



# CHILD NUTRITION POLICY BRIEF

Food Research & Action Center

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## Universal School Breakfast

**Universal School Breakfast** refers to a school program that offers breakfast at no charge to all students, regardless of family income.

### WHY UNIVERSAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST IS IMPORTANT

Many children do not eat a nutritious breakfast every morning.

- Over ten percent of all U.S. households, representing 20 million adults and 13 million children, are "food insecure" due to a lack of financial resources. Many of these families can't afford to provide good breakfasts at home every day nor the money to buy them at school.
- Regardless of income, families today live busy lives, with long commutes and extended and non-traditional work hours that often make it difficult to find enough time in the morning to eat a nutritious breakfast.

**Universal School Breakfast can improve student achievement, diets and behavior.**

- In focus groups, parents and teachers unanimously agree that a classroom of students who have eaten a nutritious breakfast is optimal for ensuring the best possible learning environment.
- Studies show that students who eat school breakfast at the start of the school day have better math and reading scores and improvements in their speed and memory in cognitive tests.
- 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.
- Children who have school breakfast eat more fruits, drink more milk, and consume less saturated fat than those who don't eat breakfast or have breakfast at home. Children who attend schools with **Universal School Breakfast** eat more minerals, fruits and dairy, and less cholesterol than children from schools without **Universal School Breakfast**.
- **Universal School Breakfast** does not promote obesity. Students who attend schools with **Universal School Breakfast** do not have significantly higher rates of overweight than children from schools without it.
- Principals in schools that provide **Universal School Breakfast** are significantly more likely to report decreased tardiness, absenteeism and disciplinary problems. Schools that provide breakfast in the classroom at for all students report decreases in discipline problems, visits to school nurses and tardiness; and increases in student attentiveness and attendance.

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### **Universal School Breakfast increases student participation in breakfast.**

- In focus groups, low-income mothers describe situations in which their children refuse to accept free school breakfast to avoid being seen as low-income by their peers. Teachers and parents of all income levels concur that this problem exists. Offering breakfast at no charge to all students helps remove the stigma for low-income children of participation in school breakfast.
- Only 43 children eat federally-funded free or reduced price school breakfasts for every 100 who receive free or reduced price school lunch. Studies show that **Universal School Breakfast** programs almost double student participation in school breakfast.
- Some **Universal School Breakfast** programs provide breakfast in the classroom when school starts in the morning, rather than in the cafeteria before school starts, which makes it easier for children to participate. Breakfast in the classroom cannot be done, in most cases, unless the breakfast is available free for all the students. Research shows that breakfast in the classroom triples school breakfast participation.
- **Universal School Breakfast** has been shown to get one out six children who do not start the day with a basic breakfast to start eating breakfast. Most of the children who increase their school breakfast participation after the start of **Universal School Breakfast** in their schools are low-income and most likely to be nutritionally at risk.

### **CURRENT ISSUES IN UNIVERSAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST**

- One of the most promising methods for implementing **Universal School Breakfast** is Provision 2, a School Breakfast Program (and National School Lunch Program) option that reduces paperwork, simplifies the logistics of operating school meals programs, and allows schools to serve meals at no charge.
- State legislation provides supplemental state funding for **Universal School Breakfast** in four states: Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, and North Carolina. Researchers have assessed **Universal School Breakfast** in some of these states and have reported improved academic achievement and test scores, better school attendance, decreased tardiness, reduced disruptive behavior, and higher school breakfast participation.
- **Universal School Breakfast** model programs in states such as Arizona, California, Georgia and Ohio have shown dramatic increases in school breakfast participation, to over 90 percent in schools with breakfast in the classroom. These model programs have also found that the increased volume of school breakfast has resulted in increased revenues, which one model program uses to provide higher quality meals.