

Food Research and Action Center

Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization | Number 6

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- While 8.5 million low-income children benefit from school breakfast, too many children miss out. Less than half of the low-income children who eat lunch at school also participate in breakfast.
- Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides the opportunity to remove barriers to participation and make program improvements so that more low-income children participate.
- Congress can improve access by making a number of key investments in the program, such as providing grants for start-up and expansion costs and reducing administrative costs by eliminating paper applications in high poverty school districts.

How to Expand Participation in School Breakfast

The School Breakfast Program provides millions of children a much needed nutritious meal so they start the school day ready to learn.¹ Breakfast is available to students in 86 percent of the schools across the country, with 8.5 million low-income children eating for free or at a substantially reduced price.² When children eat breakfast at school, it reduces hunger, tardiness and nurse visits, and improves nutrition and student achievement. Children's test scores, attentiveness, attendance, and behavior all have been shown to improve as a result of participating in school breakfast.³

Despite the positive outcomes, school breakfast participation remains too low. Nationally, less than half of the low-income children who eat lunch at school also participate in breakfast.⁴ State participation varies significantly, with some states serving breakfast to three out of five low-income students, and others serving just one in three. Many children arrive at school not ready to learn and unable to concentrate because they have not eaten a morning meal.

There are a number of reasons why school breakfast misses too many children. The time and place of meal service (often the cafeteria before class starts) and the payment system (based on family income, creating stigma) can reduce participation, especially among low-income children and middle- and high school students. Bus schedules, parents' work schedules, children's desire to socialize on the playground, even slowdowns in lines at school security, all contribute to the low participation.

Since good school breakfast programs can help transform schools and support the entire school community – students, parents, teachers, and administrators – it is important to increase school breakfast participation. The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides the opportunity to remove the barriers to participation and make program improvements so that more low-income children participate. The reauthorization should:

- Create a grant program to support the start-up and expansion of universal and in-classroom school breakfast programs;
- Expand universal breakfast programs (free for all students) by eliminating paper applications, thereby reducing administrative costs for school districts that serve a high percentage of low-income children; and
- Provide USDA commodities to schools for breakfast meals.

Benefits

The School Breakfast Program is a miracle of good public policy. It not only reduces hunger, but it has a range of other positive outcomes that advance key national priorities. The positive impact of the program on student achievement, health and well-being is well documented in an extensive body of research.

Eating School Breakfast Helps Struggling Families

School breakfast is a critical support to struggling families, who are trying to stretch limited resources. Breakfast provides children a significant portion of the nutrition their bodies need each day, which reduces struggling families' food costs.⁵ In 2009, 24 percent of households with children told Gallup that there were times in the past year when they

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did not have enough money to buy food that they needed.⁶ The School Breakfast Program is an important tool to alleviate food hardship and hunger – an all too common circumstance for American families with children.

USDA research shows that children who participate in school breakfast eat more fruits, drink more milk, and eat a wider variety of foods than those who do not eat school breakfast or who have breakfast at home.

Eating School Breakfast Improves Academic Performance

At a time when schools are expected to raise their students' academic performance and test scores, making sure every child has eaten a healthy breakfast is an important but often overlooked tool. Researchers report that children who skip breakfast are less able to master the tasks necessary to do well in school;⁷ and they have more difficulty distinguishing among similar images, show increased errors, and have slower memory recall.⁸ Studies also show that children who live in families that experience hunger have lower math scores and an increased likelihood to repeat a grade, and receive more special education services.⁹ Children who eat breakfast at school – closer to class and test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.¹⁰

Eating School Breakfast Reduces Behavioral Problems

Every parent knows that hungry children are often cranky and are more likely to misbehave. It is no surprise that research confirms that students who participate in school breakfast exhibit decreased behavioral and psychological problems and have lower rates of absence and tardiness.^{11,12,13} Studies show that behavioral and emotional problems are more prevalent among children living in families where hunger is an issue.¹⁴ Teenagers experiencing hunger are more likely to be suspended from school, and to have difficulty getting along with other children and establishing friendships.¹⁵

Eating School Breakfast Improves Children's Diets

Children in America too often grow up surrounded by junk food, and many have developed unhealthy eating habits. In contrast, breakfasts served as part of the School Breakfast Program are required to provide one-fourth or more of the key nutrients children need every day, and contain no more than 30 percent of calories from fat and 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. USDA research shows that children who participate in school breakfast eat more fruits, drink more milk, and eat a wider variety of foods than those who do not eat school breakfast or who have breakfast at home.¹⁶

Free and Reduced-Price Breakfast: How it Works

Any school can participate in the federal School Breakfast Program. School boards must apply to their administering state agency – usually the education agency – in order to institute a program, which is administered nationally through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. All students in participating schools may take part in the program.

Household income determines whether students receive free meals, reduced-price meals, or "paid" meals (for which students pay almost all of the cost). The federal government provides these funds to a school (through the state) based on how many breakfasts it provides to students in each category. In the 2009-2010 school year schools receive \$1.46 for each free breakfast, \$1.16 for each reduced-price breakfast, and \$0.26 for each paid breakfast served. Schools received an additional \$0.28 for each free and reduced-price breakfast served if at least 40 percent of the lunches served in the school during the second preceding school year were free or reduced price. (These are called "severe need" schools.)

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line receive school meals for free. In 2009, that was \$28,665 for a family of four. Children from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line receive school meals at a reduced price – no more than 30 cents for breakfast. All other participating students, officially designated as receiving "paid" meals, pay most of the cost for their breakfast, often approximately \$1.15.

Eating School Breakfast Can Help Reduce Obesity

Obesity rates have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents over the past 20 years and translate into increased risks of premature death and an overall lower quality of life because obesity is associated with an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, asthma, osteoarthritis, cancer and psychological disorders. Children and adolescents who eat breakfast (and school breakfast) are significantly less likely to be overweight, while skipping breakfast is associated with a higher risk of obesity.^{17,18} School breakfast also helps build lifelong healthy eating habits.

Recommendations for Improvement

The School Breakfast Program is available in 86 percent of schools, yet less than half of the low-income children who participate in school lunch each day also eat breakfast at school. If children do not eat breakfast at school, it is likely that they won't eat breakfast at all and will not start the school day ready to learn.

Many children skip breakfast because their families struggle to put a meal on the table. In 2007 approximately 12.4 million American children, or one in six, lived in households that struggled against hunger, according to official federal data.¹⁹ For these children a filling, nutritious meal every morning is often beyond their parents' ability to provide. Even the 30 cent co-payment required for reduced-price breakfast can be a significant hurdle for struggling families. For millions of other children, eating breakfast is not necessarily a matter of money, but of time. As the demands on working parents have grown, and parents face longer commutes to distant jobs or jobs with non-traditional work hours, many are not able to provide breakfast to their children each morning.

Child Nutrition Reauthorization can make access a priority by including changes that make it easier for schools to offer more ambitious breakfast programs and for children to participate. These investments would yield significant benefits as many more children participate and increased federal funds are captured by the school to support the program. Congress should include the following provisions in Child Nutrition Reauthorization:

Create a grant program to support the start-up and expansion of universal and in-classroom school breakfast programs.

Breakfast served in the cafeteria before the school day begins misses too many children. Children who rely on school buses to get to school each day may not arrive early enough to eat in the cafeteria before class starts. Others may be backed up at long security lines. For others, this time is reserved for talking with friends or playing outside. Stigma (only poor children are eating school breakfast) also plays a role in keeping children from participating. This perception exists in part because, unlike the typical school lunch, not all children are in the cafeteria at breakfast time, so even some of the neediest children hesitate to participate.

Family Breakfast is Uncommon in Most Homes

Data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation show that most American families of school-age children do not eat breakfast together every day. Only 35 percent of parents of children ages 6 to 11 report eating breakfast each day with their children. On average, only 22 percent of parents of middle and high school-aged students report eating breakfast daily with their children. More than twice as many parents report eating dinner with their children each day. These percentages are similar across income levels, race, areas of the country, and community type (urban, suburban or rural).

U.S. Census Bureau, *Survey of Income and Program Participation*, 2004 Panel, Wave 3. Released October, 2007.

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About this series

Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization will explore various aspects of the child nutrition programs as Congress considers reauthorization. To learn more, visit FRAC's website (www.frac.org).

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Child Nutrition Reauthorization can make school breakfast truly accessible for all students by creating supports for schools to offer breakfast free to all students ("universal breakfast") and offer breakfast in the classroom (breakfast is brought from the kitchen in containers that keep dishes at the right temperature, hot or cold, or is picked up from carts in the hallways as children enter class). A grant program would provide funds to help schools with high percentages of low-income children implement these breakfast reforms. Usually this requires only a modest investment in each school to purchase equipment and to pay for additional staff to provide temporary support to help with program implementation.

Expand universal breakfast programs (free for all students) by eliminating paper applications, thereby reducing administrative costs for school districts that serve a high percentage of low-income children.

The paper application process is burdensome to families who either never receive an application or do not complete one due to language barriers, privacy concerns, misunderstanding of eligibility rules, or other factors. High poverty school districts should be able to provide free meals to all children by using reliable statistical data (census data, household surveys, or other public records) to determine reimbursement, instead of individual paper applications. Similarly, improving direct certification to allow children who participate in Medicaid or State Children's Health Insurance Program, as well as TANF and SNAP/Food Stamps, will reduce the need for paper applications. Eliminating unnecessary paperwork for families also removes a significant barrier to participation. School districts that serve a large percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals can break even serving free breakfast to all when their administrative costs are reduced. Universal breakfast is proven to increase participation by low-income students and improve health and learning.

Provide USDA commodities to schools for breakfast meals.

Currently, school districts are entitled to a federal commodity contribution for each lunch served, but not for breakfast. If commodity support is expanded to breakfasts, schools will have more resources to provide healthy breakfasts and can use fresh fruit and vegetable commodities to improve the quality of the meals.

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