



Building a Better Breakfast Program: A Guide for Secondary School Principals

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About FRAC

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) improves the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. For more information about FRAC, or to [sign up](#) for FRAC's e-newsletters, go to frac.org.

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Introduction

The School Breakfast Program plays an important role in supporting academic achievement and student health.¹ Students who participate in school breakfast have demonstrated improved attendance, behavior, and academic performance. There has also been a decrease in tardiness.² School breakfast is a critical support for struggling families trying to stretch limited resources at home. Despite its many benefits, participation in school breakfast lags behind school lunch; secondary schools often have lower breakfast participation rates than elementary schools. This means that many children and adolescents are missing out on a healthy start to their school day.

Recognizing the connections between school breakfast and student success, a growing number of secondary school principals have taken the initiative to implement proven strategies to increase breakfast participation. This includes moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and making it part of the regular school day so that more students can access such an important meal. Through breakfast after the bell programs, such as breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” and second chance breakfast, secondary school principals can help ensure that more students start the day with a healthy school meal.

Building a Better Breakfast Program: A Guide for Secondary School Principals is the culmination of a series of resources produced by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), in cooperation with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) to help increase school breakfast participation in secondary schools. This resource provides strategies and best practices for the successful implementation



of breakfast after the bell programs that were based on conversations with principals across the country. FRAC and NASSP partnered to release two other key resources, [*School Breakfast After the Bell: Equipping Students for Academic Success*](#), which surveyed 105 secondary school principals implementing breakfast after the bell programs about their experiences, and the [*Secondary School Principals Breakfast After the Bell Toolkit*](#), which includes tips for launching a successful breakfast after the bell program, sample outreach materials, and event planning resources to help secondary school principals grow and maintain support for their school breakfast programs.

This guide is broken down into three parts:

- **What is Breakfast After the Bell?;**
- **Strategies for Success; AND**
- **Spotlight: Examples of Successful Breakfast After the Bell Programs at Secondary Schools.**

¹ Food Research & Action Center. (2016). *Breakfast for Health*. Available at: <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/breakfast-for-health>. Accessed on March 5, 2021.

² Food Research & Action Center. (2016). *Breakfast for Learning*. Available at: <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/breakfast-for-learning>. Accessed on March 5, 2021.

What is Breakfast After the Bell?

Breakfast after the bell service models overcome timing, convenience, and stigma barriers that get in the way of children participating in school breakfast, and have an even greater impact when they are combined with offering breakfast at no charge to all students. Schools have three options when offering breakfast after the bell.

- **Breakfast in the Classroom:** Breakfasts are delivered directly to classrooms using temperature-controlled and portable bags, coolers, and warmers.

- **“Grab and Go” Breakfast:** Prepackaged breakfasts are distributed to students in high-traffic areas throughout the school. Students can quickly grab the components of their breakfast from carts or kiosks in the hallway or the cafeteria line to eat in their classroom or in common areas.

- **Second Chance Breakfast:** During an extended break, students are offered a second chance to eat breakfast after homeroom or first period. Students may grab their breakfast from a kiosk in the hallway, the cafeteria, or another designated location.

Offering Free Breakfast to All

Combining breakfast after the bell with offering breakfast at no charge to all students helps further increase participation in school breakfast. School breakfast is often viewed as a program for low-income kids, causing many low-income children to opt out of the program. As children move to middle and high school, that stigma can intensify and lead even more children to opt out of school breakfast, but offering it at no charge to all students eliminates the stigma frequently associated with participation. It also eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families are struggling, but are not eligible for free school meals, to participate.

Many schools are able to offer free breakfast to all students if 70 percent or more of their students are certified for free or reduced-price meals. If breakfast is not already being offered at no charge to all students, the district’s school nutrition director can provide guidance on whether or not it is an option for a school. Schools can offer free breakfast to all students through three options.

- **Community Eligibility Provision:** Community eligibility schools are high-poverty schools that

offer free breakfast and lunch to all students and do not have to collect, process, or verify school meals applications, or keep track of meals by fee category, resulting in significant administrative savings and increased participation.

- **Provision 2:** Schools using Provision 2 (referring to a provision of the National School Lunch Act) do not need to collect, process, or verify school meals applications or keep track of meals by fee category for at least three out of every four years. Schools collect school meals applications and count and claim meals by fee category during year one of the multiyear cycle, called the “base year.” Those data then determine the federal reimbursement and are used for future years in the cycle. Provision 2 schools have the option to serve only breakfast or lunch, or both breakfast and lunch, to all students at no charge, and use economies of scale from increased participation and significant administrative savings to offset the cost of offering free meals to all students.

- **Nonpricing:** No fees are collected from students while schools continue to receive federal reimbursements for the breakfasts served under the three-tier federal fee categories (free, reduced-price,

Strategies for Success

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) interviewed several secondary school principals to take a deeper look at their experiences with starting a breakfast after the bell program. The principals shared challenges and successes, and the reasons why moving toward breakfast after the bell was so important for their students. These conversations highlighted the following five strategies for ensuring that implementing breakfast after the bell service models would be successful.

1. Use data and narratives to make a compelling case.

Principals consistently reported that the first step to implementing a breakfast after the bell program starts with getting everyone on board. To do that, principals would need to drive home the reasons why their school would need to adopt breakfast after the bell. Secondary school principals introduced the concept of breakfast after the bell by making a compelling case around why school breakfast is so important for older students, as they need a nutritious breakfast to carry them through a long day of classes followed by afterschool activities. Some principals shared data that showed school breakfast participation leads to reduced food insecurity, better test scores, improved student health, and fewer distractions in the classroom throughout the morning. The principals explained to school staff how barriers, such as hectic morning schedules, late arrivals, and social stigma, prevent secondary school students from ultimately accessing this critical morning meal. As a solution, principals proposed moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and making it part of the regular school day.

Resources:

- FRAC’s research briefs provide important findings from studies on school breakfast: [Breakfast for Learning](#); [Breakfast for Health](#); [The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior](#); and [School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning](#).
- [PowerPoint template](#) from the [Secondary School Principals Breakfast After the Bell Toolkit](#).

2. Identify school breakfast allies to cultivate overall staff buy-in.

It is imperative to identify partners within the school that support trying new initiatives, like breakfast after the bell, and understand the motivation behind increasing access to breakfast. Secondary school principals have built teams of “breakfast champions” that vary from administrative staff to teachers, nurses, custodians, school business officials, guidance counselors, and social workers. Peer-to-peer conversations can be incredibly effective in generating broader support, which is why principals have enlisted those they could count on to reach out to hesitant staff about the benefits of breakfast after the bell.

Resources:

- [Check out the Breakfast for Learning Education Alliance](#) to learn about the different educational groups, like [school social workers](#) and [school nurses](#), who have been working in partnership with secondary school principals to increase breakfast participation.

3. Establish a clear plan that includes logistics for the entire project and for those who will be involved in executing it.

A school’s breakfast program involves many different stakeholders — administrators, food service staff, teachers, custodians, office staff, and paraprofessionals — and it may be the first time that everyone is coming together to work on a project. To develop an effective and sustainable breakfast after the bell program, careful planning and stakeholder engagement is required from the beginning. Cohesive plans outline the expectations of each staff member, establish trainings, provide transition details, describe the different models that will be used and determine when breakfast will be served, create communication strategies with students and their families, and establish the school’s benchmarks and goals for the program.

Resources:

- Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom’s [How to Start a Breakfast After the Bell Program](#) includes a step-by-step checklist for executing breakfast after the bell programs.

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- FRAC and the American Federation of Teacher’s (AFT) [Breakfast Blueprint](#) details what logistics should be considered when creating a flexible breakfast service plan across a school district.

4. Be responsive and keep communication open.

It is critical to the success of the breakfast program to listen to concerns from all stakeholders. Communicating frequently and consistently is key to success, and not just when the program is first implemented. Teachers can provide feedback on student preferences and locations of carts or kiosks and what menu items might not work as well in classrooms. Some principals had staff visit other schools in a neighboring district to see the program in action, which helped minimize any concerns and erase the “unknown” before implementation.

Resources:

- Partner’s for Breakfast in the Classroom’s [Breakfast After the Bell FAQ](#) shares answers to questions that arise about creating a new morning routine, keeping classrooms clean, maximizing instructional time, and more.

5. Be flexible and adjust where needed.

Similar to other new initiatives, it is entirely possible for schools to encounter some bumps during the launch phase. These minor issues are often easily overcome with timely identification and small modifications. Sometimes kiosks need to be moved to a different hallway from the outset of the program. At other times, schools recognize a different model will work better than what they originally started with. Principals can assess if the current model is the best fit, based on logistics, participation rates, and feedback from teachers, custodians, and cafeteria staff. Adjustments can be made any time throughout the school year. Some secondary school principals have found that readjusting after a school break is a perfect time for students and staff to try something new.

Resources:

- FRAC and AFT’s [Breakfast Blueprint](#) contains information on evaluating program successes, and determining areas for improvement before making any necessary adjustments.

SPOTLIGHT:

Examples of Successful Breakfast After the Bell Programs at Secondary Schools

Dater High School (Cincinnati, Ohio)

Grades: 7–12 | Setting: Urban | Student Enrollment: 1,300 | Model: “Grab and Go”

Dater High School used to begin its lunch period by serving seventh and eighth grade students, meaning students in upper grades ate lunch many hours later. As a result, the older students were paying for snacks from vending machines throughout the morning to tide them over until lunch. This caught the attention of Principal Stephen Sipple, who wanted to address concerns of students being hungry in between meals by starting a “grab and go” breakfast program.

Sipple first met with the instructional leadership teams to discuss why moving to breakfast after the bell was important for the students at Dater High. He shared his

observations of students arriving too late to get breakfast before school started, and that older students were hungry and consuming snacks from the vending machine. To address this, Sipple explained the school was going to pilot six kiosks that would be strategically placed in the hallways to reach the older students. School nutrition staff brought a kiosk to the staff meeting so that teachers knew what it looked like and how it would work for students. This was important to ease concerns and “reduce the unknown,” Sipple says. Initially, some teachers were hesitant about the program because they were concerned about spills and trash being left overnight in classrooms and hallways if the custodial team was not fully staffed for a particular day.

Clear expectations were communicated to help students adjust to the “grab and go” program through a PowerPoint presentation in each classroom at the beginning of the

school year. The messes some staff initially feared never materialized as students understood from the presentation where to eat and place trash.

Sipple took teacher feedback seriously during the implementation phase. Dater High School was built for fewer students than it currently serves, so navigating crowded spaces and the placement of the kiosks was an initial challenge for the school. School nutrition staff adjusted the placement of kiosks after teachers shared concerns that some hallways were too congested or narrow. Being flexible and adjusting the program based on open communication has resulted in breakfast after the bell being a huge success at Dater High — breakfast participation increased by 400 percent in its first year of implementation. Dater High has been able to offer free breakfast and lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Union City High School (Union City, New Jersey)

Grades: 9–12 | Setting: Urban | Student Enrollment: 3,000 | Models: “Grab and Go” and Second Chance

At Union City High School, low participation in the traditional school breakfast program caused Principal Ryan Lewis to take a “three-pronged approach” that involved parents, students, and staff to revamp breakfast at the high school with a new “grab and go” program that was available throughout the morning, and that would be free to all students.

Lewis began with convening a student leader thinktank group to discuss the school’s breakfast program and what was important to get students to participate. While in an ideal world, students would arrive early to grab a hot breakfast, nearly half of the high school students were arriving within 10 minutes of the bell ringing for homeroom. Students also wanted more appealing meals they could access throughout the morning periods that mimicked what they were picking up at popular fast-casual chains on their way to school. Student surveys also revealed that many ate breakfast at home, so Lewis knew outreach to parents about the nutritious meals served at school each day was a must, which is why he talked to parents during back-to-school nights and other convenient opportunities.

Lewis worked with school nutrition staff to discuss a potential “grab and go” program in the upcoming school year. He scheduled a meeting with teachers, custodians, and paraprofessionals before the school year started to discuss the flow of the program — students would grab a breakfast, go to their lockers, and then head to homeroom to eat during attendance — and to address concerns. When working to get staff on board with breakfast after the bell, Lewis reminded them to “think of the students first and work backwards from there.” Lewis remained a point of contact if any problematic situations came up with the school nutrition staff to allow for a quick resolution. Having a clear plan in place before the school year started and allowing for constant communication allowed implementation of the school’s “grab and go” program to be manageable among all staff.

Teachers have noticed a change since the school has started its “grab and go” program. Students have become more engaged during morning classes, there have been fewer disciplinary disruptions, and there has been a reduction in snacks being given out at the nurse’s office.

Galva Junior/Senior High (Galva, Illinois)

Grades: 7–12 | Setting: Rural | Student Enrollment: 260 | Model: “Grab and Go”

Accessibility is particularly important for low-income students in [rural communities](#), who are more likely than their peers in metropolitan areas to live in food-insecure households, and who often face additional barriers to accessing school breakfast. As a principal at a rural secondary school, Jerry Becker is constantly looking for programs that will improve the overall well-being of his students who are certified for free and reduced-price school meals. After reading an article on the benefits of breakfast after the bell that another principal had shared, Becker researched ways to implement the program in his school.

To cultivate staff support, Becker first talked with his school nutrition manager to get her on board with his mission to implement a “grab and go” program. While it took multiple conversations to sell the program to teachers, Becker worked to address any concerns by stressing the importance of making sure that students could start each morning on equal footing by having a nutritious school breakfast.

It also was important to get the word out about the program with students and their families. With the help of the Food Research & Action Center and National Association of Secondary School Principals' [*Secondary School Principal's Breakfast After the Bell Toolkit*](#), which contains tips and resources for implementation, Becker was able to do that. Becker sent letters home, used the toolkit's phone script to let parents know about the programs, posted on the school's social media about the availability of breakfast, and printed posters from the toolkit to show students where to pick up their breakfast. In short, Becker covered all the bases to create awareness of the program.

The program has really taken off with students, especially on days when the school serves hot breakfast items, and Becker notes the improved school and classroom environments. When discussing the success of the program, Becker states, "Breakfast after the bell has been a motivating factor for students to get here on time, have a relaxing first period with a nutritious meal, and be more engaged in learning."

Francis C. Hammond Middle School (Alexandria, Virginia)

Grades: 6–8 | Setting: Urban | Student Enrollment: 1,460 | Model: Breakfast in the Classroom

Social stigma that the breakfast program is only for "poor kids" can keep the children who most need the meal from participating, especially among middle and high school students. "For kids, it's more of a social aspect, and when the opportunity came up, we knew kids weren't eating for some of the social reasons," says Principal Pierrette Peters about Francis C. Hammond Middle School's traditional breakfast program. The middle school's cafeteria is located out of the way in the basement of the school, and Peters found that students were less likely to eat breakfast if their peers were unable to join them. Peters wanted to ask school staff to try offering free school breakfast to all students by serving it in the classroom to see if it would increase participation and erase the stigma attached to it.

Peters emphasizes the importance of extensive early public relations work to get buy-in from staff. To start, Peters led small group conversations with the more hesitant staff to

discuss what their responsibilities would be and to answer questions. For example, teachers wanted to know about clean-up protocols and pest control before they started. The school nutrition team included trainings during all-staff meetings over a three-month period. Supplies, such as wipes and trash bags, were delivered to classrooms before implementation.

To ease everyone into the program, Peters planned for the entire school to do a schoolwide pilot using just granola bars. Staff practiced packaging meals, student ambassadors did a trial run of picking up and returning the insulated bags, and teachers had a chance to get into the flow of doing attendance during breakfast. From this pilot, the school learned what needed adjustments, like making sure that all bags were labeled on the sides and not the tops so that student ambassadors picked up the correct bags.

By moving to breakfast in the classroom, the school was able to reach four times as many students with breakfast. Peters has noticed a decrease in disciplinary referrals in first and second periods, and teachers have reported students being more alert in the mornings.

High School of Science and Technology (Springfield, Massachusetts)

Grades: 9–12 | Setting: Urban | Student Enrollment: 1,300 | Model: Breakfast in the Classroom

Principals know mornings can be the most chaotic time for students, especially for those who are running late. The High School of Science and Technology's traditional breakfast in the cafeteria program made the transition to first period disorderly, and on days when the most popular items were being served, there was no guarantee these items would still be available to students arriving late. Principal Kevin Lalime prioritized making mornings more structured by moving breakfast into the classroom as part of the regular day. As a school participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, they were able to offer free breakfast and free lunch to all students.

Lalime knew it would be integral to the program's success to focus his advocacy efforts on getting school faculty on board. Ensuring a plan was established that involved all staff made implementing breakfast in the classroom

a “homerun from an administrative point of view,” says Lalime. He led conversations with teachers about making instructional time more effective by ensuring students were fed and able to focus on learning. With the help of the school nutrition staff, Lalime held trainings with teachers that walked them through what each morning would look like so they were aware of any changes to their routines. These trainings stressed the importance of marking students for meal-claiming purposes, which Lalime asserted was a similar morning activity to taking attendance. Nutrition staff showed teachers which items students must take and suggested electing student representatives to be in charge of unloading coolers.

“Breakfast in the classroom has been another great resource we have in our repertoire to improve student attendance and success. It has allowed for the smoothest start to our mornings in 13 years,” notes Lalime.

Winooski Middle/High School (Winooski, Vermont)

Grades: 7–12 | Setting: Suburban | Student Enrollment: 400 | Model: “Grab and Go”

For 30 years, the city of Winooski has been the home to a diverse refugee resettlement population. Easing transitions for families and creating access to food have long been top priorities for the community. Winooski has been a leader in implementing breakfast after the bell by first starting its “grab and go” program over a decade ago.

Former Principal Leon Wheeler believes in easing the struggles that families face and that providing nutritious meals at the school is completely doable by the district. Staff understand that the community’s needs are constantly changing, and given the diverse student population, they must keep an open mind and try new initiatives. This mentality made moving to breakfast after the bell an easy decision for the middle/high school and it quickly became part of the school culture and environment. Adopting the Community Eligibility Provision has further helped eliminate any stigma associated with the program and increased its reach by providing all students with free breakfast and lunch.

Since the program has successfully been in place for years, Wheeler continues to promote it to new families settling

in the community. The school newsletter, which often highlights the program, is delivered to every household in the city. With at least 18 common languages spoken across the district, the school has several family liaisons on staff to translate and answer questions in person or on the school website.

“If a principal leads a school with students from different economic backgrounds, then breakfast after the bell is an important way to make sure students have equal access to high-quality food. It has a direct impact on a student’s achievement,” says Wheeler.

Kate Grodin and Jean Berthiaume took over as co-principals at the start of the 2019–2020 school year and have found breakfast after the bell to be a key step in addressing childhood hunger. Grodin states that the program “ensures that each student in our diverse community is prepared for learning with a nutritious meal. We make space in the day for students to eat together, which also builds community and supports their sense of belonging.”

Pittsburg Unified School District (Pittsburg, California)

Grades: 9–12 | Setting: Urban | Student Enrollment: 3,500 | Model: “Grab and Go”

A combination of knowing that their older students were more inclined to socialize in the mornings instead of heading to the cafeteria, and there was a tardiness problem during first period, caused two secondary school principals within Pittsburg Unified School District — Black Diamond High School and Pittsburg High School — to look into adopting breakfast after the bell. Both principals supported implementing a “grab and go” style model that was free for all students to give them an opportunity to quickly pick up a healthy meal as they entered the building.

Before starting the programs, Principal Todd Whitmire explained to teachers why it was critical to provide breakfast to students based on the needs of the community. This reason alone was enough for teachers to be fully supportive in trying something new, and they were eager to find a way that would help create a calmer classroom environment in the process, making it a win-win. Principal Brian Wilson noted that while sometimes

the occasional spill happens, involving and working with custodial staff to create a cleanup procedure before implementation eliminated any real issues up front. “There are so many benefits that come along with giving kids the opportunity to eat, and it really outweighs any perceived issues that are out there and might come up in discussions,” says Wilson.

To promote the program, the principals sent notifications about the breakfast program and used an auto-dialer to remind families that breakfast was available free to all students each day. In the mornings, both of the secondary school principals station themselves near the kiosks to greet students and encourage them to grab breakfast before heading to class. Since implementation, the two principals have noticed a change in the overall atmosphere at each school. Mornings are more positive and relaxed, with fewer distractions and more concentration from students.

North Corbin Junior High (North Livingston Parish, Louisiana) **Grades: 6–8 | Setting: Rural | Student Enrollment: 710 | Model: “Grab and Go”**

In 2016, North Livingston Parish experienced severe flooding that displaced families throughout 90 percent of the district. To assist students and their families, the school nutrition department approached principal Carolyn Vosburg and asked if she would be willing to try breakfast in the classroom. “Our job as principals and educators is to do what is best for students and having breakfast accessible and feeding students is absolutely necessary,” says Vosburg. This was especially true when the community was faced with a sudden natural disaster and students were not able to eat breakfast at home.

Getting teacher buy-in was relatively easy given the dire situation of many students, but for Vosburg, having all

stakeholders on board and determining what barriers existed ahead of implementation were critical. Vosburg held a meeting with teachers during which she explained that the school had been chosen for a new special breakfast program that would reach more students. She highlighted the stigma attached to the breakfast program within the school and how, after the flooding, the school needed to make sure students were getting the nutrition they needed. Serving breakfast after the bell at no charge to all students would be the best solution to address both issues. The district adopted community eligibility to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. Before the program started, Vosburg made sure there was a system in place so that all staff, including teachers and custodians, as well as students, understood their respective roles. Moving to a “grab and go” model also freed up staff time in the morning by eliminating the need for teacher supervisors in the cafeteria before the school day started.

Getting the word out about breakfast was equally important to the program’s success. The school held a media event and invited board members, school supervisors, community stakeholders, and district staff to see the breakfast after the bell program in action. Because all of these stakeholders held different relationships with the school, Vosburg found this to be helpful with engaging the community and promoting the program.

Just one year after implementation, participation in breakfast increased by 61 percent, and resulted in the school recording the highest increase of breakfast participation in the state, causing them to win Louisiana’s school breakfast challenge. This was not the only positive result of implementing breakfast after the bell — Vosburg also has noticed that interactions between students and school nutrition staff have greatly improved, teachers have had positive feedback, and there has been a decrease in tardiness and visits to the school nurse.