



Hungry for Knowledge

Breakfast After the Bell reduces barriers to nourishment at school, helping students get ready to learn

By Jillien Meier

Students are dropped off at an elementary school outside a major city. The principal and a school counselor greet them and shuffle them into the gym, where they wait for a teacher to pick them up for class. As the students enter, some ask the teacher on duty whether they can go to the cafeteria for breakfast. The teacher glances at her watch, sees there are only three minutes before the first bell rings, and tells the students they need to arrive earlier if they want to eat breakfast. There isn't enough time to make it up three levels and across the building to eat breakfast before the bell.

This scene plays out in a variety of ways across the country each morning. Schools and educators become unintentional barriers to students accessing the nutrition they need to succeed in learning each day.

Widespread Insecurity

According to the recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report "Household Food Security in the United States," 11.2 million, or 1 in 7 children, lived in food-insecure households in 2018. Many of those students attend schools each day, where nutritious meals are available to students but not easily accessible. In fact, of the students who qualify for free and reduced-price school meals—those students who depend on school meals most—just over half eat school breakfast each day.

According to a social impact analysis performed by Deloitte for Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign, students who face food insecurity often lag behind peers from food-secure homes in social and emotional

development, academic achievement, and school attendance. One way to mitigate food insecurity and related challenges is by ensuring students are able to access the nutrition they need at school. And one successful approach is by making breakfast available during the school day—just like lunch—with Breakfast After the Bell.

A National Program

The national School Breakfast Program (SBP) is a federally funded school nutrition program, like school lunch. Schools participating in SBP must adhere to nutrition guidelines supported by science. Even though food items provided to students at school sometimes look the same as breakfast foods found in grocery stores, their nutritional profile is very different.

Children may be determined eligible for free or reduced-price meals through participation in certain federal assistance programs based on their household income and family size or by meeting other federal requirements.

Why should students eat breakfast at school? Research shows that the simple act of eating school breakfast can dramatically change a child's life. Making school breakfast a seamless

part of the school day by serving it after the bell can also have a huge impact on classrooms. From higher test scores, to calmer classrooms, to better attendance and graduation rates, school meals have proven to have a huge effect on students' ability to learn. The health benefits are also clear, with fewer nurse visits, better health, and lower rates of obesity among children who have access to school breakfast.

While access to school breakfast is important in meeting students' basic needs, evidence suggests that when students have access to breakfast as part of the school day, they attend school more regularly. In a recent study commissioned by No Kid Hungry, nationwide statistics showed that among young elementary students who eat breakfast in the classroom, chronic absenteeism and days absent from school decrease significantly.

Why aren't more students participating? Traditional school breakfast programs often operate too early for students to participate, particularly if bus or car-pool schedules do not allow them to get there on time. Other students end up skipping breakfast because they do not want to be identified as poor or miss time socializing with their friends.

Alternative Models

Even if your school serves meals at no cost to students, they might still face barriers to accessing those meals. Breakfast After the Bell programs can be an easy way to overcome such barriers, ensuring that all students can start the day nourished and ready to learn.

What do Breakfast After the Bell initiatives look like? Three innovative models have been successful:

1. Breakfast in the Classroom. Students eat breakfast in their classrooms after the official start of the school day. Students or staff might deliver breakfasts to classrooms via coolers or insulated rolling bags, or they might get breakfast from mobile carts in the hallways. As students eat, teachers begin instruction.

2. Grab and Go. Students pick up conveniently packaged breakfasts from mobile service carts in high-traffic areas, such as hallways, entryways, or cafeterias. Students eat in the classroom or elsewhere on school grounds before and after the bell rings. Grab and Go is most effective when carts are stationed in locations convenient to students (e.g., near school entrances) and when students are able to eat the food they pick up immediately.



NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

Schools participating in SBP must adhere to USDA nutritional guidelines to receive reimbursement for the cost of food, preparation, and service.

Its general guidelines stipulate that a school breakfast must include 1 cup of fruit and/or vegetables, two servings of whole-grain-rich products, and 8 oz. of fat-free or 1% milk.

These minimums can be satisfied in a variety of ways, including the use of packaged items that offer an enhanced nutritional profile compared to their store-bought versions.



3. Second-Chance Breakfast. Students eat breakfast during a break in the morning, often after first period. Schools serve breakfast in the same manner as they would a Grab and Go breakfast.

Get Started

Here's how can you help students access school breakfast:

- **Talk to cafeteria and nutrition staff.** Ask them how your school serves breakfast and whether there are other models your school could try. Find out whether there is a difference between the number of students eating a school breakfast and the number eating a school lunch.
- **Talk to your school staff.** Communicate the importance of school breakfast, ask about any barriers you see to students accessing the meal, and talk through ways to troubleshoot those barriers.
- **Find a volunteer to start a pilot in their classroom.** With the support of your cafeteria,

custodial, and other staff, a small pilot initiative can help work out kinks and show the success of alternative models in real time.

- **Reach out to No Kid Hungry.** No Kid Hungry works with school administrators and staff to identify and customize a Breakfast After the Bell model appropriate for their school. Bringing together stakeholders including teachers, food and building services staff, and parents, No Kid Hungry helps design the ideal program to ensure that schools have the funding, equipment, and marketing resources they need to make an alternative breakfast model work.

Breakfast After the Bell is a solution to meeting the most basic needs of students so they can start the day ready to learn. It can have a huge impact on students' social and emotional well-being, attendance, and academic outcomes. Getting access to breakfast makes students hungry to learn. 

Jillien Meier is director of No Kid Hungry Partnerships and Campaign Strategy.

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