

School Breakfast:

Reducing Chronic Absenteeism & Supporting Student Success



If all low-income students were reached by school breakfast:



3 in 5

low-income students could see improved attendance

3 Million

fewer absences



millions of dollars of additional district funding

September 2017 • It goes without saying—attendance at school is essential for academic success. No matter how talented the teacher or engaging the lesson, children won't benefit unless they are in the classroom. Yet, chronic absenteeism—or missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, excused or unexcused—is negatively impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of California kids.^{1,2}

Chronic absenteeism impacts student success. Students who are chronically absent have lower test scores, poorer reading proficiency, and are more likely to dropout.³ Chronic absenteeism is also an equity issue, disproportionately affecting students of color, low-income students, and other vulnerable student groups.⁴ These students often face barriers at school (e.g. unjust discipline practices) or getting to school (e.g. unreliable transportation).⁵

While chronic absenteeism is an indicator of broader challenges in children's lives, schools and districts can take action to improve student attendance.

School breakfast can improve attendance!

Eating school breakfast increases student attendance by an average of 1.5 days of school per year.⁶ Yet, two million low-income California kids are missing out on the benefits of school breakfast!⁷ Reaching these kids could result in big attendance gains for the state, such as:

- **Improved attendance for three in five low-income students.** These are the over 60% of students that are eligible for but missing out on free or low-cost school breakfast.⁸
- **Three million fewer absences** over the course of the school year. An increase in 1.5 days of attendance per student really adds up!
- **Millions of dollars of additional district funding** that could be invested back into the classroom. Districts lose money when students aren't in school!⁹



How big of a problem is chronic absenteeism in California?



1 in 9

(720,000) students are chronically absent*

>50%

of schools have significant to extreme chronic absenteeism**

210,000

(7.3% of) K-5 students are chronically absent†

How does school breakfast improve attendance?

School meals provide nutritious foods that support student health. Thanks to improved nutrition standards, students are now eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in school meals than ever before.^{10,11} School meals also help to shield students from struggling with hunger. Children that struggle with hunger and inadequate nutrition are more likely than their peers to experience common health conditions and chronic illnesses which may result in missed school days.¹²

Low-income students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price breakfast through the federal School Breakfast Program. Districts receive reimbursement for meals served to these students. However, the majority of low income students in California aren't reached by school breakfast.¹³

When and where school breakfast is provided can have a significant impact on the number of students benefitting from the program. Effective ways to connect children with the nutritious meals they need to attend school and learn, include:

Offering free breakfasts to ALL students. When meals are offered free to all children, school meal participation increases. This helps to reduce stigma—especially in middle and high schools. High-poverty schools can be reimbursed for offering free meals to all students using federal options such as the Community Eligibility Provision.¹⁴

Providing breakfast after the start of the school day.

Serving breakfast after the bell increases participation in the meal program by reducing stigma and barriers to showing up to school early, such as transportation and bus schedules.¹⁵

Learn more about after-the-bell breakfast at cfpa.net/school-breakfast



Schools and districts across California have seen an increase in attendance by serving breakfast after the bell!

Learn more about the successful breakfast programs and attendance improvements at Clovis Unified School District, El Monte City School District, Lemon Grove School District, and Oakland Unified School District at cfpa.net/breakfast-after-the-bell-school-district-case-studies

How big of a problem is hunger in California?



(1.9 million) children are in families that struggle to put enough food on the table^{††}

Chronic absenteeism is a measure of school and district performance under California's accountability system. Chronic absenteeism rates by district, school, and student group will be available to the public on the California School Dashboard: www.caschooldashboard.org

Recommendations

State, local, and district policymakers should consider actions to (1) maximize participation in school breakfast, and (2) more fully integrate health and nutrition into the state's school finance and accountability system. Specifically, state policymakers could enact policies that would:

Require high poverty schools to provide universally free, after-the-bell school breakfast in order to improve student attendance. Universally free breakfast provided after the start of the school day is an attendance support for high-poverty schools that can be fully funded through state and federal meal reimbursements—freeing up district funding for additional programming and student supports.

Through federal options, such as the Community Eligibility Provision, high-poverty schools can be fully reimbursed for offering free breakfast and lunch to all students.

Integrate health and nutrition into school-level needs assessments. Many high-need schools are required to conduct needs assessments. These can help schools identify the root causes of student performance issues. They should take into account a range of student needs, including health and nutrition. For example, assessing student food insecurity and availability of after-the-bell school breakfast could help schools determine whether student hunger contributes to chronic absenteeism.

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Provide ongoing state funds for Breakfast After the Bell expansion grants, giving priority to high-poverty schools and those with chronic absenteeism. State-funded grant programs to start-up and expand after-the-bell breakfast should receive ongoing support. These programs could be improved to (1) provide support for schools to engage staff and build capacity for sustainable breakfast programs, and (2) more explicitly support student attendance.



California Food Policy Advocates

is a statewide public policy and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food.

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Endnotes

¹ Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center. Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absences. Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PreventingMissedOpportunityFull_FINAL9.8.16_2.pdf

² California Department of Justice. "In School + On Track: Attorney General's 2016 Report on California's Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crises." Available at https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/tr/truancy_2016_en.pdf

³ Attendance Works. "Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success." Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Absences-Add-Up_September-3rd-2014.pdf

⁴ California Department of Justice. "In School + On Track: Attorney General's 2016 Report on California's Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crises." Available at https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/tr/truancy_2016_en.pdf

⁵ Attendance Works. "Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success." Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Absences-Add-Up_September-3rd-2014.pdf

⁶ Murphy, J. "Breakfast and learning: An Updated Review." *Current Nutrition & Food Science* 3.1 (2007): 3-36.

⁷ California Food Policy Advocates. "School Meal Access & Participation: California Statewide Summary." Available at http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/ChildNutrition_CFPAPublications/SchoolMealAnalysis-StateSummary-2015-16.pdf

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Districts receive funding based on the average number of kids attending school each day, or Average Daily Attendance (ADA). The amount of funding varies by grade level and district. Some districts report losing around \$40 for each day a student is absent. For more information about funding levels: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/pa/pa1617rates.asp>

¹⁰ Cohen JFW, Richardson S, Parker E, Catalano PJ, Rimm EB. Impact of the New U.S. Department of Agriculture School Meal Standards on Food Selection, Consumption, and Waste, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 46(4):388-394, online March 4, 2014.

¹¹ Schwartz MB, Henderson KE, Read M, Danna N, and Ickovics JR, New School Meal Regulations Increase Fruit Consumption and Do Not Increase Total Plate Waste, *Childhood Obesity*. June 2015, 11(3): 242-247.

¹² California Food Policy Advocates. "Research Summary: School Nutrition and Academic Achievement." Available at http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/Education%20Reform/CFPA_LCAP_Research%20Summary%20and%20Overview_FINAL_16_12_06.pdf

¹³ California Food Policy Advocates. "School Meal Access & Participation: California Statewide Summary." Available at http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/ChildNutrition_CFPAPublications/SchoolMealAnalysis-StateSummary-2015-16.pdf

¹⁴ California Food Policy Advocates. "The Benefits of Universal Free School Meals." Available at http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/benefits_of_universal_free_meals_7_26_16.pdf

¹⁵ Food Research & Action Center. "Breakfast Blueprint: Breakfast After the Bell Programs Support Learning." Available at <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfast-blueprint-report-july2017.pdf>

* Schools with significant to extreme chronic absenteeism rates are those where 10% or more of students miss 15 or more days. For more information: Attendance Works. "Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence." Available at <http://www.attendanceworks.org/research/portraits-of-change>

** Chronic absence is defined as missing 15 or more days. For more information: Attendance Works. "Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence." Available at http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PreventingMissedOpportunityFull_FINAL9.8.16_2.pdf

† California Department of Justice. "In School + On Track: Attorney General's 2016 Report on California's Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crises." Available at https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/tr/truancy_2016_en.pdf

** Feeding America. "Map the Meal Gap 2017: Child Food Insecurity in California by County in 2015." Available at http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2015/MMG_AllCounties_CDs_CFI_2015_1/CA_AllCounties_CDs_CFI_2015.pdf