



Increasing Breakfast Participation to Improve Student Health

The School Breakfast Program plays a vital role in supporting children's health and academic achievement. Still, too many students miss out on school breakfast and the positive outcomes that stem from participation. Just over half of low-income children who participate in school lunch also participate in school breakfast. School nurses can help increase student nutritional intake through school breakfast participation by encouraging their school(s) to implement a *breakfast after the bell* program and to offer nutritious breakfasts at no cost to all students, particularly in schools or school districts with high concentrations of students certified for free and reduced-price school meals.

School Breakfast Improves Children's Health

- **School breakfast reduces school nurse visits, especially in the morning.** Children experiencing hunger are more likely to have lower physical functioning, more frequent stomachaches and headaches, mental health problems, and to be in poorer health.^{i ii iii iv v vi vii}
- **School breakfast decreases the risk of food insecurity¹.** School breakfast offered at no cost to all students may eliminate disparities between food-secure and food-insecure children in terms of eating breakfast at all.^{viii}
- **School breakfast improves children's dietary intake.** Low-income children who eat school breakfast are more likely to consume fruit and milk at breakfast and have better overall diet quality compared to those students who do not participate in school breakfast. Participation also is linked with lower intake of fat, cholesterol, and sodium; whereas, skipping breakfast is linked to higher blood cholesterol and insulin levels.^{ix x xi xii}
- **School breakfast may protect against childhood obesity.** School breakfast participation is associated with a lower body mass index (BMI), lower probability of being overweight, and lower probability of obesity.^{xiii xiv xv xvi}

In addition to improving health, school breakfast improves student's academic performance. Participation is linked to increased cognitive function and attention; improved test scores and academic achievement; less absenteeism and tardiness; and fewer behavioral referrals. For more information of the positive impact of school breakfast on students, check out FRAC's [Breakfast for Health](#), [Breakfast for Learning](#), and the [Connections Between Food Insecurity, Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior](#).

¹ The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) official definition of a food-insecure household is one in which "access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources."

Make Breakfast Part of the School Day

School breakfast plays an essential role in a child's ability to learn; however, traditional service models which occur before the start of the school day in the cafeteria pose many barriers to participation. Busy morning schedules, late bus arrivals, a desire to socialize with friends, and the stigma that school breakfast is only for "poor kids" are all reasons students do not participate.

Implementing a breakfast after the bell model that moves breakfast out of the school cafeteria served before school starts — making it more accessible and a part of the regular school day — 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 or the cafeteria line to eat in their classroom or 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.

Offer Breakfast Free to All

Many high-poverty schools are able to offer school breakfast for free to all students, generally those with at least 70 percent of their students certified for free or reduced-price school meals. Providing breakfast at no charge to all students helps remove the stigma that breakfast in school is for "the poor kids," opens the program to children from families that would struggle to pay the reduced-price copayment or paid breakfast charges, and streamlines the implementation of breakfast in the classroom. For more information about how to offer free breakfast to all students, check out FRAC's Fact Sheet: [Offering Free Breakfast to All Students](#).

Helping to Increase School Breakfast Participation

School nurses can help ensure children's access to school breakfast by encouraging school administrators to implement one of the breakfast after the bell models described above. In partnership with your school nutrition director, opening up discussions with key stakeholders, such as the district's superintendent, principal, teachers, and school nutrition staff is the first step to forming a plan and implementing a program in the school building. Schools can implement a breakfast after the bell program at any point during the school year, so it is never too late to start the conversation. Check out FRAC's [School Breakfast Expansion Strategies](#) for additional information on how to increase participation.

Endnotes

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