

**P****BREAKFAST**

# Building Opportunities for Equity:

# Social Emotional Learning with Breakfast



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By Hunger Solutions  
New York

Children's achievement, well-being, and behavior are intimately tied to nutrition. Unfortunately, reliable access to consistently good nutrition each morning is not a reality for one in five New York State children. Those children start their school day hungry, and thus less equipped to learn. Research shows that children from food-insecure households are more likely to be apathetic, withdrawn, and nonresponsive. They are also more likely to struggle with mental health and behavioral issues. Providing access to good nutrition is a key strategy schools can use to support positive development and behavior among students facing food insecurity.

The federally funded School Breakfast Program plays a critical role in addressing issues related to students' physical and mental health, as well as students' ability to learn, be engaged in the classroom, and attend school. It provides schools with a powerful tool to safeguard children from the impact of hunger and ensures that no child starts the school day hungry.

School breakfast participation is linked to numerous health and educational benefits including reduced food insecurity, improved dietary intake, better test scores, calmer classrooms, stronger attendance and graduation rates, and improved student health.

Yet across our state, students are missing out on school breakfast. Fewer than one in three students – of the 1.8 million students who qualify – ate free and reduced-price school breakfast during the 2017-2018 school year, according to Bridging the Gap: Creating Pathways for Student Success with Breakfast After the Bell, a report released by Hunger Solutions New York. This annual statewide report analyzes state- and district-level participation in the School Breakfast Program in New York State public schools.

### **WHY STUDENTS ARE MISSING OUT**

Many school districts serve breakfast when most children have not yet arrived at school for the day. That traditional breakfast model – served in the cafeteria before school begins – misses too many children who qualify to eat at school for free or at a reduced price. Time constraints, transportation difficulties, early start times, the stigma that school breakfast is only for “poor kids,” and other issues prevent children and teenagers from getting to school to eat before the first bell rings.

### **NEW YORK STATE SCHOOLS TAKE ACTION**

Often, within a school district the food service department is not considered a piece of student support services. Yet the school breakfast program plays a critical role in protecting children against the health and academic ramifications of hunger.

Increasingly aware of that fact, school leaders are starting to look at school breakfast participation as an indicator of whether or not they are meeting students' basic needs. A growing number of administrators, nutrition directors, and educators are working with anti-hunger advocates and other stakeholders to ensure more students eat school breakfast.

Schools are responding to low breakfast participation by adopting best practices to improve access to the program – offering Breakfast After the Bell, where schools provide breakfast after the start of the instructional day, and providing universal school breakfast, where schools provide breakfast to all students at no charge.

Those proven strategies overcome timing and stigma – barriers common to a traditional school breakfast program – and have driven growth in the School Breakfast Program over the past decade.

### **BREAKFAST AFTER THE BELL AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Students who attend schools with Breakfast After the Bell programs are more engaged in the classroom, less likely to be absent or tardy, and have less anxiety and depression. Furthermore, Breakfast After the Bell schools that offer breakfast in their classrooms have incorporated social emotional learning into the school day by providing social bonding time, while also reducing the stigma that breakfast is only for low-income kids.

The Bridging the Gap report features school districts that led the state with the strongest growth in school breakfast participation from the 2016-2017 to the 2017-2018 school year. Those districts include Middletown Enlarged City, Owego-Apalachin, Patchogue-Medford, and Whitney Point. Each district utilized the two proven methods to increase breakfast participation: universal breakfast and Breakfast After the Bell. While their success was quantifiable, with a significant increase in the number of children participating in breakfast, the integration of social emotional learning into the school environment was also apparent in testimony school leaders shared in the report.

One school administrator shared how school breakfast is a part of the district's trauma-informed approach and said providing breakfast is a way to provide students with stability and build trust. Another school leader commented that Breakfast After the Bell is a “game changer” for students. By providing breakfast, the district ensures daily support of students' physical, emotional, academic, and social growth. Meanwhile, other districts have integrated school breakfast in their broader agenda to improve equity access and opportunities for all students.

In a concrete way, Breakfast After the Bell has the power to change the lives of children.

### **NEW YORK STATE POISED FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Although some districts have experienced success with increasing participation locally, it has not been enough to translate to significant statewide increases. Nationally, New York consistently ranks among the poorest performing states in reaching low-income children with school breakfast. The Bridging the Gap report findings show, statewide, only 48 percent of students who ate free and reduced-price lunch also participated in breakfast during the 2017-2018 school year. That means fewer than half of students who should receive free and reduced-price breakfast each day actually do. Furthermore, New York State public schools forfeited \$75.4 million in federal reimbursement during the 2017-2018 school year alone as a result of low school breakfast participation.

However, New York State is setting a new standard for schools serving low-income communities. The state is positioned to turn around years of stagnant growth in the School Breakfast Program and improve its national ranking. That goal will be accomplished with the help of the new Breakfast After the Bell policy that requires public schools with 70 percent or more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals to implement Breakfast After the Bell, as well as the state's investment to eliminate students' reduced-price copayment.

**TAKE ACTION TO REMOVE  
BREAKFAST BARRIERS**

Hunger Solutions New York's report, Bridging the Gap, serves as a tool to demonstrate how school breakfast supports the whole child, and provides specific action steps for how schools can coalesce decision makers to improve access to school breakfast. While school nutrition directors are central to changing the way breakfast is served, making breakfast a part of the school day requires collaboration among school nutrition staff, school system leaders, and other education stakeholders such as teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members.

We ask that you, as a leader in your district, consider using the recommendations detailed in Bridging

the Gap to remove barriers to school breakfast, so that each student has an equitable start to their school day.

**HOW CAN WE HELP**

Hunger Solutions New York is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to alleviating hunger. We work alongside other advocates to provide support, technical assistance, and resources to help facilitate the implementation of successful Breakfast After the Bell programs. We can provide one-on-one assistance at no cost to your school district to help implement best practices for increasing breakfast participation. Reach out to Jessica Pino-Goodspeed at Jessica.PinoGoodspeed@HungerSolutionsNY.org. Find our full report and learn

more about Breakfast After the Bell at [www.SchoolMealsHubNY.org](http://www.SchoolMealsHubNY.org).



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