplifies the task of creating, complying and reporting on school breakfast programs. In a “severe need” school/district of 1,000 students, increasing participation just 10 percent would yield \$39,600 in additional revenues in one school year (assuming 180 school days).

1,000 student district/building (Assuming 180 days @\$2.20/breakfast)			
Participation rate	Revenue	Total annual revenue increase	\$39,600
40% participation	\$158,400	Annual revenue increase	
50% participation	\$198,000	per student/year:	\$396

With academic, behavioral and health outcomes supported by well-nourished students, districts will be well served by maximizing breakfast participation.

There are several factors that tend to contribute to low participation in school breakfast: Students may eat prior to coming to school; they arrive at school after breakfast service has concluded; and some forgo breakfast because they perceive school breakfast to be only for low-income students and they don’t want to be labeled as such. As you embark to increase the number of students eating breakfast, consider surveying students, parents and staff to learn what obstacles your district may be facing.

Identify your School Breakfast Program Service Style

Thirty years ago, breakfast was only available in the cafeteria. Today, schools offer grab-and-go options or breakfast-in-the-classroom in lieu of or in addition to cafeteria-served breakfast. “Breakfast After the Bell,” which provides students breakfast in the classroom, or a second-chance cafeteria served or grab-and-go meal after the first period, has shown to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is advancing legislation requiring public schools with 60 percent or more of students currently eligible for free or reduced-price meals to move to breakfast-after-the-bell service. The move could provide up to \$30 million statewide to school districts that increase participation rates to 80 percent and more.⁸

Changing the way your district serves breakfast may yield significant improvement to your participation levels.

There are pros and cons to each service style/location:

- **Cafeteria service** allows schools to offer a wider variety of foods, including heated options such as burritos and breakfast sandwiches. Cafeteria service is generally only offered prior to the bell and requires more foodservice staff to prepare, serve and clean up. Students who eat breakfast in the cafeteria may be viewed by their peers as being low income.
- **Grab-and-go** (before and after the bell) service requires movable breakfast carts and/or display racks that can be stocked and deployed at optimal points within the school to attract students on the way to class. Offerings are generally limited to fruits and packaged foods (yogurt, cereal bars, etc.) that can be easily eaten on the go. Grab-and-go breakfast is popular with middle and high school students and avoids the low-income stigma association with cafeteria-served breakfast.
- **Breakfast-in-the-classroom (BIC)**, offered after the bell, works best for elementary schools that qualify for the Community Eligibility Provision, which provides free meals to all students without family applications and verification of income. A plastic bus tub can be used to organize and deliver the day's offerings to each classroom. Students grab their breakfast as they come into class and eat as the teacher shares morning announcements.

The school in this [video](#) used insulated cooler bags to organize the daily offerings for each classroom. The bags were placed into wagons that students pulled from the kitchen to classrooms.

Some schools shy away from BIC service for concerns it will burden classroom teachers and create mess throughout the building. This has been unfounded by many schools. In fact, the National Education Association Foundation has backed BIC with its [BIC toolkit](#) and [teacher handbook](#). Your teachers and staff may be reluctant at first. Once they experience the difference in students' behavior and academic performance, however, they will have a change of heart. Check out the [Breakfast-in-the-Classroom Resources](#) from the School Nutrition Foundation to learn how best to overcome challenges and successfully implement BIC.

Empower Your Foodservice Director

Districts' foodservice directors are in touch with students and what foods are popular with them. They also are familiar with the USDA's nutritional guidelines for the School Breakfast Program. These guidelines have been shown to "improve nutrition-related outcomes among students, especially in terms of improving fruit and vegetable selection and consumption."⁹

With a willing attitude and a supportive team, directors can map the best strategy for moving to breakfast after the bell, whether in the classroom or grab-and-go. As with every change, it will take time for staff and students to get into a new rhythm and work through small hurdles. The payoff in improved academic outcomes, better behaved students and increased revenues will be worth the efforts.

Funding Your Breakfast

There may be upfront costs, such as new display racks or equipment to accommodate breakfast in the classroom, associated with changing the service style of a breakfast program. [Action for Healthy Kids](#), [Fuel Up to Play 60](#), [Food Research and Action Council](#) and [Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom](#) offer grants to help offset such costs.

Promote Your Program

One of the USDA requirements for the School Breakfast Program is that each participating school/district/institution must promote the availability of breakfast. This could be as simple as posting notice on the district's website. A more proactive approach to marketing, however, will yield greater gains in participation. Frequent district-wide communications and teachers' emails to parents can be more effective at reaching parents. There are many resources readily available from the [Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom](#), [USDA Team Nutrition](#) and others that your district can use. NutriStudents K-12 offers [this issue of Cafeteria Connection](#), our newsletter for schools to send to parents, and [this school breakfast video](#) to promote the benefits of school breakfast.

NutriStudents K-12 can also help bolster districts' School Breakfast Program participation and simplify administration of it with our streamlined breakfast market basket, automated Breakfast Menu Builder that takes the work out of menu creation and reporting, and expertise on all facets of school nutrition. **[Schedule a demonstration today.](#)**

Endnotes

- 1 Share Our Strength and Deloitte. 2015. "Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis."
- 2 Food Research & Action Center. 2018. "The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior." Available at: <http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfast-for-behavior.pdf>. Accessed on January 21, 2020.
- 3 Food Research & Action Center. 2016. "Breakfast for Health." Available at: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforhealth-1.pdf>. Accessed on January 21, 2020.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Share Our Strength Center for Best Practices, August 21, 2015. "No Kid Hungry Starts with Breakfast." Available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource-center/download?id=0B2DIBiC2i6E-HZWFzbmg2Q2RRNFU> Accessed on January 21, 2020.
- 6 School Nutrition Association, "School Meals and Trends Stats" webpage: <https://schoolnutrition.org/AboutSchoolMeals/SchoolMealTrendsStats/> Accessed on January 20, 2020.
- 7 Share Our Strength Center for Best Practices. August 21, 2015. "No Kid Hungry Starts with Breakfast." Available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource-center/download?id=0B2DIBiC2i6E-HZWFzbmg2Q2RRNFU> Accessed on January 21, 2020.
- 8 WBZ-TV website. January 18, 2020. "Bill Aims to Have More Students Eating School Breakfasts." <https://boston.cbslocal.com/2020/01/18/bill-aim-more-students-eating-school-breakfasts-massachusetts/> Accessed on January 20, 2020.
- 9 Food Research & Action Center. 2016. "Breakfast for Health." Available at: <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforhealth-1.pdf>. Accessed on January 21, 2020.