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# Governance Brief

## Starting a Breakfast After the Bell Program

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The research is clear: students learn at a higher level after having eaten breakfast. Most schools and school districts serve breakfast in the traditional model of service—before the bell in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, many students do not or cannot access the most important meal of the day when it is served in this manner. It is challenging for many families to get their students to school on time, especially with enough time to eat breakfast before the bell rings. For many students, the breakfast program in the cafeteria carries with it a stigma of poverty, and they would rather go hungry than be seen as poor. Also, many students are excited to socialize before school begins and do not think about breakfast until they are sitting in their classrooms and their stomachs begin to growl.

Schools that serve breakfast after the bell ensure students have equal access to the meals, as well as benefit from increasing participation which leads to an increase in meal reimbursements, average daily attendance and consequently more funding to the district as a whole. Yet, many California schools are not taking advantage of this practice. The purpose of this brief is to help governance teams start thinking about how they may bring these benefits to their districts and learn about some best practices other districts have developed to establish successful breakfast after the bell programs.

### The benefits of breakfast after the bell programs

CSBA's July 2011 Policy Brief, *Expanding School Breakfast Programs to Improve Student Learning*, provides a summary of the research that proves breakfast to be a powerful learning tool. In short,

- » School breakfast programs correlate with better grades and lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

- » In a survey that sampled responses from students in grades 7, 9, and 11, Academic Performance Index scores were higher where a higher percentage of students ate breakfast the day of the test.<sup>4</sup>
- » A study of the effects of universal school breakfast (no student is charged for a meal) found that math and reading achievement scores increased each year that the program was in place.<sup>5</sup>
- » Researchers found that serving breakfast to children who do not get a morning meal elsewhere can significantly improve their cognitive and mental abilities.<sup>6</sup>
- » After implementation of the federally funded School Breakfast Program, schools experienced improvements in attendance, and therefore increased average daily attendance.<sup>7</sup>

Many students who attend schools without a breakfast after the bell program skip breakfast and therefore miss out on this important—and potentially tasty—learning boost. According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as healthy breakfast eating habits are not reinforced, the percentage of young people who eat breakfast decreases with age.<sup>8</sup> Innovative school districts have found a solution to this problem with alternative breakfast models of service and the results have been stunning for their many positive effects on teaching, learning, student behavior and overall school climate.

For school districts that want to maximize the impact of their breakfast program, it is not enough to rely on traditional before school, cafeteria based programs. These programs see dramatically less participation than do breakfast after the bell programs. According to an analysis conducted by California Food Policy Advo-

cates in 2012, In California, school breakfast programs reach only 35% of students from low-income families.<sup>9</sup> Districts can increase their participation rates in breakfast by serving the most important meal of the day after the bell rings and to all students.

## Which districts make a good fit for breakfast after the bell?

Breakfast after the bell is an especially good option for districts or individual schools with large numbers of students who are eligible for free and reduced priced meals. It is possible for districts to implement breakfast after the bell districtwide or on a school-by-school basis, should there be a large discrepancy in the number of students from low-income families throughout the district. Economies of scale make it possible for districts with high counts of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch to offer the breakfast meal at no cost to *all* students on campus. Under this model, extra accounting is unnecessary and there is no stigma attached to who pays for breakfast and who does not.

While breakfast after the bell is most economically expedient for districts with a large population of student who receive free and reduced-price lunch, breakfast is a great learning tool for all students. The correlation between eating breakfast and student attendance and achievement make breakfast after the bell a worthwhile educational investment. As is well known, many teachers, schools, and school districts request food to be brought into the classroom during testing to help improve test scores, so why limit it to just during the testing schedule and not provide it all year round?

## Types of breakfast after the bell models of service

Several models of breakfast after the bell programs have proven successful in schools:

**Breakfast in the classroom:** This is a popular choice for elementary schools. Students eat breakfast during the first 10 to 15 minutes of the school day—after the bell, in the classroom. Teachers often use this time for administrative tasks, taking role, reading and math assignments, teaching about nutrition and healthy eating, or simply to get right into the first lesson. The cafeteria staff packs nutritious, yet easy-to-manage breakfast meals into sturdy insulated bags on wheels that look a lot like something that could be easily rolled to a picnic in the park.

**Grab and go:** Grab and go breakfast programs typically have students pick up prepackaged breakfast meals first thing in the morning from carts on or around the school campus. Students can then eat breakfast anywhere on campus or take it to their classrooms. Schools set up grab and go stations in locations other than cafeterias, such as the bus stop, campus entrance, high trafficked hallways or in front of classrooms.

**Second chance breakfast:** Some districts have found success with serving a second chance breakfast during a nutrition break between first and second period or in the mid-morning by setting up breakfast carts around the school. This program is especially beneficial for students who do not typically feel hungry early in the morning (generally high school students), but get uncomfortable when having to wait until lunchtime to eat.

Of all the breakfast after the bell models of service, breakfast in the classroom is the gold standard in terms of its ability to increase participation and ensure all students have equal access to the meal. After the school day officially begins, time is designated for students to eat breakfast in the classroom. Most schools that run breakfast in the classroom delegate most of the responsibility of running the program to the students. A few students from each classroom pick up the meals in the morning from the cafeteria, deliver them to their classrooms, and pass them out to their classmates. This not only ensures each student has access to the breakfast meal but teaches students responsibility, sharing, and dining etiquette. Students are in charge of cleaning up after themselves and transporting leftovers and trash to the appropriate places. In school districts across the nation that have employed the breakfast in the classroom model of service, students embrace these responsibilities and take them seriously.

Because of the tremendous effects eating a healthy breakfast has for learning, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has declared that time allocated for breakfast counts for instructional time (<http://bit.ly/UYAxIX>).

## Universal Feeding and Provision 2

Most schools or districts that implement an after the bell model of service do so by providing all breakfast meals at no charge to the students through the federal Universal Feeding Program. When schools have a large majority of students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals, the few dollars they take in from the paid students aren't worth the effort in human resources and

paperwork and so they just write off those few meals. There is also an option known as Provision 2, which is a federal provision within the School Meals Programs that helps reduce the paperwork and simplify the logistics of operating the school meals programs. Any school that participates in the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program may opt for Provision 2. Provision 2 schools do not have to collect and process school meal applications, keep track of meal categories, or conduct verifications for at least three out of every four years. Schools that opt for Provision 2 serve meals to all students at no charge. Provision 2 schools pay the difference between the cost of serving meals at no charge to all students and the federal reimbursement. The significant administrative savings of Provision 2 helps offset the cost differential. For more information, check with the district's nutrition/food service director.

## Case studies of finding a breakfast champion

Like many ambitious new initiatives, finding a champion who is willing to put in the extra work to get breakfast after the bell up and running is important. This person could be a food service director, other district administrator, principal, teacher, board member, parent, or student, depending on the culture of the district. Following are a few examples of such champions:

**Nutrition Services Director:** Dr. Robert Lewis, nutrition services director at El Monte City School District, takes great pride in his award-winning nutritional services programs. El Monte adheres to the strict standards of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and has been recognized by prominent political figures, such as former President Bill Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama. Robert also knows his customers. Approximately 88% of the students at El Monte City School District are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. The families of this district needed help and Dr. Lewis, his staff, and his administration stepped up to the challenge. They knew that their students needed to have access to the school breakfast meal and they came together to do what was best for their students. It's not only important to provide the access but one also needs to pay close attention to serving food that is appealing to students. Dr. Lewis regularly includes student input in crafting his menus by polling students and even taking student representatives to food services exhibitions.

Dr. Lewis' reputation of excellence and doing what is best for the students of the district came in handy when breakfast after the bell was proposed in the district. Even though breakfast in the classroom was outside some El Monte Elementary teachers' comfort zone, they were willing to give it a try because they trusted that Robert would be thoughtful about the program's implementation. "No syrup!" Dr. Lewis had promised. He has made good on this promise and still managed to pull off pancakes, which is a student favorite. He found pancakes with the syrup baked-in, and they passed the student taste test. Dr. Lewis also includes an extra breakfast entree for his teachers in the breakfast carts so that they can partake in the meal. Now students and teachers can break bread together in an environment that is safe, nurturing and provides the nutrition students need to thrive and become successful adults.

**Director of Food Service:** In Mountain View School District, Director of Food Service Susan Delgado, along with the Director of Curriculum Dr. Peter Knapik and their Superintendent Dr. Lillian Maldonado French, realized their students weren't eating breakfast in the morning. They brought the idea of breakfast in the classroom to their principals and had some pushback from teachers. They applied for a grant to help implement an after the bell model of service and came together to brainstorm. They realized that many of their schools have multiple entrances. If they closed off some of the entrances and put a breakfast cart at the open ones, all students would have the option to take a breakfast on their way in. The principals and teachers agreed, and ultimately helped roll out the program. Now students at each school walk in through an entrance passing a breakfast cart where they can grab a meal and go to the patio or courtyard to eat with their friends and teachers. Shortly after, the teachers lead the students to their classes. This model of service has proven to increase participation from 19% to 88% in one school and 46% to 75% in another. Mountain View School District has rolled out the breakfast program in all of its schools and are now seeing students arrive to school on time and be more prepared and alert for their morning lessons.

**Principal:** Nancy Bloom has been the principal of the high performing Montclair Elementary School in Oakland Unified School District for several years. Walking across the playground next to her feels like walking next to a superstar, as students excitedly wave to her and greet her. When the Oakland Unified School District nutrition services director asked Bloom if she would consider piloting a breakfast in the classroom

program she jumped at the opportunity. “The evidence is overwhelming,” said Bloom. “If children eat breakfast in the morning they are more ready to learn. This makes our nutrition services team not just an important part of our community for the services they provide, but we should also view them as partners for learning.”

Despite the clear-cut research, many teachers at Montclair Elementary School were resistant to the idea of breakfast in the classroom because they were worried it would take time away from instruction and create a mess. Bloom pushed her teachers to give the program a try and thought creatively with them about how to alleviate some of their worries. For example, the kindergarten classes do not actually eat in the classroom, but instead go to the multi-purpose room after the bell has rung. Bloom looks forward to continuing the program’s success and plans to speak to other principals of Oakland Unified about bringing the program to their schools.

**Board Member:** Jody London was elected to the Oakland Unified School District school board in 2009. When parents approached her about revamping the district’s nutrition program she thought it a good idea to meet with the district superintendent and Jennifer Le Barre, the district’s nutrition services director. Le Barre had many innovative ideas for improving food quality and implementing strategies to support student learning and was excited to have an advocate for change on the board.

But London, Le Barre, and the Oakland Unified parents did not just stop at improving the nutrition services program. It became clear that in order to make further improvements to the nutrition services program, they would need to significantly enhance the capacity of Oakland Unified’s facilities. Oakland voters overwhelmingly approved a \$475 million bond with over 84% of the vote. Renovating district kitchens and building a 1.5 acre urban farm to grow produce were important selling points of the bond measure and were thought to resonate with voters.

## Role of the governing board

Districts and county offices of education have a responsibility to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn in a healthy environment. The governing board, working closely with the superintendent, can promote an environment where students are well nourished and ready to achieve academically. The board can do this through each of its major responsibilities:

1. **Setting direction for the community’s schools:** As the board establishes a long-term vision, goals and priorities, it should consider the potential positive impacts that implementing breakfast after the bell could have in providing a school environment where students are well nourished and therefore more likely to attend class, be engaged, learn and achieve academically.
2. **Establishing an effective structure for the district/COE through policy and other decisions:** It is recommended that the board adopt policies that address nutrition and school breakfast. CSBA provides a sample board policy and administrative regulation, BP/AR 3550 – Food Service/Child Nutrition Program, which address the School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program, and other federally reimbursable meal programs. Other policies and administrative regulations address related concepts and should be aligned, such as BP/AR 3553 – Free and Reduced Price Meals, BP 5030 – Student Wellness, BP/AR 3552 - Summer Meal Program and BP/AR 3554 – Other Food Sales.
3. **Ensuring that the budget is aligned with district goals and priorities:** Decisions about providing school breakfast programs should include a consideration of the fiscal impact, including costs as well as benefits arising from increased student attendance and learning. Visit this site to determine if your school district is missing out on the fiscal benefits of an after the bell breakfast program: <http://bit.ly/UYB2m6>
4. **Providing support to the superintendent and staff as they carry out the board’s direction:** When the policies that impact food service are aligned and adopted, it is important that staff appropriately implement the policies to ensure that the goals and strategies identified by the board for increasing student participation in the school breakfast and lunch programs are put into place. The superintendent and staff should develop procedures and plans for implementing the programs based on the needs of each school site, including the capacity of school facilities and the grade levels of the students at the site. The board can support these efforts by continually demonstrating its commitment to student health, upholding its adopted policies, asking for updates from the superintendent or nutrition services director, and ensuring that budget and other board decisions support the agreed-upon goals for student nutrition.

5. **Ensuring accountability to the public:** The board has a responsibility to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve student nutrition and to increase participation in school meals programs. The board and superintendent should agree on the data that will be collected (e.g., student participation in breakfast after the bell programs and other breakfast programs, percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals being served by the programs, fiscal impact of participation in federal school meals programs, compliance with federal and state nutritional standards, linkages between student achievement data and meal program participation) and how often such data will be reported to the board. The data should be used to recommend policy revisions, if necessary, and may be linked to goals and actions in a district's Local Control and Accountability Plan.
6. **Acting as a community leader:** The governance team should work with parents, staff, community-based organizations (e.g. food banks), local health agencies and health care providers, and other stakeholders in efforts that promote a culture of wellness for all students. Such stakeholders might be involved in developing goals, policies or specific strategies related to nutrition and to the breakfast after the bell program.
3. If this appears to be a viable option for the district, garner additional support by asking to place the issue on a board meeting agenda and ask the superintendent to meet with the nutrition service director to discuss next steps. The superintendent and nutrition service director can contact principals who might be interested in starting a program (especially principals of schools with a high number of FRP students).
4. Consider what new equipment might be needed to start a breakfast after the bell program. The good news is that there are agencies and organizations that provide grants specifically for school breakfast expansion. The California Department of Education gives about \$1.1 million to schools each year (around March) for this very purpose. Other organizations can also help support the expansion of school breakfast.
5. Gather more information. Information on breakfast programs is available from Breakfast First ([www.BreakfastFirst.org](http://www.BreakfastFirst.org)), California Food Policy Advocates ([www.cfpa.net](http://www.cfpa.net)) and other organizations. For talking points, breakfast resources, spreadsheets, training materials, information on grants, etc., contact Nicola Edwards at [Nicola@cfpa.net](mailto:Nicola@cfpa.net)

There is truth in the old adage that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Not only do districts that serve breakfast after the bell help their students get their days off to a good start, but they increase their district's ADA and raise student achievement. Board members can be an important part of starting the conversation on the feasibility of breakfast after the bell in the district.

## How can districts start a breakfast after the bell program?

There are a few initial steps that can be taken to determine if a breakfast after the bell program is right for the district.

1. Ask for a report from the superintendent or food and nutrition services director on the current rate of participation in the breakfast program as well as the rate of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals to determine if an after the bell model of service would be a benefit.
2. Use a spreadsheet and plug in the number of FRP students, food costs, labor costs, etc. to help determine if this is a good move for the district.

## Endnotes

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