



# Building Strong School Nutrition Programs: A Guide for Charter Schools

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## Acknowledgments

This guide was written by Diane Girouard and Crystal FitzSimons of the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). Jessie Hewins and Emily Johnson, formerly of FRAC, contributed to this guide. FRAC gratefully acknowledges the support of the Kellogg Company Fund for this guide.

## About FRAC

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. For more information about FRAC, or to sign up for FRAC's *Weekly News Digest* and monthly *Meals Matter: School Breakfast Newsletter*, visit: [frac.org](http://frac.org).

# Introduction

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**T**he School Nutrition Programs play an essential role in ensuring that students have adequate nutrition throughout the school day and beyond. Many low-income families struggle to put food on the table, and these programs — school breakfast and lunch, as well as the afterschool and summer nutrition programs — are critical academic and health supports for students and families. Research confirms what educators and school officials see every day: a well-nourished child is more likely to be at school, is a better learner, and is more willing to participate in the classroom. When children are hungry, they are more likely to have lower math scores and grades; be absent or tardy; get suspended from school; have difficulty getting along with others; repeat a grade; need special education services; or receive mental health counseling.

The School Nutrition Programs offer charter schools an important opportunity to draw down federal funding to support their students. Implementing and expanding access to these programs is key to making sure that students,

particularly those from low-income households, receive the nutritious meals they need in order to achieve academic success.

This guide provides steps to start and strengthen the School Nutrition Programs in charter schools. The guide recognizes the common challenges charter schools may face while operating these programs and the best practices to overcome them so that charter schools can maximize access to school meals through provisions, like community eligibility and breakfast after the bell service models.

## The guide is divided into five sections:

- **Part I:** School Nutrition Program Basics;
- **Part II:** Initial Steps for Navigating the School Nutrition Programs;
- **Part III:** Overcoming Administrative Challenges;
- **Part IV:** Addressing Facility Challenges: Cafeterias, Kitchens, Equipment, and Storage; and
- **Part V:** Making the Finances Work Using Best Practices.

# PART I: School Nutrition Program Basics

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**C**harter schools, like other schools, are able to participate in the federal child nutrition programs, including the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, the Afterschool Nutrition Programs, and the Summer Food Service Program. These programs provide a reimbursement for each meal served that meets federal nutrition standards. At the federal level, the programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and at the state level, through a state child nutrition agency that is typically housed in the state department of education or agriculture. The state agency provides training and technical assistance on operating the programs, processes the charter school's application to participate, monitors program operations, and reimburses the charter school based on the number of meals that it serves. State agencies are ultimately responsible for determining if an entity meets the criteria for participating in the school nutrition programs and are a great resource for any questions when considering implementing these programs.

## School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program

The School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program make it possible for children to receive a nutritious breakfast and lunch every school day. Any child who attends a school that participates in the programs can eat school breakfast and lunch. Participating charter schools are directly reimbursed for meals based on children's free, reduced-price, or paid eligibility status. In order to receive free school meals, the student's household income must be 130 percent or below the poverty line, and between 130 and 185 percent to receive reduced-price school meals. Schools can charge reduced-price eligible students no more than 30 cents per breakfast or 40 cents per lunch. Students who are not certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals

generally pay the full cost of the meal.<sup>1</sup> The majority of meals nationwide are provided for free or at a reduced-price to students.

Schools collect and process school meal applications to certify that students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals. In addition, some students are categorically (automatically) eligible to receive free school meals because their household participates in programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously known as food stamps); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR); or they are homeless, migrant, in foster care, or enrolled in Head Start. These students can be directly certified for free school meals without a school application through direct certification (matching lists of students participating in SNAP or other programs with student enrollment lists) or the sharing of lists, e. g., the homeless liaison can share with the school nutrition staff a list of students who are homeless.

The National School Lunch Program serves more than 21.5 million children who receive free or reduced-price school lunch on an average school day; however, the School Breakfast Program is underutilized by comparison — [servicing just 14.6 million children overall; 12.5 million of whom received free or reduced-price school breakfast](#) in the 2017–2018 school year. This means that nearly half of the low-income children who participate in school lunch miss out on school breakfast and its many benefits, such as decreased food insecurity; a lower probability of overweight and obesity; improved student behavior; fewer school absences and visits to the school nurse; and decreased emotional and behavioral problems.

In order to reach more students, schools across the country are finding that more children start the day with school breakfast when they move it out of the cafeteria and after the first bell, making it more accessible and part

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<sup>1</sup> The School Nutrition Association's (SNA) [School Nutrition Operations Report 2018](#) finds that on average, 38.5 percent of the lunches served are to students in the paid meal category, and that, on average, full-paid lunch meal prices have risen to \$2.48 at the elementary school level, \$2.68 at the middle school level, and \$2.74 at the high school level for the 2017–2018 school year.

of the school day. In order to increase student participation in school breakfast, charter schools can use one or more of three options when offering breakfast after the bell: breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” and second chance breakfast.

### How it Works: Breakfast After the Bell

Schools offering breakfast after the bell service models make eating school breakfast more accessible for all students, especially if the school does not have a cafeteria or other common meeting spaces for students. Implementing a breakfast after the bell service model makes breakfast part of the school day, and has proven to be the most successful strategy for increasing school breakfast participation. Breakfast after the bell overcomes timing, convenience, and stigma barriers that get in the way of children participating in school breakfast and are even more impactful when they are combined with offering breakfast at no charge to all students. Schools generally use one or more of three options when offering breakfast after the bell:

- **Breakfast in the classroom:** Meals are delivered to and eaten in the classroom at the start of the school day.
- **“Grab and go”:** Children (particularly older students) can quickly grab the components of their breakfast from carts or kiosks in the hallway to eat in their classroom or in common areas.
- **Second chance breakfast:** Students are offered a second chance to eat breakfast after homeroom or first period. Many middle and high school students are not hungry first thing in the morning. Serving these students breakfast after first period allows them ample time to arrive to class promptly, while still providing them the opportunity to get a nutritious start to the day.

[Check out Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom’s resource \*How to Start a Breakfast After the Bell Program\*](#) for information on setting up your breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” or second chance breakfast program.

Many high-poverty schools are able to offer free breakfast and lunch for all students, with federal reimbursements that are based on the proportions of low-income children in the school. Providing breakfast at no charge to all students helps remove the stigma often associated with school breakfast (that breakfast in school is for “poor kids”), opens the program to children from families who may struggle to pay the reduced-price copayment or the paid breakfast charges, and streamlines the implementation of breakfast after the bell service models. Schools can offer free breakfast and lunch to all students through community eligibility or Provision 2. In addition, schools can choose to offer free breakfast through nonpricing, which provides a way for schools to continue to receive federal reimbursements for breakfasts served without collecting fees from students.<sup>2</sup> Under nonpricing, schools are still required to keep track of the number of breakfasts served by fee category.

More information on [school lunch](#) and [school breakfast](#) can be found at [frac.org](http://frac.org).



<sup>2</sup>Nonpricing generally cannot be used to offer free school lunch to paid students unless the school district uses non-federal dollars to cover the costs of providing free lunches to children who are not certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals.

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## How it Works: Community Eligibility and Provision 2

Community eligibility schools offer school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students, regardless of their income level. Schools that implement community eligibility do not have to process and verify school meal applications. Instead, schools are reimbursed based upon the percentage of students who are certified for free school meals without a school meal application (called the identified student percentage, or “ISP”), which includes students who live in households that participate in SNAP, TANF, FDPIR, or who are homeless, in foster care, are migrant, or enrolled in Head Start. Because the identified students are a subset of the students who would be certified for free or reduced-price school meals if the district collected school meal applications, the percentage of identified students is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal free rate. The rest are reimbursed at the paid rate (there is no reduced rate under community eligibility). For example, if the school’s ISP is 50 percent, 80 percent of the breakfasts and lunches are reimbursement at the free rate, and 20 percent are reimbursed at the paid rate. To be eligible, a school, group of schools, or a school district must have an ISP of at least 40 percent.

Eligible school districts must notify the state child nutrition agency that they are implementing community eligibility by June 30 for the subsequent school year, but most schools begin discussing implementing community eligibility many months in advance of the annual adoption deadline. For more information, check out FRAC’s fact sheet on the [Community Eligibility Provision](#).

Schools using Provision 2 (referring to a provision of the National School Lunch Act) do not need to collect, process, or verify school meal applications or keep track of meals by fee category for at least three out of every four years. Schools collect school meal applications and count and claim meals by fee category during year one of the multi-year 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. For more information, check out FRAC’s [How it Works: Provision 2](#).

## Afterschool Nutrition Programs

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs provide federal funding to charter schools (and other entities) to serve nutritious meals and snacks to children and teens at educational and enrichment activities after school, on weekends, and during school holidays throughout the school year. These activities can be part of a formal afterschool program or informal, such as student clubs and tutoring sessions. Charter schools with extended school days also are able to tap into this funding to provide an afternoon meal or snack. Afterschool meals and snacks are available through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Afterschool snacks also are available to schools through the National School Lunch Program.

Afterschool meals and snacks that are offered through CACFP can reimburse charter schools for providing a meal, a snack, or both to children who are 18 years old and younger who participate in educational or enrichment programming after school, on weekends, and during school holidays throughout the school year. Charter schools can provide suppers and snacks at one or multiple sites that may be on or off of school grounds. For example, a school, park and recreation department, or food bank can provide meals, snacks, or both at multiple sites throughout the community. To qualify, the site must be in a low-income area where at least half of the students in the school serving the area are certified to receive free or



reduced-price school meals. Charter schools can use their school data to qualify sites on school grounds. Because charter schools do not usually serve a limited geographic boundary, they can work with the state child nutrition agency to determine the eligibility of sites located off of school grounds. [All meals and snacks are reimbursed at the free rate.](#)

The National School Lunch Program reimburses schools for providing snacks (but not suppers) to children 18 years old and younger who participate in school-sponsored educational or enrichment programming after school, but not on weekends or school holidays. Schools designate which afterschool programs in the community they are sponsoring. The afterschool program does not need to be operated by the charter school or be located on the charter school's grounds in order to receive snacks through the National School Lunch Program. Similar to afterschool meals programs through CACFP, a site is eligible to participate through the National School Lunch Program — and have snacks reimbursed at the free rate — if it is located in a low-income area. If the charter school is not located in an eligible area, the site can still participate, but reimbursement is based on the participating children's eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals.

More information and resources on the [Afterschool Nutrition Programs](#) can be found on [frac.org](#).

## Summer Nutrition Programs

Charter schools can continue to provide meals through the Summer Nutrition Programs during summer vacation or extended breaks if they operate all year long. There are two programs available to charter schools: The Summer Food Service Program, which provides a higher reimbursement rate per meal, and the Seamless Summer Option, through the National School Lunch Program, which provides the free rate for the breakfasts, lunches, and snacks served. Schools can choose the program that makes the most sense for them. To qualify, a site must be located in a low-income area if at least half of the children are eligible for free school meals, or else the site must serve primarily low-income children.<sup>3</sup>

Charter schools that only provide meals to students attending summer school can continue to operate the National School Lunch Program as they do during the school year. Many schools will host summer programming or summer school, open library hours, or have other educational activities to provide safe and stimulating learning environments for students during the summer. Offering programming is not required, but by providing a safe and fun place for students to play and learn, children are more likely to participate in the summer meals.

Find more information and resources on the [Summer Nutrition Programs](#) on [frac.org](#).

<sup>3</sup> Summer meal sites can meet the area eligibility requirement through school data and census data. Charter schools can use their school data if the site is located at the school.

## PART II: Initial Steps for Navigating the School Nutrition Programs

One of the first decisions charter schools need to make when considering implementing the School Nutrition Programs is how they plan to participate. Charter schools can operate as their own School Food Authority (SFA), the entity that has the legal authority to operate the school nutrition programs in schools under its jurisdiction through an agreement with the State agency, or participate through another existing SFA.

The best approach depends on the size, operating structure, and management of the charter school, along with the availability of an SFA within the area. For example, charter schools with larger management organizations that are able to help with day-to-day operations of their school nutrition programs may find it easier to operate independently and prepare the meals themselves. Others may be able to do the broader operations of their programs independently, but use an outside school meals vendor to store or prepare food. Some small, independent charter schools are successfully able to operate the School Nutrition Programs and act as their own SFAs,

either by choice or necessity, because sometimes there is not an SFA in the area that is able to work with the charter school. How a charter school decides to manage its program will depend on the school's unique needs and capabilities.

### Operate as own SFA

Charter schools that choose to be their own SFA take on the administrative responsibility of operating the School Nutrition Programs. This includes applying and being approved to operate the School Nutrition Programs by the state child nutrition agency, attending trainings, submitting monthly meal reimbursement claims, and setting menus. Being the SFA gives the charter school control over the food that is served to students. SFAs can choose to prepare their own meals or contract with a vendor to prepare, store, and deliver meals, as well as prepare menus.

An SFA may choose to contract with a food service management company (FSMC) to manage any aspect

### Case Study: Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School

E.W. Stokes Charter School in Washington, D.C., and its school meal program have grown since it first opened its doors in 1998. The charter school first leased space in the basement of a church to serve 35 kindergarten and first grade students, and contracted with a vendor to serve its school meals. E.W. Stokes Charter School has since purchased its own building with a kitchen, became its own SFA, opened a second campus, and now prepares in-house meals from scratch to its 485 students. The charter school knew that high-quality, nutritious meals are key to a student's learning experience, and that having control over the menu and the quality of food being served was important for all of the students and the surrounding community.

While the kitchen existed when E.W. Stokes Charter School purchased its building, the charter school had to

replace and purchase new equipment over time. Today, E.W. Stokes Charter School offers free breakfast for all students and also participates in the National School Lunch Program, the Summer Food Services Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the Afterschool Meals Program through CACFP. The success of E.W. Stokes' school nutrition programs have enabled the school to serve as an SFA for other D.C. charter schools, which has helped improve the school's economies of scale and per meal costs by providing a higher volume of meals. Altogether, E.W. Stokes Charter School serves 400 breakfasts, 670 lunches, 350 afterschool snacks, and 140 afterschool suppers on an average day to its own students, plus the additional students it serves at other charter schools while serving as their SFA.



of its food services, such as determining students' eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals, tracking meals served for reimbursement, or ensuring program compliance. SFAs are required to go through a competitive procurement process to identify the FSMC that will provide the best food service operations to meet their needs, and the state agency must approve the contract with the FSMC. If a charter school uses a charter management organization (CMO) to manage and operate the charter schools, the CMO would be considered the FSMC if it is responsible for the SFA's administrative responsibilities. More information about FSMCs can be found in [Contracting With Food Service Management Companies: Guidance for School Food Authorities](#) (USDA).

## Participate Through Another SFA

Charter schools can enter into an agreement with their local public school district or another charter school to participate in school meals. Arrangements with another SFA vary by agreement and should clearly identify the responsibilities of each party. For example, the SFA could provide meals to a charter school and have the charter school remain responsible for all other aspects of the program operations.

On the other hand, a charter school could enter into an agreement where the other SFA operates almost all aspects of the program, such as certifying household applications and verifying eligibility, providing meals, and counting and claiming meals. This option streamlines responsibilities involved in administering the programs and makes it less burdensome for charter schools to participate in the School Nutrition Programs. Since most charter schools — nearly two-thirds — are freestanding and operate independently,<sup>4</sup> many find that participating through another SFA is an easier way to provide school breakfast and lunch to their students. Because of the smaller size of these schools, oversight duties of the child nutrition programs may fall under the finance or operations staff member, or be split among multiple employees who wear various hats at the charter school.

## Case Study: Palm Beach County School District as an SFA

Palm Beach County School District serves as the authorizing authority for charter schools in the area, and serves as the SFA to 33 charter schools, some with multiple campuses. The district's nutrition staff ensures that schools applying for charter approval with the district understand the importance of school meals for students. The secret of their success is based on consistent and early communication — at the beginning stages when a charter school is starting the application process, the nutrition staff provide information about the school meals programs and the many benefits that come with serving meals through the district's program, and present several options for participation. If the charter school opts to use the school district as a vendor, it is guided through the facilities requirements and health inspections before the school year starts. If it chooses to run its own program, the school district is available to answer questions and connect the charter school to local vendors.

Each year, existing and new charter schools are invited to a meeting where the school district's nutrition staff provide information regarding new policies and procedures for the upcoming school year. New programs, like breakfast after the bell, community eligibility, or afterschool meals, may also be highlighted at the meeting for charter schools to consider for the upcoming school year. The district also provides equipment and support for charter schools to implement new innovative breakfast models, such as "grab and go" in a high school or breakfast in the classroom in an elementary school.

<sup>4</sup> David, R. (2018). *National Charter School Management Overview, 2016–2017 School Year*. Available at: [https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-08/napcs\\_management\\_report\\_web%20New%20Final.pdf](https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-08/napcs_management_report_web%20New%20Final.pdf). Accessed on March 20, 2019.



## Contact the State Child Nutrition Agency

After determining whether the charter school will be able to serve as its own SFA or will need to enter into an agreement with another SFA, a charter school should contact the state's child nutrition agency to ensure they're setting up their program for success. They are usually housed within the state department of education (or sometimes department of agriculture) and administer the child nutrition programs, as well as provide training and technical assistance to support implementation and operation of the programs. State agencies can provide charter schools with a comprehensive list and description of administrative requirements for participating in the School Nutrition Programs. A number of states have taken targeted steps to help charter schools establish their school nutrition programs. The state child nutrition agencies also can be helpful in connecting charter schools with local SFAs if a charter school decides to go this route. USDA maintains a [list of school meals contacts by state agency](#).

## Make Peer-to-Peer Connections

It can be helpful to reach out to colleagues in nearby charter schools or traditional school districts to gain knowledge about their school meal programs. These conversations can help identify vendors or meal service providers in the area, best practices to maximize participation and operate financially viable programs, and strategies to communicate with parents. These

## Case Study: Minnesota Department of Education's Targeted Training for Charter Schools

The Minnesota Department of Education's Child Nutrition Programs Office has a dedicated staff member who helps charter schools understand and apply for the School Nutrition Programs. Technical assistance is provided to interested charter schools through a series of orientation videos and training modules that outline the steps for establishing a school nutrition program. The orientation series covers general school nutrition program requirements, food service operational models, facility issues for food service, and staffing recommendations. Once a charter school has chosen to start a school nutrition program, staff must complete online training modules provided by the State agency. Each training module includes an overview of program options and requirements for operating a school nutrition program — including meal services, certification, and counting and claiming procedures — and consists of seven lessons that include a video, practice activities, and a knowledge check. Because the Minnesota Department of Education has a dedicated Charter School Center, the Child Nutrition Team is able to streamline outreach to charter schools and share resources with the team members providing technical assistance to charter schools. Child Nutrition Program Team Lead Donna Becker encourages state agencies to track barriers or issues that come up with several charter schools, and then address those specific needs through training.

conversations can take place by simply reaching out, or in more structured settings, such as school meals informational sessions and trainings hosted by the state child nutrition agency, or conferences for charter school administrators. It also is helpful to build a relationship and visit nearby schools to see how program operations work in real time.

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## Reach out to Advocates

Anti-hunger and child advocates in many states can provide information, highlight best practices to respond to unique barriers that charter schools face, and work directly to support efforts to administer the School Nutrition Programs. Advocates can connect charter schools with

appropriate state agency staff and help with implementing innovative school nutrition models. They often can facilitate connecting the school with other charter schools in the state that have successfully implemented the School Nutrition Programs.

### Case Study: Children at Risk's Outreach and Education Strategy

Children at Risk, a Texas advocacy group, works to improve the health of all children across the state and provides direct assistance to schools to improve their school nutrition programs. When first engaging with charter schools through their Food in Schools Initiative, Children at Risk realized there was a lack of familiarity among charter school leadership about School Nutrition Programs and the different options available for implementing them, including new innovative programs, such as community eligibility and breakfast in the classroom, both of which can improve participation and streamline administrative processes. Because of administrative staff capacity challenges that charter schools can face, the school nutrition lead contact can be anyone from the principal to the school counselor to the charter school's business official.

Children at Risk understands the different levels of knowledge and perspectives that charter school staff can have. They often address common misconceptions about the School Nutrition Programs, and by reaching out and meeting directly with school staff, they are able to address any concerns and brainstorm solutions to challenges. On its website, [Children at Risk has developed a series of detailed case studies](#) of successful school breakfast programs implemented by charter schools, including IDEA Public Schools and KIPP Austin, to show the benefits, process, and logistics of running an effective breakfast program.

## PART III: Overcoming Administrative Challenges

**D**istributing, collecting, and processing school meals applications can be time-consuming. Monthly claiming reports also can be challenging if adequate training is not provided to appropriate staff. It is critically important, though, to ensure that students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals are certified to receive them, and the paperwork ensures that the school receives the entitled reimbursement. To ease administrative challenges, there are a number of time-saving strategies that can help charter schools reduce or manage administrative work.

### Adopt Community Eligibility in High-Needs Schools

Community eligibility is a great option for charter schools with high percentages of low-income children to reduce administrative work while simultaneously offering free school breakfast and lunch to all students. Schools are able to realize significant administrative savings under community eligibility because they are no longer required to collect, process, and verify school meals applications, or keep track of meals by fee category. The streamlined reimbursement and paperwork requirements ease staff

capacity issues, and focus instead on serving nutritious meals to help students learn and grow.

### Maximize Direct Certification to Enroll Automatically Eligible Students for Free School Meals

Direct certification is the process conducted by State agencies and local education agencies (LEAs, such as school districts) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications. All LEAs that participate in the School Nutrition Programs are required to conduct direct certification, and each state has a system in place to help students receive free school meals if the student lives in a household that participates in SNAP. Schools are able to data-match their school enrollment to SNAP enrollment and directly certify students to receive free school meals without a school meal application. Many states include other programs in their direct certification systems, such as TANF, FDPIR, and foster care. Direct certification reduces the number of school meal applications that are collected and processed. It also provides the basis for community eligibility,

#### Case Study: FirstLine Schools Implements Community Eligibility

The success of Louisiana's FirstLine Schools school meals programs stems from their strong partnership with their FSMC, which supports implementation of innovative models that improve participation and nutrition quality. FirstLine Schools implemented community eligibility and breakfast after the bell models to make it easier to feed 3,750 students in six schools each school day. With nearly all of FirstLine's students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, it was an easy decision to adopt community eligibility and breakfast after the bell models. The charter school district has a robust meal program where breakfast, lunch, and afterschool meals are served at all of its schools, and it serves as the SFA for two additional

schools outside FirstLine as well. The elimination of school meal applications and unpaid meal fees has meant that the school can focus on introducing and improving breakfast service models. To ensure high student participation, FirstLine Schools has implemented "grab and go" in its high school, where students pick up a meal in the cafeteria and take it to their first period class. In pre-K through eighth grade schools, FirstLine uses "grab and go" and breakfast in the classroom models, depending on the grade level. Since 2006, FirstLine Schools also has operated its signature program, Edible School Yard: New Orleans, a program where cooking, gardening, and nutrition education are integrated into the curriculum.

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[so improving direct certification processes](#) makes it easier for schools to consider community eligibility as well. To ensure schools directly certify as many children as possible, charter schools can adopt the following best practices:

- **participate in training opportunities** through the state agency to understand the state system’s available features, including individual look-up options and [extending eligibility to additional children in a SNAP household](#);
- **conduct a match as often as possible** so that schools can certify children as soon as they are eligible (some states provide revised data weekly, monthly, or even in real time);

- **provide SNAP education and application assistance** by hosting a family resource or engagement night with local social services or anti-hunger advocacy organizations where eligible families can apply for programs that allow them to be directly certified for free school meals; and
- **conduct comprehensive outreach campaigns to collect school meals applications** at the beginning of and throughout the school year to ensure that students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals apply and are certified. To maximize the number of school applications collected, send school meals applications in new student enrollment packets over the summer months. Applications also should be provided online and they should be translated into languages that are represented at the school. Check with the state child nutrition agency for translations.

## PART IV: Addressing Facility Challenges: Cafeterias, Kitchens, Equipment, and Storage

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Since charter schools can be located in a variety of buildings, such as commercial spaces, former public school buildings, church classrooms, warehouses, and even in shared spaces with traditional public schools, some can lack access to a full kitchen that meets state and local health and safety standards. Some charter schools do not have kitchen space at all in their buildings. In some states, fewer than 50 percent of charter schools have kitchen facilities that meet federal standards, impeding their ability to prepare meals on site.<sup>5</sup> Charter schools also may lack the heating equipment and refrigeration needed to use an outside vendor because they cannot keep food warm or cold once it has been delivered.

This can make it difficult to use vendors that deliver food once a week or deliver only in the mornings for breakfast, lunch, and afterschool supper programs. Charter schools can work with vendors to adopt services and operations models, such as serving school breakfast or lunch in the classroom, that allow the school to offer healthy school meals within their infrastructural constraints. Common vendors include private companies and other SFAs, and the state child nutrition agency can provide information on vendors serving the area, as well as guidance on the process of contracting with the vendors. To address concerns with facilities challenges, charter schools can consider having prepared meals delivered to the school or partnering with other schools to store food.

### Have Prepared Meals Delivered to the School

Charter schools can overcome some of the challenges associated with not having typical meal service facilities by receiving meals that are prepared and delivered by

a vendor. To determine whether this is a feasible option for the charter school, schools should first assess its staff, facilities, and administrative capacities through a comprehensive assessment. This can include an inventory of equipment and facilities, responsibilities, and time required of involved staff members, and staff's level of understanding of the federal School Nutrition Programs and the requirements. The needs determined in the assessment can then be used to develop the Request for Proposal (RFP) to send out to vendors. The state child nutrition agency can provide guidance on conducting an RFP for a vendor. Charter schools also can explore nontraditional vending options, such as working with a vendor through a cooperative formed by a group of charter schools to find a food service contract that works best for the school.

### Partner With Other Schools to Store Food

If a charter school lacks adequate storage, they may need to have more frequent deliveries, which can increase food costs and delivery fees. In addition to partnering with another charter school or having the public school district act as the SFA, charter schools can arrange with larger SFAs to store food. USDA encourages smaller SFAs and charter schools to consider having a larger SFA receive and store food shipments, prepare the meals at the larger SFA's kitchen facility, and then transport the meals to the smaller SFAs and charter schools.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> National Charter School Resource Center. (2013). *Charter Schools Facilities Initiative: Initial Findings from Twelve States*. Available at: <http://facilitiesinitiative.org/>. Accessed on March 20, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2009). *National Policy Memorandum: School Food Authorities Acting as a Collective Unit in the Control and Use of Donated Foods*. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/fdd/FD-067-sfa-collective-unit-donated.pdf>. Accessed on March 20, 2019.

## PART V: Making the Finances Work by Using Best Practices

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**M**any charter schools are able to operate the School Nutrition Programs and break even. In order to achieve economies of scale, charter schools with smaller enrollments will find that their purchasing power and reimbursement revenue increases when they serve more meals. This can be done by offering more School Nutrition Programs (like afterschool meals), using proven strategies to increase participation in existing ones, or by entering into agreements with nearby charter schools to contract jointly from a vendor. Depending on the contract, however, some programs may not operate within the confines of the federal reimbursement. This is more likely for schools that set additional nutrition quality standards beyond the federal requirements, or that have additional transportation costs due to multiple meal deliveries. Charter schools may need to consider supplementing the school nutrition budget with additional funds if this is the case.

### Implement Innovative Breakfast Service Models

Charter schools with small school populations can maximize their federal reimbursements and purchasing power if all students have easy access to school breakfast, which generally has much lower participation than school lunch. Alternative breakfast service models, such as [breakfast in the classroom](#), “[grab and go](#),” or [second chance breakfast](#) are great ways to increase participation because they make accessing breakfast more convenient for students. Breakfast after the bell models help facilitate a sense of classroom community, and address busy mornings or tight bus schedules, which can be barriers for students to starting the day with a healthy meal. Charter schools that lack cafeteria space or kitchens may find that breakfast (and lunch) in the classroom is the best way to provide nutrition to their students.

### Offer School Meals at no Charge to all Students

Schools with high percentages of students certified for free or reduced-price school meals often are able to offer free breakfast, lunch, or both to all students through community eligibility or Provision 2. Schools need to determine the exact percentage necessary for them to break even, but many schools are able to offer free breakfast if 70 percent or more of the students are certified for free school meals, and some have been able to offer free breakfast with even lower percentages. Schools may require higher free and reduced-price percentages to offer free lunch. Schools that have a high enough percentage to offer free breakfast, but not free lunch, can use either Provision 2 or simply offer breakfast for free to all students (called nonpricing).<sup>7</sup>

### Eliminate the Reduced-Price Copay

Schools that are unable to offer free breakfast to all students can consider eliminating the reduced-price copay for students certified to receive reduced-price school meals. Schools can charge a maximum of 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch, which can deter many struggling families from participating. Eliminating the reduced copay can increase participation, thereby creating economies of scale and helping reduce unpaid school meal debt.

### Provide Afterschool Suppers and Snacks

The energy provided from a nutritious school lunch can quickly wear off by the late afternoon, and students who have longer school days or participate in educational and enrichment programming after school greatly benefit from afterschool suppers and snacks that allow them to continue learning throughout the day. Many charter schools provide additional instructional time to maximize learning.<sup>8</sup> Charter schools that extend the school day by

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<sup>7</sup> Community eligibility requires that schools offer both breakfast and lunch to all students.

<sup>8</sup> The Center for Education Reform (2014). *Survey of America's Charter Schools*. Available at: <https://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014CharterSchoolSurveyFINAL.pdf>. Accessed on March 20, 2019.

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an hour or more and those that offer clubs and tutoring can offer afterschool meal programs. A meal, snack, or both can be served after school, during the extended school day, on weekends, and during school holidays, and can be reimbursed through CACFP, while just a snack can be reimbursed through the National School Lunch Program.<sup>9</sup> Schools can serve meals at any point during the afterschool program.

## Enter Into Collective Buying Agreements

Charter schools can face limited choices and prices due to purchasing for only one school or a small group of schools. To address this challenge, charter schools can enter into agreements with other schools to purchase larger shipments from outside vendors, such as through the [National Charter Schools Group Purchasing Program \(Buy Q\)](#) to buy supplies in bulk, which brings down the price-point for schools participating in the agreement. These types of agreements allow charter

schools to leverage more purchasing power by negotiating for larger bids, and vendors can benefit from consolidating their outreach to charter schools.

## Conclusion

The School Nutrition Programs play a vital role in supporting children’s health and academic achievement, as participation in these programs is linked to increased cognitive function and attention; improved test scores and academic achievement; less absenteeism and tardiness; and fewer behavioral referrals. Recognizing these connections, charter schools across the country are overcoming the unique challenges they may face while operating the School Nutrition Programs by implementing best practices highlighted in this guide — such as offering school breakfast and lunch for free to all students through community eligibility, using breakfast after the bell service models, and providing afterschool meals — to ensure they are setting their students up for academic success each school day.

### Case Study: IDEA Public Schools Uses Best Practices to Maximize Participation

IDEA Public Schools is a large charter school district in Texas with 77 schools. IDEA Public Schools ensures access to school meals for more than 20,000 students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals. The school district recently implemented community eligibility in 59 of its schools, and the program has been well-received by students, parents, and school staff. Moving to community eligibility has eliminated the time-consuming task of collecting and verifying school meals applications. Further success stems from offering free breakfast to all students in the classroom, which the district has done for over 15 years, and communicating directly with parents and students via banners, contests, and nutritional activities to get students excited about eating breakfast. As a result, meal participation is very high at IDEA Public Schools, with breakfast participation reaching 84 percent. IDEA Public Schools recently began serving afterschool meals, by first piloting the CACFP Afterschool Meals

Program in certain schools in the 2017–2018 school year, and has since expanded the program to all of its schools.

In order to operate a successful school nutrition program, the school district also runs a decentralized process where each school has a cafeteria manager, who is in charge of placing orders, fulfilling meal production, and maintaining reimbursement paperwork, but receives substantial support from the nutrition department staff at IDEA’s headquarters. All food is prepared in-house from scratch. There is a strong emphasis on leadership development and training and encouraging nutrition staff at the individual schools to solve problems at the local level. This allows the district staff to focus on innovative ways to improve the district’s program overall. Headquarters staff analyze districtwide data to see how different changes affect participation in schools, and identify trends to replicate and scale successes.

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<sup>9</sup> Snacks served through the National School Lunch Program can only be provided after school, not on weekends or during school holidays.



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## Additional Resources

For more information on starting and expanding the charter school's nutrition programs, check out the following resources.

- [\*National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Questions and Answers for Charter Schools\*](#) (USDA) addresses common questions about charter schools and the School Nutrition Programs that state agencies and advocates may have.
- [\*Contracting With Food Service Management Companies: Guidance for School Food Authorities\*](#) (USDA) explains how an SFA may contract with a food service management company (FSMC) to manage the food service operation in its schools.
- [\*“Charter Schools and Food Services: Options, Planning, and Decision-Making”\*](#) (National Charter School Resource Center) is a webinar that focuses on the logistics of starting a school nutrition program in a charter school and the various application and program requirements, per federal guidelines, that a school must follow.
- [\*Equipment Purchasing and Facility Design for School Nutrition Programs\*](#) (National Food Service Management Institute) is a guide that provides a detailed overview of the different equipment options available to schools.
- [\*Facts: Community Eligibility\*](#) (FRAC) provides information on the benefits of this popular federal provision that allows all students to eat school breakfast and lunch at no charge.
- [\*How it Works: Making Breakfast Part of the School Day\*](#) (FRAC) explains the different breakfast after the bell service models schools can use to reach more students with school breakfast.
- [\*Direct Certification Improves Low-Income Student Access to School Meals: An Updated Guide to Direct Certification\*](#) (FRAC) highlights different strategies for strengthening direct certification systems.