

Eight Ways to Increase Participation in Afterschool Suppers

The Afterschool Meal and Snack Program through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides funding to programs to serve meals and snacks alongside educational and enrichment activities during the hours after school ends. In order to participate, an afterschool program must operate in a low-income area where at least 50 percent of the children in the local elementary, middle, or high school qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

Since the nationwide expansion of the Afterschool Meal Program was authorized in 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, sponsors, state agencies, and anti-hunger, afterschool, and child advocates have been working to increase the number of programs and children participating. Detailed below are promising practices that can help increase the reach of afterschool suppers.

Serve Suppers Instead of (or in Addition to) Snacks

Many children receive afterschool snacks rather than suppers. One of the simplest strategies to reduce student hunger and improve nutrition is for afterschool programs to provide supper. If the program extends long enough, both supper and a snack could be offered. By not providing supper, sponsors and sites pass up significantly higher federal reimbursements that make the afterschool nutrition program more financially viable. An afterschool supper requires five food components, compared to the two required for snacks, but a supper's reimbursement rate is two-and-a-half times more than that of a snack.

Recruit More School Districts to Provide Afterschool Suppers and Snacks

School districts can provide afterschool suppers at schools and sites that are off of school grounds and located in an attendance area where at least 50 percent of the students are certified for free school meals. School districts have the capacity and experience to operate the Child Nutrition

Programs successfully. One reason is they often have a captive student audience, as many formal afterschool programs and informal enrichment activities are offered in school buildings. Schools that operate the Afterschool Supper Program can incorporate supper menu planning and procurement into existing school meal operations, allowing the nutrition programs to function more seamlessly and increase financial efficiency. To expand the number of school nutrition departments participating, state agencies and advocates should conduct outreach to eligible schools, identify barriers to participation, and assist schools in overcoming those barriers.

Support and Expand Year-Round Participation

In many communities, afterschool programs serve essentially the same group of children during the school year as they do during the summer months, and most summer meal sites are eligible to provide afterschool meals. To ensure consistent access to nutrition during out-of-school time hours all year long, targeted outreach should be conducted to bring summer meal sites into the Afterschool Supper Program when the school year begins, and afterschool sites into the Summer Food Service Program, when the school year ends. This year-round approach to providing meals eliminates



gaps in service and strengthens programs by allowing sponsors to employ the same staff and vendors, as well as maintain relationships with program providers, throughout the year. To implement more year-round programs, advocates can cross-promote programs during outreach, and state agencies can share information about both programs during site visits and trainings.

Streamline and Simplify Program Administration

One of the common concerns raised by eligible sponsors that are not participating in the Afterschool Supper Program is that it requires too much administrative work. The U.S. Department of Agriculture gives state agencies several options to reduce paperwork and streamline administrative requirements, such as creating an easier application process for schools and summer food sponsors. States also can reduce duplicative and unnecessary paperwork for schools and summer food sponsors that want to operate the Afterschool Supper Program. States also can allow School Food Authorities (SFAs) to submit an addendum to their school meal application instead of a separate CACFP application, and not requiring budgets or management plans.

Serve Meals During Weekends, Holidays, and Unanticipated School Closures

Afterschool programs can receive federal funding to serve meals and snacks through the Afterschool Nutrition Programs not just after school, but also on weekends, school holidays, and school breaks during the school year. Programs operating on days when school is not in session can choose to provide breakfast, lunch, or supper (and a snack). Maximizing service days helps programs increase the total number of meals claimed for reimbursement, allowing them to reallocate funds from other sources previously spent on food to expand programming or serve additional children. These days are



significant — for an average school year that runs 36 weeks, weekends equal more than 70 days of missed meal service days, and school holidays and vacations can total an additional 15 days or more of missed meals. The easiest way to add more meals when school is not in session during the school year is to recruit sites that are already providing educational and enrichment programming during those times, such as recreation centers, libraries, and youth groups.

Reduce Barriers in Rural Communities

Afterschool suppers fill the hunger gap that exists for millions of low-income children in rural communities. Rural communities have unique challenges that schools, anti-hunger partners, and other leaders should work together to overcome. For example, long travel distances may make it challenging for some children to stay after school, even when programs are offered. To alleviate this barrier, schools can work to adjust bus schedules to allow for meal service and an enrichment activity before buses leave. Schools also can consider serving meals immediately after the bell rings in the classroom, alongside offering homework help.

Improve Meal Quality

Serving high-quality and appealing suppers and snacks is an important way to draw more children into afterschool programs and maintain participation. All suppers and snacks provided through the Afterschool Nutrition Programs must meet federal nutrition standards. The U.S. Department of Agriculture updated these standards for suppers and snacks served through CACFP, which improved the nutritional quality significantly. Sponsors can further improve the meals they serve by incorporating fresh, seasonal food with “Farm to Afterschool,” and strengthening contracts to enhance the nutritional quality and appeal of vended meals.

Increase Funding for Afterschool Programs

One of the biggest challenges to expanding afterschool meals is the limited public and private funding that supports afterschool programming in low-income communities. An important way to connect more children to afterschool suppers is to ensure that there are enough afterschool programs available for children to participate in and that families can afford. This means maintaining and investing more in existing funding streams, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which is the largest funding source for afterschool programs but only provides funding for 1.7 million children on an average day. More public and private funding is needed to increase the number of high-quality, affordable afterschool programs.