



New Jersey's School Breakfast Story



There is a way to help students succeed in school — without costing New Jersey taxpayers an additional penny and, in fact, bringing more federal dollars into the state.

School breakfast, when done right, benefits students, schools and helps fuel academic achievement.

School breakfast success stories abound across New Jersey. Officials at districts that have embraced making breakfast part of the school day — just like lunch — all tell the same story. More students start their day with a healthy meal. More students are ready to concentrate and learn. There are fewer trips to the school nurse, fewer classroom disruptions. Attendance improves.



“Most of the school breakfast challenges are myths and it’s all about getting beyond the myth and getting to the reality.”

Richard O’Malley,
Superintendent, Edison



And, millions more in federal dollars flow into schools to combat childhood hunger, removing a major barrier to learning, while improving the quality of food all students eat in school.

Since 2011, hundreds of New Jersey schools have switched to serving breakfast after the bell, typically during the first few minutes of the school day, rather than before school when most students have not yet arrived.

This change has resulted in a 73 percent jump in the number of low-income students participating, translating to nearly 18 million more breakfasts served each school year. Districts have more than doubled the amount of federal per-meal breakfast dollars to an anticipated \$105 million in FY 2018. New Jersey rose from nearly last in the nation for its low student participation to 19th in the 2016-17 school year.

Now, New Jersey is headed in the wrong direction. From April 2016 to October 2017, New Jersey schools served breakfast to 4 percent fewer low-income students — a decline of nearly 10,600 students, according to Advocates for Children of New Jersey’s analysis of state data.

“Breakfast goes a long way in Union City because the majority of kids live below the poverty line. The parents I’ve spoken to are extremely grateful to have that worry alleviated, knowing their children are getting fed.”

Angela Andrews, Union City Parent

- **The issue is not enrollment.** These children are already enrolled and eligible for this federally-funded nutrition.
- **The issue is not money.** In high-poverty schools, federal per-meal reimbursements cover the cost of school breakfast, pumping additional funds into school meals programs to build kitchens, upgrade cafeterias, buy new equipment, hire staff and overall improve the food schools serve to students.
- **The issue is when breakfast is served** — and of school leaders unwilling to end the long-standing, ineffective practice of serving breakfast before school when stigma and schedules conspire to keep breakfast from reaching most students who need this morning nutrition.

Many districts have stepped up to meet the logistical challenges of making the switch to breakfast after the bell. Sadly, many others remain resistant to making this change — despite ample evidence that this is a doable, common-sense approach to combating childhood hunger and improving students’ chance for school success.

As members of the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign have travelled across the state over the past six years, recruiting local advocates to champion breakfast after the bell in their own backyards, we are often asked why? Why wouldn’t school administrators make this change when the need and the money are clearly there?

From our experience, the answer is, essentially, that change is not easy. It requires vision, leadership and hard work. Plus, school administrators face many competing demands. All too often, nutrition gets low priority, despite overwhelming evidence of the strong, documented connection between nutrition and academic achievement.

Frequently, school administrators cite clean-up, lost instructional time and other implementation issues. The truth is, these issues can be addressed — with a strong will and strong leadership. There's plenty of proof of that in schools across New Jersey.

It is time that all high-poverty schools serve breakfast at a time and in a way that all students can benefit from the nutrition they need to concentrate, learn and achieve academic success.

“We want to make sure every child receives a nutritious meal. That benefits everyone. It’s a win/win.”

Tonya Riggins, Director,
Food and Nutrition Services,
Newark Public Schools

Recommendation: Require all schools with at least 70 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals to serve breakfast after the bell. State law already requires districts with at least 20 percent low-income students to have a breakfast program. This change would simply ensure that all children in high-poverty schools can take advantage of that all-important morning meal.

Breakfast by the Numbers¹

Number of students eligible for free/reduced-price school meals: **539,576**

Number of students receiving free/reduced-price school breakfast, October 2017: **228,525**

Number **NOT** receiving school breakfast: **311,051**

Percent of low-income students receiving school breakfast, October 2017: **42 %**

Percent of low-income students receiving school lunch, October 2017: **74 %**

How do schools pay for breakfast?

The federal School Breakfast Program reimburses districts for each meal served. This school year, the reimbursement rate for higher-poverty schools is \$2.09 for each free meal, \$1.79 for each reduced-price meal and 30 cents for a paid meal.

A family of four earning \$31,980 or less is eligible for free breakfast, while a family of four earning up to \$45,510 is eligible for reduced-price school meals.

High-poverty schools can cover the full cost of free breakfast — and still have surplus funds to improve other aspects of their food service. All federal breakfast funds must be used toward food service expenses. Those dollars cannot go into a district's general fund or be used for any other purpose, other than meal-related expenses.

Since New Jersey increased school breakfast participation, annual federal reimbursements more than doubled to an anticipated \$105 million in FY2018.

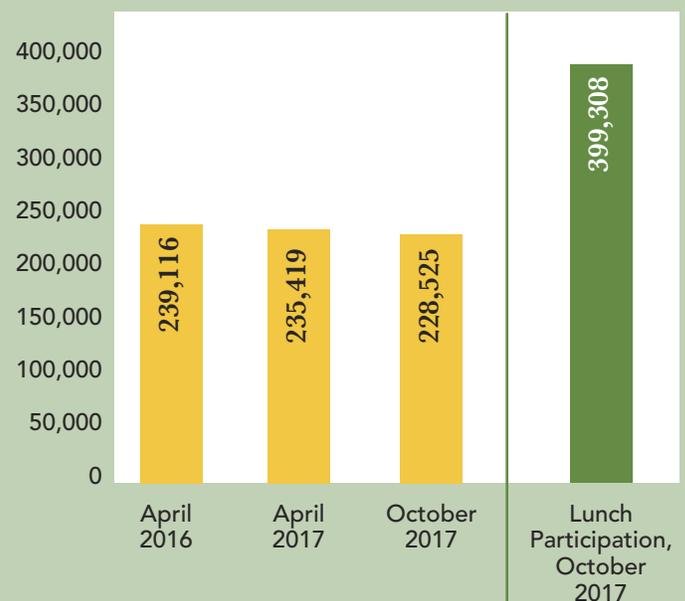
Federal School Breakfast Reimbursements²

FY 2010: \$46.3 million

FY 2018: \$105 million

Federal breakfast reimbursements lost each year: \$89 million

School Breakfast Participation, Number of Low-Income Students³



New Jersey School Breakfast Success Stories

Here is a look at a handful of the many districts that have model school breakfast programs to help other New Jersey districts fully implement breakfast after the bell.

UNION CITY: Breakfast boosts mean better food for all students

Union City's federal breakfast reimbursement soared \$1.5 million — funds used to build kitchens, buy equipment and improve food quality.

Union City's staunch commitment to serving breakfast to every single student has reaped enormous benefits that stretch far beyond a surge in participation.

Fewer children visit the nurse because of hunger headaches, school officials say. Students are more focused each morning. They're enjoying a wider variety of more appealing, healthy foods at both breakfast and lunch.

And then there's the money.

Since 2013, federal reimbursements for breakfast have rose \$1.5 million primarily because of the skyrocketing participation, according to Business Administrator Anthony N. Dragona, Ed.D. The district now collects more than \$2.5 million annually for breakfast alone. Federal reimbursements for school meals overall has also soared \$6.5 million, Dragona says.

That has enabled the district to install kitchens in all but one of its 14 schools, buy new equipment and make their cafeterias brighter, happier places for students to eat. This, in turn, means the district can provide fresher, more appetizing meals, which further fuels participation.

"The quality of food increases dramatically as a result of greater participation in breakfast and lunch," explains Dragona, whose district takes advantage of a federal accounting option



"We have beautiful kids, but they have struggles. It's really about setting a tone. When you provide breakfast and healthy, appealing choices for lunch, the road you're leading the child down to get a good education is a much smoother one."

Anthony N. Dragona, Ed.D., Business Administrator, Union City

known as Community Eligibility that allows schools to provide free meals to all students and reduce paperwork.

"The better the food is, the more kids want to eat it," he adds.

Pancake and burger stations, hot breakfast sandwiches for high school students to "grab and go" and more appealing packaging of Asian offerings and sandwiches are just a few of the food improvements the district has implemented in recent years, thanks to increased federal dollars.

The real bottom line, though, is the kids.

"We have beautiful kids, but they have struggles," Dragona says. "It's really about setting a tone. When you provide breakfast and healthy, appealing choices for lunch, the road you're leading the child down to get a good education is a much smoother one."

BOUND BROOK: No more stomach aches for students

"Kids would come in complaining of stomach aches and I would give them graham crackers paid for out of my own pocket."

— Sally Hoben, School Nurse, Bound Brook

School nurse Sally Hoben knew kids were coming to school hungry and she knew she had to do something about it.

In a town where roughly three-quarters of students live in low-income households, only 16 percent were receiving school breakfast during the 2012-2013 school year.



"Kids would come in complaining of stomach aches and I would give them graham crackers paid for out of my own pocket," Hoben recalls.

She discussed the issue with school leaders, which eventually led Superintendent Daniel Gallagher to implement breakfast after the bell in all schools.

Now, Bound Brook feeds 87 percent of its low-income children, making it one of the most effective districts in the state. The district easily covers the cost of providing breakfast free to all students, school administrators said. Attendance improved and tardiness dropped.

For Hoben, the biggest reward is knowing that all students now have a nutritious start to their day.

"I even had one teacher comment, 'I've never seen so many students wide awake and ready to work.' It's been very positive," the school nurse says.

NORTH HALEDON: School breakfast a routine part of the school day

"Once everyone gets into a routine, it just becomes a normal part of the day. I think if we pulled it away now the teachers and kids would be very upset."

Miguel Hernandez, Superintendent, North Haledon Public Schools

When Miguel Hernandez took over the helm of the North Haledon School District in 2016, one of the first changes he implemented was to make breakfast part of the school day.

In one short year, participation climbed from 16 percent to 40 percent of students eligible for free and low-cost school meals. The additional reimbursements have more than covered the cost of the program.

"The program pays for itself," Hernandez says.

Classroom breakfast also enhances instructional time.

"We have students complete lessons as they're eating breakfast, so we're not wasting instructional time," he explains. "And once they finish breakfast, they are more focused and that makes instructional time even more productive."

"Students ask for the breakfast immediately when they walk into the classroom in the morning. They're hungry. When kids are hungry it truly impairs their ability to focus on their academics. I really can't imagine our day without the breakfast. It's just one thing off the list of concerns students have to deal with."

Kristin Brucia, Bound Brook Teacher



After working out the logistics of serving breakfast in the classroom, breakfast runs smoothly and teachers — at first skeptical — have become staunch supporters.

"Once everyone gets into a routine, it just becomes a normal part of the day," Hernandez explains, adding that the district also continues to offer a hot breakfast before school in the cafeteria for students who can arrive early. "I think if we pulled it away now the teachers and kids would be very upset."

EDISON: Strong leadership led to breakfast after the bell

"You can eat and learn. It's OK to have milk when you're doing math."

Richard O'Malley, Superintendent, Edison Township

Edison's school breakfast story illustrates how a determined school leader and a committed staff can make breakfast after the bell work — even when less than one-quarter of students qualify for subsidized meals.

It started several years ago when Superintendent Richard O'Malley read an Advocates for Children of New Jersey report that found just 1 percent of Edison's low-income students were receiving school breakfast — a statistic so stark he had to act.

The first thing O'Malley did was to break down the myths. Cost, clean-up, lost instructional time are common obstacles school officials cite when they reject breakfast after the bell.

"Most of the challenges are myths and it's all about getting beyond the myth and getting to the reality," O'Malley notes.

And that's just what he did.

"I sat down with my cabinet of principals and supervisors," O'Malley remembers. "I explained to them my vision for the district, the benefits to the students and the district and how we can be leaders in this effort."

Today, the district feeds 60 percent of low-income students, rivaling the participation rates of many large urban schools with much higher poverty. Not only has breakfast become popular with students living in low-income families, many parents opt to pay a nominal fee so their kids can eat breakfast at school.

"You can eat and learn," O'Malley says. "It's OK to have milk when you're doing math."

"We've seen a big increase in the number of students eating breakfast. I'm seeing more students coming in early and it helps with attendance."

Kathleen Tierney, Principal,
Science Park High, Newark

Childhood Hunger by the Numbers

Nearly **300,000** New Jersey children face hunger, with many receiving their primary nutrition at school.⁴

Nearly **540,000** New Jersey children live in families that struggle to make ends meet.⁵

These children are all qualified for free or low-cost school meals and enrolled in the breakfast program.



"The kids really are appreciative of the breakfast. Some administrators say that grab-n-go was one of the best things that happened in the high school. I don't hear as many nurses complaining that kids are coming to their offices hungry. It's a big plus. No child should go hungry."

Linda Reid, Paterson Grandparent and
Chief Organizer of the Paterson Parents Education
Organizing Council

What is Breakfast After the Bell?

Most students simply can't get to school with enough time to eat before the first bell rings. Bus schedules, the need to care for younger siblings, transportation issues, early start times and other factors prevent this. Plus, the stigma of being the kid who eats breakfast before school keeps many students away.

That's why breakfast after the bell is the only effective way to ensure all students receive a healthy breakfast each morning.

The most common forms of breakfast after the bell are:

- **Classroom Breakfast.** Breakfast is delivered to the classroom. When students arrive, they pick up a breakfast and a milk and sit down to eat. Many teachers incorporate lessons into breakfast time.
- **Grab 'N Go.** Students pick up breakfasts from kiosks stationed in high-traffic areas, taking their breakfast to the classroom. This method is used most often in middle and high schools.
- **Second Chance Breakfast.** The meal is served during a morning break, usually in the classroom. Again, this method is most often used in high schools.

Schools can tailor breakfast service to fit the size of the building, staffing levels, children's needs, school schedules and other factors.

School Breakfast in Other States

Currently, five states — Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, West Virginia and Illinois — and the District of Columbia require high-poverty schools to serve breakfast after the bell.

Three — West Virginia, New Mexico and D.C. — consistently achieve the highest participation rates in the nation, according to the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), a national advocacy group based in Washington D.C. Colorado and Nevada also rank near the top, while Illinois is just implementing breakfast after the bell this school year.⁶

Here is a quick look at school breakfast in these states.

- **Colorado** Passed in 2013, Colorado's law requires all schools with 70 percent qualified students to serve breakfast after the bell. Since the legislation was implemented, Colorado rose from 31st nationally in the 2011-12 school year to 14th in the 2016-17 school year, according to FRAC. Participation increased to 60 percent of those children receiving free or reduced-price school lunch.
- **Illinois** In 2016, Illinois passed legislation requiring breakfast after the bell in schools with at least 70 percent low-income students. In the 2015-16 school year, Illinois schools fed less than half of low-income students who participated in lunch, with the state ranking 43rd nationwide. The legislation is being implemented this year.

- **Nevada** Three years after Nevada adopted a law requiring high-poverty schools to serve breakfast during the school day, student participation more than doubled, schools are collecting \$8 million more in federal funds each year to feed students and teachers say fewer children start their day hungry.

Participation skyrocketed from 37 percent to 64 percent of low-income students. Nevada rose in the national ranks from 25th to 7th. With this change came a decline in childhood hunger, according to Share Our Strength. In a survey of 271 teachers, two out of three said fewer students are hungry in the morning because of breakfast after the bell.

- **West Virginia** West Virginia's law encompasses more than breakfast, making the state a national model for fighting childhood hunger. Feed to Achieve Act, passed in 2013, requires all school districts — regardless of poverty level — to implement innovative breakfast delivery strategies. This has put the state number one in the country four years in a row. In the 2016-17 school year, West Virginia schools fed breakfast to 85 percent of low-income children who also ate lunch at school, compared to New Jersey's 57 percent.
- **Washington D.C.** The District of Columbia was the first jurisdiction in the country to require classroom breakfast when it passed the 2010 D.C. Healthy Schools Act, which requires all public and public charter schools to offer free breakfast to all students.

Elementary schools with more than 40 percent of qualified students must serve breakfast in the classroom. In addition to traditional breakfast served in the cafeteria before school, middle and high schools must serve some form of breakfast after the bell. D.C. has consistently ranked in the top three nationally.

“Most school nutrition directors want to feed as many students as possible so that all children have the morning nourishment they need to succeed. But many face opposition or lack support from administrators and others when proposing breakfast after the bell. We need support to make that happen for our students.”

Warren DeShields, President,
New Jersey School Nutrition Association



■ End Notes

- ¹ Food for Thought: 7th Annual New Jersey School Breakfast Report, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, <https://acnj.org/food-for-thought-7th-annual-school-breakfast-2017/> and NJ Department of Agriculture NSLP ADP Report, Oct. 2017.
- ² New Jersey State Budget, FY 2010, FY 2018
- ³ Food for Thought: 7th Annual New Jersey School Breakfast Report, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, <https://acnj.org/food-for-thought-7th-annual-school-breakfast-2017/>
- ⁴ Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/research/map-the-meal-gap/2015/2015-mapthemealgap-exec-summary.pdf>
- ⁵ Food for Thought: 7th Annual School Breakfast Report, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, <https://acnj.org/food-for-thought-7th-annual-school-breakfast-2017/>
- ⁶ School Breakfast Scorecard, School Year 2016-2017, Food Research & Action Center, <http://frac.org/research/resource-library/school-breakfast-scorecard-2015-2016-school-year-february-2017>
Advocates for Children of New Jersey, School Breakfast Success Stories, <https://acnj.org/food-for-thought/school-breakfast-success-stories/>

“I think it’d be hard for me if they didn’t have breakfast because I come to school a little later and have a full schedule, so I wouldn’t be at my full potential.”

Kajal, Union City High School Student



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The New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition (NJAHC) is a non-profit, non-partisan statewide advocacy organization working to end hunger through education, advocacy and activism. NJAHC educates the public and decision-makers about hunger — its causes, its solutions. NJAHC mobilizes diverse organizations to combat hunger and pushes for sweeping changes to ensure that every single New Jersey resident has healthy food to eat — every single day. NJAHC is a program of the Center for Food Action.

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