



# Supporting Academic Success With School Breakfast: 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 [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).

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# Introduction

**S**chool breakfast is associated with positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes; however, far too many secondary students skip this essential morning meal. Additionally, school breakfast is a critical support for struggling families trying to stretch limited resources at home, allowing parents and guardians to invest in nutritious meals on nights and weekends. Despite its many benefits, participation in school breakfast lags behind school lunch,<sup>1</sup> and secondary schools often have lower breakfast participation rates than elementary schools. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only one in four high school students ate breakfast daily in 2023, meaning many children and adolescents are missing out on a healthy start to their school day.<sup>2</sup>

This resource is designed to help school principals address barriers to school breakfast participation, strengthen their school breakfast programs, support families, and improve students' health, academic performance, and overall well-being.



## Importance of School Breakfast

The School Breakfast Program plays an important role in supporting students' learning and development. Research shows that students who participate in school breakfast exhibit improved attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Participating in school breakfast is also associated with improved dietary intake and health outcomes.<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup>

### Academic Performance

- **Attendance:** Strong school breakfast programs are associated with better school attendance rates.
- **Concentration:** Providing breakfast to students at school improves their concentration, alertness, comprehension, memory, and learning.
- **Test scores:** Students who eat breakfast perform better on standardized tests compared to those who skip breakfast.

### Health Benefits

- **Food security:** School breakfast decreases the risk of child hunger and food insecurity, especially when breakfast is offered to all students at no charge.
- **Nutrition:** Students who eat breakfast regularly have a higher nutrient intake and better diet quality than those who skip breakfast.
- **Reduced sick visits:** School breakfast has been linked with fewer visits to the school nurse.

### Social and Emotional Benefits

- **Community:** Strong school breakfast programs provide students with social support and create a sense of community and belonging.
- **Behavior:** Students are less likely to exhibit disruptive behaviors when they start their day with a nutritious meal.
- **Mental health:** School breakfast participation positively impacts children's mental health, including reductions in hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression.

# Barriers to School Breakfast Participation

Traditional school breakfast models that charge students for meals based on their individual household income and serve breakfast in the cafeteria before the start of the school day create participation barriers that prevent many children from accessing a nutritious morning meal.

## Barriers to Breakfast Participation

- **Stigma:** Traditional service models unintentionally identify students as being from households with low incomes or as “needing” school breakfast. This social stigma prevents many eligible children from utilizing the School Breakfast Program.
- **Cost:** Charging students for school breakfast, even at a reduced price, can prevent students from participating in the program.
- **Location:** Serving breakfast in the cafeteria, far from lockers, classrooms, and where students socialize, creates unnecessary obstacles to participation.
- **Timing:** Requiring students to arrive at school early, when they are often dependent on bus schedules or factors outside of their control, prevents many students from participating in school breakfast. Additionally, some students report that they are not hungry first thing in the morning, before the start of the school day.<sup>8</sup>

- **Menu quality:** Students report taste as a common barrier to school breakfast participation.<sup>9</sup>

## A Spotlight on Nutrition

As an educator, you know that children cannot learn on an empty stomach, and school breakfast is the key to combatting morning hunger. But did you know that school meals are also some of the healthiest meals children eat in a given day?

Research shows that thanks to strong nutrition standards, meals consumed at school have higher diet quality than meals eaten elsewhere.<sup>10,11</sup> And they are about to get even healthier. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) final rule, Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, builds upon science-based recommendations by strengthening children’s access to fruit, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and low-fat dairy.

Starting in the 2025–2026 school year, school nutrition departments will start reducing the amount of added sugar in school meals, with additional sodium reductions scheduled for the 2027–2028 school year. To learn more about school nutrition standards, visit [USDA’s webpage](#).

# Strategies for School Breakfast Success

Serving breakfast after the start of the school day, a strategy called “breakfast after the bell,” combats many barriers to school breakfast participation and increases students’ access to this vital morning meal. There are a variety of ways that schools may incorporate breakfast into their school day, and schools may use multiple models to increase students’ access to breakfast. Collaborating with students, school food service departments, teachers, and custodial staff will help ensure breakfast-after-the-bell models operate smoothly and successfully.

**Breakfast in the classroom:** Breakfasts are delivered directly to classrooms using temperature-controlled

and portable bags, and students eat during morning announcements or start-of-day activities.

**“Grab and Go”:** Students quickly grab a breakfast from carts or kiosks as they enter the school building or from the cafeteria and eat in their classrooms during homeroom or first period.

**Second chance:** Students are given the opportunity to get breakfast during an extended morning break, usually after homeroom or first period, and then they eat breakfast in their next class. This model works particularly well in high schools where students may not be hungry upon arrival.

## Funding Free Breakfast

The winning breakfast recipe is free breakfast offered after the bell. Offering free breakfast to all students reduces stigma, builds community, and drives participation. Due to increased participation, many schools can offer free breakfast to all students if 70 percent or more of their enrollment is certified for free or reduced-price meals. Additional ways to offer all students school breakfast at no charge include:

- **Community Eligibility Provision:** Eligible schools provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, eliminating the need to process meal applications or track meals by fee category, thus saving on food service’s administrative costs and increasing participation.
- **Provision 2:** Schools using this method offer free breakfast and/or lunch to all students, resulting in increased participation and administrative savings. Provision 2 schools avoid collecting and processing meal applications or tracking meals by fee category for three out of every four years. In the base year, they gather data to determine federal reimbursement for the entire cycle.
- **Non-pricing:** Under non-pricing structures, schools do not charge fees for meals but still receive federal



reimbursements for breakfasts served under the three-tier fee system (free, reduced-price, or paid).

- **State policies:** States across the country have adopted policies that support schools’ efforts to offer students meals at no charge. From breakfast-specific policies to Healthy School Meals for All, states are helping to combat childhood hunger by making school meals available to all students. To learn more about Healthy School Meals for All, visit [frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all](https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all).

School food service departments can help you determine the best way to offer all students free school breakfast.

## Building a Breakfast Team

A successful school breakfast program is built by a group of key stakeholders that work together to address the needs of the entire school community. Creating a breakfast team that includes students, parents and guardians, school food service departments, custodial staff, and teachers will get your program started and ensure that it continues to function successfully for years to come. Your breakfast team could be a part of an existing wellness committee, or a standalone coalition; the formality and structure are up to you. Your team could craft policies that support participation, promote the program to the entire school community, identify key metrics of success, evaluate your program against those metrics, and adjust operations to better meet your goals. Below are some examples you may consider when building your breakfast team.

### Engagement

- **Students:** Engage students early on to ensure that the breakfast program meets their needs. Students can provide input on menu items, ideal service locations, breakfast policies, operating procedures, and promotion strategies.
- **Parents and guardians:** Inform parents and guardians about the benefits and availability of school breakfast and answer any questions they may have, such as questions regarding cost, allergies, or operations.
- **School food services:** School breakfast expansion cannot occur without the commitment of your school food service department. Approach cafeteria staff with your goal of increasing breakfast participation and ask

them to be a leader on your school breakfast team. They will know how much time is needed to implement a breakfast-after-the-bell service model to ensure that they have adequate staffing, food, equipment, and operating procedures in place before the first day of service. They will also know the best way to offer free breakfast to all students, whether through CEP, Provision 2, or another non-pricing model. Regular communication with school food services is necessary to ensure the program starts and runs smoothly.

- **Teachers:** Share that making time for breakfast will promote academic success and support student focus and behavior in the classroom. Convey that strengthening the school breakfast program is a priority for you and the school. Invite teacher representatives to join the breakfast team to share staff goals and concerns. Include teachers' input in the policy making process, such as creating sample schedules on how to incorporate breakfast into morning routines and lesson plans.
- **Custodial staff:** Custodians are key players in a successful breakfast program. Include them in the planning process so that they understand how, when, and where meals will be served and consumed. Address their concerns, such as pests and waste, and ask what they need to make your program a success. This may include additional garbage bags and cans, sanitizing wipes, or equipment like brooms and mops.

## Policies and Procedures

- **Food in the classroom:** Allowing students to eat breakfast in their classrooms is necessary for a successful breakfast-after-the-bell program. Working with your breakfast team to develop operating procedures, such as addressing allergies and food safety, handling leftover items, and students' roles in proper food disposal, will help address concerns upfront.
- **Late arrivals:** Consider how students who arrive late to school will be able to access school breakfast. This may include storing meals in the front office or the health room and allowing students to get those meals before going to class. Coordination between the storage location, teachers, and school food services is essential for this policy to be effective.
- **Bell extensions:** Some schools that implement second-chance models alter their school schedule to

have an extended transition period between certain morning classes to allow students to access breakfast mid-morning. Adjusting schedules to accommodate meal pickup ensures students aren't penalized for participating in breakfast.

- **Operating procedures:** Different departments, such as custodial services and the school food service department, may have to adjust their operating procedures to accommodate your breakfast program. For example, custodial staff may have to adjust the location of communal garbage cans or the garbage pickup schedule, whereas food services may have to change their procedures for transporting food or ensuring the safety of students with allergies. As experts in their discipline, these staff will know what to do to ensure the program is safe and effective for all students.



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## Promotion

- **Student involvement:** Peer-to-peer promotion through student-led media helps communicate program benefits and policies in an engaging and exciting way.
- **Family involvement:** Parents and guardians can share program information through their networks, such as Parent Teacher Organizations or other family outreach initiatives, and they can encourage their children to participate in the breakfast program.
- **Staff involvement:** Teachers play an important role in promoting the breakfast program. Encourage teachers to role model healthy habits by eating breakfast with students when possible.
- **Schoolwide:** Market your breakfast program through schoolwide communication channels, such as social media channels, school media, and morning announcements.

## Evaluation

- **Metrics:** Establish measures of success, such as breakfast participation rates, student satisfaction, teacher assessments, health measures, or academic outcomes. Some metrics may include average daily breakfast participation, attendance rates, morning nurse visits, behavioral referrals, and test scores. Collect data prior to implementing the breakfast program and at certain intervals after implementation. Identify who on the breakfast team will be responsible for collecting each data point and at what frequency. Use these metrics to help assess the success of your breakfast program.

- **Surveys and feedback:** Conduct surveys with students and staff to gather feedback and identify areas for improvement. Regular meetings with your breakfast team will provide informal information, while structured surveys can provide qualitative and quantitative data. For example, parents can offer insight into how school breakfast supports their household's finances and environment. Surveying students and staff can provide introductory information on meal quality and program benefits, while follow-up focus groups can provide more in-depth information on what is and is not working. Start assessing menu quality by reviewing program participation data against different menu days to see which menu items are most popular. Then your breakfast team could host a taste test of potential breakfast items. Students can vote on which new item they would like to see on the breakfast menu, and food services can monitor participation to see if the new item is popular schoolwide. Likewise, you could survey teachers on their classroom environment prior to implementing a breakfast program and then reassess after implementing your program to see the difference school breakfast has had on student attention and behavior. How you gather data will depend on what you establish as your metrics of success.
- **Adjustments:** Be flexible and willing to change based on feedback and evaluation results. Creating your perfect breakfast program may require adjustments based on your community's needs and experiences, and your goals for that school year.

## Success Stories

### *Middletown Public Schools Connecticut*

Middletown Public Schools in Middletown, Connecticut is a 10-school district with one middle school and one high school. The district utilizes community eligibility and breakfast after the bell to ensure its students have access to a healthy morning meal. This winning combination has resulted in nearly half of the district's

4,400 students participating in school breakfast each day. Randall Mel, Jr., director of Food, Nutrition, and Wellness Services, shared how they are engaging older youth: "Expanding breakfast options in secondary schools ensures that every student, regardless of their morning circumstances, has the opportunity to start their day with a nutritious meal. By bringing breakfast closer to the classroom and offering variety, we've seen participation soar and students thrive."

# Success Stories

## *Sparrows Point Middle School Maryland*

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS), located in central Maryland, is a large, urban-suburban school district with 110,000 students across 169 schools. BCPS has boosted breakfast participation by pairing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) with “grab and go” service models in all their schools. Since implementing CEP and “grab and go,” BCPS has increased breakfast participation in middle and high schools by nearly 6 percent. Overall, BCPS serves over 40,000 breakfasts each school day. Assistant Principal Vincent Piscopo reported that “breakfast at Sparrows Point Middle School is extremely beneficial to our students. By offering school breakfast to our students daily, we are ensuring they are starting the day with a quality meal that they may not otherwise get.”

## *Hood River Valley High School Oregon*

Hood River Valley High School in Oregon uses community eligibility and second chance breakfast to ensure students start their day ready to learn. Students select breakfast in between first and second period and then eat their meal in their next class. Implementing this breakfast-after-the-bell model has been a tremendous success: Hood River Valley High increased breakfast participation by 35 percent in the first year, and they currently serve over 40 percent of the high school’s enrollment. Principal Columba Jones understands the importance of school breakfast: “Providing students with the opportunity to have breakfast before school and after their first class has been a tremendous way to support their well-being. High schoolers lead busy lives, and having access to nutritious breakfast options not only fuels their bodies but also enhances their ability to engage and succeed throughout the day.”



## *North Powder Charter School Oregon*

North Powder School District is a small, rural district located in Northeast Oregon that utilizes the winning combination of community eligibility and breakfast after the bell to ensure all students have access to a nutritious breakfast each school day. North Powder first adopted CEP in the 2024–2025 school year, allowing the district to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. The district coupled free breakfast with the second-chance service model to encourage participation in their high school. Pairing CEP with breakfast after the bell increased breakfast participation by 85 percent, with over 70 percent of high school students participating each day. Principal Molly Smith was supportive of the change: “Our school is located in a very high-poverty area. Feeding our students at school is a top priority, as we know that a well-rounded meal will help our students in a variety of ways. We found that our students would not walk across the street to the cafeteria, so our cafeteria staff have been doing a second chance breakfast between first and second periods that has been highly successful. Any ways that we can support our students, I am willing to give it a try.”



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## Endnotes

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