

# FRAC Child Nutrition Reauthorization ISSUE BRIEF

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- While 10.8 million low-income children benefit from school breakfast, too many millions of other children miss out. Just over half of the low-income children who eat lunch at school also participate in breakfast.
- The scheduled 2015 Child Nutrition Reauthorization will provide the opportunity to remove barriers to participation and make program improvements so that more low-income children participate.
- The reauthorization also will mean that the quality of school breakfast can be further improved
- This issue brief suggests key investments needed in the School Breakfast Program to boost participation and nutrition.

FRAC  
 Campaign to End  
 Childhood Hunger  
 1200 18th St., NW  
 Suite 400  
 Washington, DC 20036

THIS IS THE FIRST IN  
 A SERIES OF FRAC  
 ISSUE BRIEFS FRAMING  
 IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR  
 THE 2015  
 REAUTHORIZATION.

## School Breakfast: Reaching More Children, Making Breakfast Better

The School Breakfast Program provides millions of low-income children a much needed nutritious meal so they start the school day ready to learn.<sup>1</sup> When children eat breakfast at school, it reduces hunger, tardiness and nurse visits, and improves nutrition and achievement. Children's test scores, attentiveness, attendance, and behavior all have been shown to improve as a result of participating in school breakfast.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the positive outcomes, school breakfast participation remains too low. Nationally, just over half of the low-income children who eat lunch at school also eat breakfast.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of reasons why school breakfast misses so many children. The time and place of meal service (often the cafeteria before class starts—and before children arrive at school) and the payment system (based on family income, creating stigma) can reduce participation, especially among low-income children and middle and high school students. Bus schedules, parents' work schedules, children's desire to socialize on the playground, the modest copayment for reduced-price meals, and even slowdowns in lines at school security all contribute to low participation.

Increasing participation and improving nutrition by creating strong school breakfast programs can help transform schools and support the entire school community – students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides the opportunity to remove barriers to participation and make program improvements so that more low-income children participate and nutrition and health are improved.

### The reauthorization should:

- Increase the number of low-income children who are directly certified for free school meals by virtue of their participation in other means-tested programs. This cross-certification would do away with unnecessary applications and reduce burdens on schools and parents.
- Eliminate the reduced-price copayment of 30 cents for breakfast, thereby removing a significant financial barrier for low-income families.
- Require Title I Schools to offer the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs to ensure that their low-income students have access to nutritious school meals and maximize federal education dollars targeted to high poverty schools.
- Authorize funding for grants to school districts to purchase much-needed kitchen equipment, which would support ongoing efforts to improve nutrition quality.
- Provide more adequate school breakfast funding to high-poverty schools by increasing the "severe need" reimbursement they receive for each breakfast served to a low-income student and by changing the threshold required for schools to qualify for "severe need" funding.
- Allow school districts to claim and receive reimbursements retroactively for meals served to free and reduced-price eligible children starting with the first day of the school year, thereby reducing administrative work for school districts and easing financial hardship on low-income families.

# Benefits of a Strong School Breakfast Program

The School Breakfast Program is the epitome of good public policy. It not only reduces hunger, but it has a range of other positive outcomes that advance key national priorities. An extensive body of research documents the positive impact of the program on student achievement, health and well-being.

## Eating School Breakfast Helps Struggling Families

School breakfast is a critical support to struggling families trying to stretch limited resources. It provides children a significant portion of the nutrition their bodies and brains need each school day and reduces strain on tight family food budgets. In Gallup surveys taken between 2008 and 2012, 23.5 percent of households with children responded that there were times in the past year when they did not have enough money to buy food that they needed.<sup>4</sup> School breakfast also is a crucial support to low-income working families where parents have non-traditional work hours or long early morning commutes on top of long work hours.

## Eating School Breakfast Improves Academic Performance

Making sure every child has eaten a healthy breakfast is an important but often overlooked tool to boost academic performance. Children who skip breakfast are less able to master the tasks necessary to do well in school.<sup>5</sup> They have more difficulty distinguishing among similar images, show increased errors, and have slower memory recall.<sup>6</sup> Children who live in families that experience hunger have lower math scores and an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, and receive more special education services.<sup>7</sup> Children who eat breakfast at school – closer to class and test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.

## Eating School Breakfast Reduces Behavioral Problems

Every parent knows that hungry children often are cranky and are more likely to misbehave. Teenagers experiencing hunger are more likely to be suspended from school, and to have difficulty getting along with other children and establishing friendships.<sup>9</sup> Students who participate in school breakfast exhibit decreased behavioral and psychological problems and have lower rates of absence and tardiness.<sup>10,11</sup> Providing students with breakfast in the classroom is associated with fewer disciplinary office referrals.

## Eating School Breakfast Improves Children's Diets

Breakfasts served as part of the School Breakfast Program provide key nutrients children need every day—and updated nutrition requirements established under the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 have amplified these benefits. All meals meet nutrition guidelines that limit sodium and saturated fats and eliminate trans fats. Children who participate in school breakfast are more likely to consume diets that are adequate or exceed standards for important vitamins and minerals than those who do not eat school breakfast or who have breakfast at home.<sup>13</sup>

## Eating School Breakfast Can Help Reduce Obesity

Obesity translates into increased risks of premature death and an overall lower quality of life. Children and adolescents who eat breakfast (and school breakfast) are significantly less likely to be overweight, while skipping breakfast is associated with a higher risk of obesity.<sup>14,15</sup> School breakfast also helps build lifelong healthy eating habits.

# Recommendations for Improvement

More than one in five children lives in a household that struggles against hunger.<sup>16</sup> For these children a filling, nutritious meal every morning is often beyond their parents' ability to provide. Even the 30 cent copayment required for reduced-price breakfast can be a significant hurdle for struggling families. For millions of other children, eating breakfast is not necessarily a matter of money, but of time. As the demands on working parents have grown, and parents face longer commutes to distant jobs or jobs with non-traditional work hours, many are not able to provide breakfast before school to their children each morning. For those children, if they do not eat breakfast at school, it is likely that they won't eat breakfast at all. As a result, they do not start the school day ready to learn.

Child Nutrition Reauthorization must make it possible for more schools to offer breakfast, for schools to offer more ambitious and healthier breakfast programs, and for more children to participate. The following changes in Child Nutrition Reauthorization would strengthen school breakfast:

Increase the number of low-income children who are directly certified for free school meals by virtue of their participation in other means-tested programs.

Students who live in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), as well as children who are migrant or homeless, in foster care, or enrolled in Head Start are considered "categorically eligible" for free school meals and can be certified without submitting an application. In practice, however, the picture is more complicated. Schools districts are required only to directly certify children in households participating in SNAP. They do that by matching SNAP data with school enrollment lists either at the state or school district-level. (In the most recent data, only half of states are meeting the interim federal direct certification standard of 90 percent.) States are not required to—but have the option to—directly certify children in households receiving TANF and FDPIR. Certification without application of other categorically eligible students (those who are homeless, migrant, in Head Start or foster care) is inconsistent and varies from district to district and state to state.

School districts should be required to directly certify all categorically eligible children. To most effectively certify such children without an application, states will need to incorporate TANF and FDPIR data into their current data matching systems. School districts also must be required to formalize coordination with homeless liaisons, migrant education coordinators, Head Start program coordinators, and local foster care agencies.

Additional low-income students can be certified for free school meals without submitting an application by adding to the list of groups that are categorically eligible for free school meals. USDA is currently conducting a pilot program in several states to directly certify children enrolled in Medicaid, which if successful, should be extended nationwide. In addition, children in military households that receive the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance should be categorically eligible for free meals and be directly certified.

Eliminating unnecessary paperwork for families and schools: removes a significant barrier to participation; results in significant administrative savings for schools (freeing up money to improve the quality of meals); and improves program integrity by reducing the number of applications schools must collect and process. Increasing the number of children certified without an application also increases the number of schools and districts that can participate in the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows high poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all children. And, offering breakfast free of charge to all students streamlines implementation of the most successful alternative service models like "breakfast in the classroom," through which children eat breakfast in the classroom after the start of the school day.

## Free and Reduced-Price Breakfast: How it Works

Any public school, nonprofit private school or residential child care institution can participate in the federally-funded School Breakfast Program. The program is administered at the national level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and at the state level typically through the state department of education.

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals. Children from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level qualify for reduced-price meals and can be charged no more than 30 cents per breakfast. Children from families with incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty level pay charges (referred to as “paid meals”) which are set by the school, but schools receive a small federal reimbursement for such children.

The amount that the federal government reimburses a school for a child’s breakfast depends on whether the student qualifies for free, reduced-price, or paid meals. For the 2013-2014 school year, schools receive \$1.58 per free breakfast, \$1.28 per reduced-price breakfast, and \$0.28 per paid breakfast. “Severe need” schools qualify for an additional 31 cents for each free or reduced-price breakfast served. Schools are considered severe need if at least 40 percent of the lunches served during the second preceding school year were free or reduced-price.

A growing number of schools and districts are offering “universal” free breakfast to all students. Schools that serve high percentages of low-income children are often able to offer breakfast at no charge and still break even, especially when combined with alternative service models that allow students to eat in the classroom after the start of the school day.

### Eliminate the reduced-price copayment of 30 cents for breakfast, thereby removing a significant financial barrier for low-income families.

More and more families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line struggle to put enough food on the table, and often the 30 cent copayment for school breakfast presents a significant barrier. Participation rates among students certified for reduced-price school meals traditionally have lagged substantially that of students certified for free meals primarily due to the burden that even a modest copayment can be for low-income families, especially those with more than one school-age child. Eliminating the reduced-price copayment for breakfast would remove this financial barrier, increase participation among these children, and help low-income families stretch limited budgets. Seven states already provide state funding to eliminate the reduced-price copayment for breakfast resulting in increased access and participation among reduced-price eligible children. The benefits of school breakfast in improving nutrition, health and school achievement are so powerful that it is self-defeating to require a copayment when so many parents cannot afford it.

### Require Title I schools to offer the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.

Title I schools serve a high percentage of low-income students and should provide them access to healthy meals at school. The large majority of Title I schools offer breakfast as well as lunch, but all Title I schools—with federal funding aimed at boosting learning among low-income children—should serve both meals. (A number of states have enacted legislation requiring schools with certain levels of low-income children to offer school breakfast and/or lunch. However, no national requirement exists.) This principle would maximize the educational and health impact of federal funding.

## Authorize funding for grants to school districts to purchase much-needed kitchen equipment.

Many school districts have been working diligently to implement the new nutrition standards for both breakfast and lunch. Many schools, however, have little kitchen equipment—or outdated equipment—and cannot afford to upgrade their kitchens. Providing school districts with grant funding to purchase new kitchen equipment supports efforts to improve the nutrition quality of school meals and may also make it easier to increase participation (reducing waits and lines at lunch and breakfast, and easing a path to breakfast in the classroom). Funding should be targeted to high-poverty schools. The impact of such funding also should be magnified by prioritizing grants to schools that offer both the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, with a focus on schools that serve breakfast in the classroom or another alternative breakfast model and that operate the Summer Food Service Program and the Afterschool Meal Program. Prioritizing schools offering meals through multiple child nutrition programs maximizes the effect of this federal investment.

## Family Breakfast is Uncommon in Most Homes

Data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation show that most American families of school-age children do not eat breakfast together every day. Only 38 percent of parents of children ages 6 to 11 report eating breakfast each day with their children. On average, only 25 percent of parents of middle and high school-age students report eating breakfast daily with their children. More than twice as many parents report eating dinner with their children each day. These percentages are similar across income levels, race, areas of the country, and community type (urban, suburban or rural).

U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, A Child's Day: 2009 (Selected Indicators of Child Well-Being) (2008 SIPP Panel, Wave 4).

## Provide more adequate school breakfast funding to high-poverty schools by increasing the “severe need” reimbursement they receive for each breakfast served to a low-income student and by changing the threshold required for schools to qualify for “severe need” funding.

The important increase in school breakfast nutrition standards created by 2010 legislation has not been, unlike the school lunch standards, accompanied by a reimbursement increase. Targeting an increase on schools with many low-income children would be an economical way of boosting nutrition while encouraging schools to grow participation. “Severe need” schools (in which 40 percent or more of the lunches served in the second preceding school year were free or reduced-price), have long received an additional reimbursement, adjusted annually based on the Consumer Price Index, per free or reduced-price breakfast served. During the 2013-2014 school year, such schools will receive an additional 31 cents. Increasing the severe need reimbursement by 10 cents would provide increased targeted support for schools serving high concentrations of low-income students and help high poverty schools to implement fully and effectively the new nutrition requirements for the School Breakfast Program. In addition, lowering the threshold to qualify for severe need funding to 30 percent would allow more schools with large numbers of low-income students access to this badly-needed funding to support nutrition quality improvements and expand participation.

Allow school districts to claim and receive reimbursements retroactively for meals served to free and reduced-price eligible children starting with the first day of the school year.

In part because of shortfalls in direct certification discussed above, not all low-income children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals at the start of the school year. Instead, families can submit applications—and schools can certify groups of categorically eligible children without an application—at any point during the school year. Indeed, school districts are required to perform data matches to directly certify children in SNAP households at least three times throughout the school year.

Eligible low-income children who are not certified for free or reduced-price school meals at the start of the school year can accrue school meal fees that their struggling families are unable to pay and that place an undue burden on the school's nutrition programs. Schools should be allowed to adjust school meal claims retroactively in order to claim the full federal reimbursement for students who are certified as eligible for free or reduced-price school meals at any point during the school year. This would enable schools to claim meals served to low-income children prior to certification and forgive families of any debt accrued. This would also benefit students newly entering a school district or newly eligible for free or reduced-price school meals who are not provided the 30 day carry over eligibility that returning students are afforded at the start of the school year.

## References

1. Food Research and Action Center. School Breakfast Scorecard School Year 2012-2013 (2014, January). Available at [http://www.frac.org/pdf/School\\_Breakfast\\_Scorecard\\_SY\\_2012\\_2013.pdf](http://www.frac.org/pdf/School_Breakfast_Scorecard_SY_2012_2013.pdf)
2. Food Research and Action Center. Breakfast for Learning. Available at [www.frac.org/pdf/breakfastforlearning.PDF](http://www.frac.org/pdf/breakfastforlearning.PDF).
3. FRAC, Scorecard School Year 2012-2013.
4. Food Research and Action Center. Food Hardship 2008-2012: Geography and Household Composition (2013, September). Available at [http://frac.org/pdf/food\\_hardship\\_geography\\_household\\_composition\\_2008-2012.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/food_hardship_geography_household_composition_2008-2012.pdf)
5. Pivik, RT, Tennal, KB, Chapman, SD, Gu, Y. Eating breakfast enhances the efficiency of neural networks engaged during mental arithmetic in school-aged children. *Physiology & Behavior*, June 2012; Vol. 106, Issue 4, pp 548-555.
6. Wesnes KA, Pincock C, Richardson D, Helm G, Hails S. "Breakfast reduces declines in attention and memory over the morning in schoolchildren." *Appetite* 2003;41(3):329-31.
7. Murphy JM. "Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review." *Journal of Current Nutrition and Food Science*, 2007; 3(1): 3-36.
8. Vaisman N, Voet H, Akivis A, Vakil E. "Effects of Breakfast Timing on the Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students." *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 1996 150:1089-1092.
9. Alaimo K, Olson CM, Frongillo EA Jr. "Food Insecurity and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic and Psychosocial Development." *Pediatrics* 2001; 108(1):44-53.
10. Murphy JM, Pagano ME, Patton K, Hall S, Marinaccio J, Kleinman R. "The Boston Public Schools Universal Breakfast Program; Final Evaluation Report." Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, 2000.
11. Murphy JM et. al. "Maryland Meals for Achievement Year III Final Report." Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, 2001.
12. Murphy JM, Drake JE, Weineke KM. "Academics & Breakfast Connection Pilot: Final Report on New York's Classroom Breakfast Project." Nutrition Consortium of New York State. Albany, New York. July 2005.
13. Clark, MA, Fox, MK. Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 2009; 109(2 Supplement 1), S44-56.
14. Millimet, DL, Tchernis, R, Husain, M. School nutrition programs and the incidence of childhood obesity. *Journal of Human Resources*, 2009; 45(3), 640-654.
15. Jones SJ, Jahns L, Laraia BA, Haughton B. "Lower Risk of Overweight in School-aged Food Insecure Girls Who Participate in Food Assistance: Results from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 2003; 157:780-84.
16. Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Mark Nord, and Anita Singh. Household Food Security in the
17. United States in 2012, ERR-155, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service,
18. September 2013. Available at [www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx)