

# Breakfast for Learning in Alaska



## A Report on the School Breakfast Program



# Executive Summary

**H**ungry children can't learn. Every child in Alaska should have access to breakfast at school to make sure they are prepared to learn. A modest state investment in the School Breakfast Program will help ensure that Alaskan schools can provide breakfast to their students.

The School Breakfast Program is an efficient and proven way to reduce childhood hunger, promote children's health, reduce obesity, and improve classroom performance. Under the School Breakfast Program, the federal government provides reimbursements through the state to schools serving breakfasts that meet federal nutrition guidelines.

Unfortunately, the School Breakfast Program is severely underutilized in Alaska. Key findings of this report include:

- Children in Alaska are more likely to face hunger than adults. Fifteen percent of Alaskan children are food insecure.
- Only 34 percent of low-income students in Alaska received a school breakfast during the 2006-07 school year. Alaska ranks 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia for participation in the School Breakfast Program.
- Among the 406 public schools in Alaska providing school lunch, 125 do not have a breakfast program.
- 8,589 low-income Alaskan children attend a school with no breakfast program. In total, 30,375 students attend schools without breakfast programs.
- Alaska stands to gain an additional \$1.95 million in breakfast funding per year by bringing participation up to 60 percent of low-income students – near the level already achieved by the states with the highest participation.

Why aren't all Alaska schools participating in the School Breakfast Program? The most important barrier identified by school nutrition officials is economic. Federal breakfast reimbursements are often not enough to cover the significant labor, transportation, and food costs faced by schools. Other challenges include staffing issues, students arriving on busses without enough time to eat breakfast, and inadequate facilities in some rural districts. In addition, students from low-income families living between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level must contribute a breakfast "co-pay," which deters participation.

For a modest investment at the state level, the legislature can help many more Alaskan children receive the nutritional and educational benefits of

school breakfast and leverage additional federal funds. A state supplement of 50 cents for each breakfast served to a low-income child would help make the School Breakfast Program affordable to more nonparticipating Alaskan schools. Eliminating the breakfast co-pay has been shown to increase participation among students in the reduced-price category. At current participation levels, the subsidy would cost approximately \$1 million and eliminating the co-pay would cost approximately \$82,000.

Once a School Breakfast Program is established, schools can increase student participation in breakfast by adopting by innovative models of breakfast delivery, such as Breakfast in the Classroom and Grab-and-Go Breakfast. But first the State must invest in our children's health and education and ensure that every child has breakfast.

## The Most Important Meal of the Day

**A**cross Alaska and throughout the United States, the School Breakfast Program (SBP) helps to ensure that children begin their school day with a full stomach and the nutrition they need for success in the classroom. Benefits of school breakfast include:

### Reducing Childhood Hunger

Children in Alaska are more likely to face hunger than adults. According to data from the 2006 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey, 15 percent of Alaskan children experienced food insecurity, compared with 11 percent of Alaskan adults. Food insecure children include those who suffer skipped meals or reduced food intake as well as those who experience a reduced quality or variety of diet because their family cannot afford adequate food. The problem is most severe in rural Alaska, where nearly one child in four experienced food insecurity. The School Breakfast Program not only ensures that children start each school day with a healthy and balanced meal, it helps low-income families by relieving pressure on their food budget at home.

### Improving Nutrition and Combating Obesity

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research has found that children who have breakfast at school eat more fruits, drink more milk, and consume less saturated fat than those who skip breakfast or eat at home. Other research supports a strong correlation between eating a healthy breakfast and reduced risk of obesity. Breakfast both provides a metabolic boost and reduces the need to snack on less healthful foods later in the day.

“I really like breakfast at school. It tastes good and I think it helps me concentrate. I like the muffins the best. I can eat at school when I don't have time at home.”

7th grader,  
Palmer Junior Middle School

### Supporting Learning and Classroom Success

Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of school breakfast to student learning and classroom behavior, including better attendance and punctuality, fewer behavioral problems, fewer trips to the school nurse, and faster performance on cognitive tests. Research has also shown that eating breakfast improves math grades and performance on standardized tests. Children who are hungry are more likely to be suspended from school and to repeat a grade.

As one Alaska school official interviewed for this report said, “a food program is one of the few things that can increase student achievement without changing the way we teach.” At a time of increasing pressure on schools to perform well on standardized tests, as well as rising concern about obesity among Alaskan children, the School Breakfast Program is a proven intervention that addresses multiple issues confronting students, parents, and schools.

## How School Breakfast Works

**T**he School Breakfast Program involves all levels of government: federal, state, and local. Most of the funding for the program comes from the federal government, which is passed down to the states and then to schools in the form of reimbursements on a per-meal basis. The federal government sets the regulations for the program, including basic nutritional guidelines, serving and recordkeeping procedures, and civil rights safeguards. The USDA is the responsible agency at the federal level.

State governments oversee the implementation of the School Breakfast Program and provide the reimbursements to school districts. In Alaska, the Department of Education and Early Development (EED), Child Nutrition Services administers the SBP and other children’s nutrition programs. Some state legislatures have dedicated state funds to supplement the federal reimbursements or assist schools in starting a breakfast program. According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 39 states have passed some kind of legislation supporting school breakfast, but Alaska is not one of them.

Finally, local school districts make the School Breakfast Program happen. School districts plan menus, prepare meals or contract out for food service, and serve them to students each day. School districts are not required by federal law to have a breakfast program or even a lunch program.

School districts also distribute, collect, and approve household applications for free or reduced-price school meals. Children in families living below 130 percent of the Alaska poverty line receive free meals. Children

living between 130 and 185 percent receive reduced-price meals and must pay 30 cents for each breakfast and 40 cents for each lunch. Those above 185 percent of the poverty line are known as “paid” students, and they pay full price for breakfast, though the federal government provides a modest subsidy for meals served to those students as well.

If the school provides breakfast, a child in any payment category may eat, and schools are encouraged to create payment systems that eliminate any overt identification of children eating free or reduced-price meals. **Table 1** provides Alaska’s income eligibility guidelines for free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch for the 2007-08 School Year. **Table 2** lists Alaska’s reimbursement rates for free, reduced-price, and paid school breakfast.

**Table 1: Alaska Income Eligibility Guidelines for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals, School Year 2007-08**

Number of Household Members	Free Meals (130% of Alaska poverty line)	Reduced-Price Meals (185% of Alaska poverty line)
1	\$16,601	\$23,625
2	\$22,256	\$31,672
3	\$27,911	\$39,720
4	\$33,566	\$47,767
5	\$39,221	\$55,815
6	\$44,876	\$63,862
7	\$50,531	\$71,910
8	\$56,186	\$79,957

Source: Federal Register, Vol. 72 No. 38, February 27, 2007. p. 8687.

**Table 2: Federal Reimbursements for School Breakfast in Alaska, School Year 2007-2008**

	Non-Severe Need	Severe Need*
Paid	\$0.36	\$0.36
Reduced	\$1.85	\$2.27
Free	\$2.15	\$2.57

Source: Federal Register, Vol. 72 No. 131, July 10, 2007. p. 37510.

Breakfast menus at schools may vary widely, but each meal must follow a USDA meal pattern. At minimum, a school breakfast consists of:

- one serving of fluid milk;
- one serving of fruit, vegetable or 100 percent juice; and
- two servings of grains/breads and/or meat or other protein.

Averaged over the week, school breakfasts must meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and the meals must provide at least one-fourth the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) of protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C, and calories.

## School Breakfast Participation in Alaska

**T**he School Breakfast Program only works to the extent that schools participate in the program and help make it easy and appealing for their students to eat breakfast. According to *School Breakfast Scorecard 2007* by the Food Research and Action Center, 11,921 low-income Alaskan students participated in the SBP during the 2006-07 school year. By contrast, 34,152 Alaskan students received free or reduced-price school lunches. In other words, only 34 percent of low-income Alaskan students received school breakfast during the last school year, putting Alaska in 48th place among the 50 states and the District of Columbia for participation in school breakfast.

What is behind this relatively poor participation rate? Perhaps the most important factor is the large number of schools in the state that do not offer the federal School Breakfast Program. During the 2006-2007 school year, 281 public schools statewide participated in the SBP, compared with 406 schools offering school lunch. (Participation in the National School Lunch Program among Alaskan schools is almost universal.) This leaves 125 public schools in Alaska that do not participate in the School Breakfast Program. There were also 12 private schools, juvenile institutions, alternative programs and other sponsors participating in school breakfast, out of 26 participating in school lunch, in 2006-07.

The Appendix lists each school district in Alaska, the number of participating and non-participating schools in that district, the number of low-income students attending the schools without the SBP, and the total student population in the schools without the SBP. Across the state, there are 8,589 low-income Alaskan children who qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast but who attend a school where eating breakfast is not even an option.

Low-income students—those at highest risk of hunger—are not the only ones affected when schools do not offer breakfast programs. Early-morning bus pickups and parents' work and commuting schedules can affect the opportunity to eat a healthy breakfast for students in all income categories. According to one Alaska school district official, "Mom and Dad feed children at 5:30 a.m. and it is burned out of the children by the beginning of the school day, and if they do not receive a snack before lunch they start to feel sick with a headache or stomach ache and need to go to the nurse." As the Appendix shows, there are 30,375 Alaskan public school students in all income categories who attend schools where breakfast is not offered.

Rural Alaska holds a disproportionate share of non-participating schools, but there are many schools on the road system without breakfast programs as well, including schools in the Anchorage School District, the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, Copper River School District, and others. Districts with breakfast available at every school include the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District, and a number of rural districts.

In addition to feeding more children, better uptake of the SBP would bring more federal reimbursements into Alaska. According to FRAC, Alaska stands to gain an additional \$1.95 million in breakfast funding per year by bringing participation up to 60 percent of low-income students – near the level already achieved by the states with the highest participation.

## Barriers to School Breakfast in Alaska

**W**hile school breakfast is a clear benefit to student health, learning, and classroom achievement, Alaska schools face a number of challenges in implementing breakfast programs. Addressing these barriers is the key to improving Alaska’s relatively poor performance in providing the SBP to its children.

To determine what barriers are most important in the minds of those who implement school feeding programs, a University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) researcher working in close coordination with the Alaska Food Coalition (AFC) and Food Bank of Alaska (FBA) conducted a survey of school food service personnel across the state. School nutrition professionals representing 24 school districts responded to the survey, out of 53 districts contacted. The survey addressed barriers at two different levels: barriers to schools implementing a breakfast program, and barriers to student participation at schools that do provide breakfast. The survey asked respondents to rate potential issues on a scale of 1 (not a barrier) to 5 (strong barrier).

The most significant barrier to schools introducing the breakfast program is economic. School officials gave “difficulty breaking even financially” the highest rating with an average of 4.0 (**Table 3**). School food service programs are generally required to break even financially with the federal reimbursements and revenue from paying students. While there are exceptions, most school food programs cannot draw significantly on the school district’s general funds. One food service director explained why breaking even is a particular challenge when it comes to school breakfast:

Every school could have breakfast here if the labor costs were less. The kitchens are staffed with non-benefit employees or part-time.... If you have [employees] work the breakfast shift then you add 2 hours per day and you must pay

**Table 3: Barriers to Starting a Breakfast Program Perceived by Alaska School District Officials**

Barrier	Average Rating (1 = not a barrier; 5 = strong barrier)
Difficulty breaking even financially	4.0
Staffing issues	3.4
Timely transportation of students	2.9
Lack of parental support	2.0
Lack of adequate facilities	2.0
Few children eligible for free or reduced-price meals	1.9
Stigma issues	1.8
Difficulty transporting food	1.4

Note: Only school districts with schools not currently offering breakfast programs were asked these questions.

the individual full-time benefits. The district cannot afford to pay benefits, and there are not enough people to make all the staff part-time. There are extra expenses with outlying schools... [and] food prices are also going up, especially fresh fruit.

The second highest-rated barrier, “staffing issues,” is related to cost issue but also encompasses having teachers to supervise breakfast time. Another serious issue for many food service supervisors was students being transported to school without sufficient time to eat breakfast. The remaining issues in Table 3 were not rated as highly as barriers, although the distribution of responses on “lack of adequate facilities” was lopsided, with a handful of rural districts rating that barrier a 5.

High food prices and transportation costs, limited facilities, and small student populations are particular challenges for schools off the road system. One rural district that has succeeded in providing breakfast at every school, The Bering Strait School District, has utilized on a grant from a Washington, DC-based anti-hunger organization and substantial local financial support to make the breakfast program work financially. Many other rural districts, however, do not have the same resources.

The barriers to student participation at schools with the SBP were not considered as serious as the barriers to schools implementing the SBP. Some districts reported that students not having enough time to eat before class was a serious issue, and others did not; the average rating for this barrier was 2.5. According to one official, “our school busses arrive about fifteen minutes prior to the start of school. This only leaves about five minutes for the students to actually come down to the cafeteria to get breakfast and eat before the first bell rings.” Students preferring to play outside rather than eat inside rated similarly as a barrier, with an average score of 2.4. Fortunately, few school districts reported that stigma (a perception of shame from eating school meals) was a barrier to student participation.

One barrier not addressed in the survey, but acknowledged by the national School Nutrition Association, is the co-pay for reduced-price meals. For families with income between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line – families with incomes low enough to qualify for WIC benefits and, in many cases, Denali KidCare – paying even 30 cents per breakfast can be an obstacle.

The proof that the co-pay is a barrier has been demonstrated when states or school districts have eliminated the breakfast co-pay and participation among children in the reduced-price category has skyrocketed. Washington State eliminated the co-pay during the 2006-07 school year, using state funds to cover the lost revenue, and participation by students in the reduced-price category increased 34 percent. Similarly, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District ended its breakfast co-pay the same year, and their reduced-price participation went up 42 percent compared to the previous year. Moreover, thanks to the additional federal reimbursements from their higher participation, the district did not lose any revenue from the change.

## Recommendations

To ensure that all needy Alaskan children receive the nutrition, health, and educational benefits of school breakfast, there is a pressing need for state officials, educators, advocates, schools, and school districts to work together on eliminating the barriers to school breakfast in Alaska. What follows are recommended priorities for intervention in this proven but seriously underutilized program.

### **State financial support for School Breakfast**

Providing school breakfast is expensive in Alaska, and the overwhelming consensus among school nutrition officials surveyed was that breaking even financially is the most serious challenge school districts face in implementing the SBP. Therefore, the legislature can provide a critical contribution to the success of this program by dedicating state funds to support school breakfast. The simplest policy, which states ranging from Illinois to California to Hawaii have already adopted, is for the state to provide a supplement to the federal reimbursement for meals served to children in the free and reduced-price categories. This policy ensures that the schools with the most needy students receive the most assistance. At current participation levels, \$1 million in support from the Alaska legislature would provide a 50-cent supplement for each school breakfast served to a child in the free or reduced-price category.

### **Eliminating the reduced-price co-pay**

Children receiving reduced-price meals are a relatively small category, comprising only 11 percent of all Alaskan students eating breakfast in 2006-07.

However, eliminating the co-pay is a very effective way to increase their participation in the SBP, as the experiences of Washington state and the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District show. At current participation levels, eliminating the breakfast co-pay statewide would cost approximately \$82,000—but the true cost could well be less, because this policy helps to pay for itself through the additional meal reimbursements.

### **Using innovative breakfast models**

Many schools around the country have devised alternatives to the traditional cafeteria model of breakfast delivery. Breakfast in the Classroom ensures all students have the time and opportunity to eat. If a large percentage of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals, schools can affordably offer Breakfast in the Classroom for free to all students. Grab-and-Go Breakfast, which enables students to take a portable breakfast with them, and Second Chance Breakfast, which allows students to eat breakfast after their first class, may be more effective for older students who pass between classes many times per day and may not be ready to eat first thing in the morning. These models are being used at a handful of schools in Alaska, but all deserve wider replication based on the needs and situation of each school. A school official interviewed for this report spoke to the power of one of these models, Second Chance Breakfast: “For the high school we had breakfast before school, and the kids never came. Now after second hour the kids go to the commons sit around visit and eat their breakfast. A real positive solution to our lack of participation.”

As much as everyone would wish that every Alaskan child could eat a healthy breakfast at home, the realities of hunger and food insecurity, bus and commuting schedules, and parental work schedules prevent many students from starting the day with the nutrition they need to reach their full potential. Providing a healthy breakfast to all Alaska children is not solely the responsibility of parents, nor of local school food service managers, nor of the federal government providing funding for the School Breakfast Program. Improving Alaska’s poor performance in providing school breakfast will take new energy, new investments and new partnerships at all levels, particularly at the state level. Alaska should not settle for 48th place, nor even for first place, but should strive to ensure that no Alaskan child has to start the school day without a healthy breakfast.

## **Notes and Resources**

For statistics on childhood hunger and food insecurity in Alaska, see Szadziwski, Henryk (2006), “Results from the 2006 Alaska BRFSS Survey Concerning the Hunger Issue,” available at [http://www.alaska-food.org/materials/2006BRFSS\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.alaska-food.org/materials/2006BRFSS_Survey.pdf). Additional data on hunger in Alaska may be found on Food Bank of Alaska’s website, [www.foodbankofalaska.org](http://www.foodbankofalaska.org).

An excellent summary of the research on the physical, psychological and academic costs of childhood hunger is Center on Hunger and Poverty (2002), "The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: Evidence from Recent Scientific Studies," available at <http://www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/ConsequencesofHunger.pdf>. Additional research on the benefits of school breakfast is compiled in Food Research and Action Center (2007), "School Breakfast Scorecard 2007," available at [http://www.frac.org/pdf/SBP\\_2007.pdf](http://www.frac.org/pdf/SBP_2007.pdf); and Food Research and Action Center (2005), *An Advocate's Guide to the School Nutrition Programs* (not available online).

For a summary of School Breakfast Program history and regulations, including annually updated income eligibility guidelines and per-meal reimbursement rates, see the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) webpage on school breakfast, available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/>.

Data on School Breakfast Program participation in Alaska come from Food Research and Action Center (2007) and from data provided to the authors by Andrea Stasyszen, National School Lunch Program Specialist for Child Nutrition Services (CNS), Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. For the numbers of students in the free, reduced-price and paid categories listed by school and school district, see the CNS "Free and Reduced-Price Percent Report," available at <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/NSLP.html>.

More detailed information on state legislation supporting the School Breakfast Program, including a state-by-state table of legislation, is available from Food Research and Action Center (2007). Amy Rouse, Director of Nutrition Services for the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, provided data on the impact of eliminating the reduced-price option in the 2006-07 school year.

## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Shawn Powers, Director of Advocacy at Food Bank of Alaska, with assistance from Kerri Burrows, Alaska Food Coalition Manager. Editorial review was provided by Susannah Morgan, Executive Director of Food Bank of Alaska.

Joel'lene Anderson and Gwyn Jerman, social work students at the University of Alaska Anchorage, provided research supporting this report under the supervision of Tracey Burke, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work.

Food Bank of Alaska and the Alaska Food Coalition gratefully acknowledge the advice, assistance, and expertise of Madeleine Levin, Senior Policy Analyst at FRAC, at all stages in this project.

**Appendix: Public School Participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and Students Without Access to School Breakfast in Alaska, 2006-2007 School Year**

	<b>Schools Participating in the SBP</b>	<b>Schools not Participating in the SBP</b>	<b>Free and Reduced-Price Students at non-SBP Schools</b>	<b>All Students at non-SBP Schools</b>
Alaska Gateway Schools	7	0	0	0
Aleutians East Borough Schools	0	2	109	191
Anchorage School District	55	28	2,118	11,950
Annette Island School District	3	0	0	0
Bering Strait School District	15	0	0	0
Bristol Bay Borough Schools	0	1	88	188
Chatham School District	0	2	80	106
Copper River School District	0	3	167	469
Cordova Public Schools	2	0	0	0
Craig City Schools	2	0	0	0
Delta Greely School District	0	5	395	879
Dillingham City Schools	3	0	0	0
Fairbanks North Star Borough Schools	29	0	0	0
Galena City Schools	3	0	0	0
Haines Borough Schools	3	0	0	0
Hoonah City Schools	1	0	0	0
Hydaburg City School District	0	1	48	72
Iditarod Area Schools	8	0	0	0
Juneau School District	0	11	868	4,945
Kake City Schools	1	0	0	0
Kashunamuit School District	1	0	0	0
Kenai Peninsula School District	16	17	1,618	4,131
Ketchikan Gateway Schools	0	8	741	2,269
Klawock City Schools	0	1	98	139
Kodiak Island Borough Schools	11	2	283	859
Kuspuk School District	10	0	0	0
Lake Peninsula School District	0	14	293	411
Lower Kuskokwim Schools	23	2	163	358
Lower Yukon School District	11	0	0	0
Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District	32	0	0	0
Mt. Edgecumbe High School	1	0	0	0
Nenana City Public Schools	1	0	0	0
Nome Public Schools	0	3	375	743
North Slope Borough School District	9	3	95	499
Northwest Arctic Borough School	11	0	0	0
Petersburg Public Schools	3	0	0	0
Sitka Borough School District	2	3	200	768

# A REPORT ON THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM

<b>Appendix Continued: Public School Participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and Students Without Access to School Breakfast in Alaska, 2006-2007 School Year</b>				
	<b>Schools Participating in the SBP</b>	<b>Schools not Participating in the SBP</b>	<b>Free and Reduced-Price Students at non-SBP Schools</b>	<b>All Students at non-SBP Schools</b>
Southeast Island School District	8	0	0	0
Southwest Region Schools	0	8	533	673
St. Mary's School District	1	0	0	0
Unalaska City School District	2	0	0	0
Valdez City Schools	2	1	68	370
Yakutat School District	1	0	0	0
Yukon Flats School District	0	8	215	267
Yukon Koyukuk School District	0	2	34	88
Yupiit School District	3	0	0	0
<b>State Total</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>8,589</b>	<b>30,375</b>
Source: Alaska Food Coalition and Food Bank of Alaska calculations with data provided by Child Nutrition Services, Department of Education and Early Development.				

February 2008

The Alaska Food Coalition  
c/o Food Bank of Alaska  
2121 Spar Avenue  
Anchorage, AK 99501-1855

907.272.3663 Main  
907.222.3103 Direct  
907.277.7368 Fax

[www.alaskafood.org](http://www.alaskafood.org) | [info@foodbankofalaska.org](mailto:info@foodbankofalaska.org) | [www.foodbankofalaska.org](http://www.foodbankofalaska.org)