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EDITORIAL

Too few kids are eating school breakfast

High-poverty districts should focus on implementing breakfast after the bell.

By **The Editorial Board** Updated December 30, 2025, 4:00 a.m.



Plymouth, MA - 3/25/2022 JLunch time at Plymouth Community Intermediate School during lunch time. A pandemic-triggered expansion of the federal school nutrition program, which has funded free school meals for all students nationwide since 2020, is now slated to end in June after Congress failed to authorize its extension. Advocates for Massachusetts children say it is time for the state to take over and pass legislation that would keep school lunches free for all indefinitely, at an estimated cost of \$100 million per year. (Jonathan Wiggs /Globe Staff) JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

In August 2020, then-governor Charlie Baker [signed a law](#) requiring every school where more than 60 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to offer breakfast after the beginning of the instructional day, in a bid to boost student health and behavior.

But [a new report](#) by the Eos Foundation suggests schools are falling short of the legislation's goal of feeding more students. In the state's 953 high-poverty schools, only 48 percent of students were eating school breakfast in March 2025.

Implementation of the law got sidetracked by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the foundation. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which tracks compliance with the law, found [that as of 2024](#), around 180 high-poverty schools were not offering breakfast after the bell. (Another 100-plus schools at all income levels weren't offering breakfast at all.) That same department memo said the agency is continuing to work with districts to bring them into compliance. The department hasn't published an updated list of noncompliant schools this year.

The state needs to push districts to comply with the rule. But even for the vast majority that are complying, schools need to ensure that their breakfast programs are implemented in a way that serves students' needs so that they are actually eating the meals.

Particularly in districts where students are less likely to have access to consistent, nutritional breakfasts at home, providing breakfast at school can have health and academic benefits. A [2023 review of literature](#) on "breakfast after the bell" found that more students eating breakfast in school was associated with improved diet quality and improved classroom behavior, particularly among students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and low-income students. The evidence is mixed on whether school breakfast is correlated with attendance or academic performance, but some studies suggest that [attendance improves](#) and [test scores increase](#) when students eat school breakfast, particularly among students with lower achievement levels.

Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, executive director of Children's HealthWatch, said providing breakfast improves food security, which impacts behavior. Children who skip breakfast are more likely to go to the nurse with a headache or stomachache or have trouble concentrating. "Particularly in lower-income communities, where you have lots of kids who are food insecure, the classroom can be a disruptive place," Ettinger de Cuba said. "It's not that they're bad kids, it's that their bodies aren't getting what they need."

Money shouldn't be a barrier to offering school breakfast. The federal government pays for lunch and breakfast for low-income students and all students in high-poverty districts. Governor Maura Healey signed universal free school meals into law in 2023, obligating the state to pay for meals for all remaining students. Grants are available from private sources to cover implementation costs. Importantly, the more students eat at school, the greater the reimbursement. A school that serves more meals generates more money for the school district, since the marginal cost of making 100 more meals is probably lower than the additional state and federal revenue.

The hurdles tend to be administrative — figuring out how to serve breakfast without eliminating instructional time and determining what method works. Different models include providing breakfast in the classroom or cafeteria at the start of the school day, having a "grab and go" cart where students get breakfast on their way to class, or providing breakfast during a mid-morning break.

Erin McAleer, president and CEO of Project Bread, which works with schools implementing breakfast programs, said more schools are offering breakfast since legislation made meals free, but "there's no question districts are still struggling with competing priorities post-COVID." McAleer said offering breakfast in the classroom at the start of the day usually generates the highest participation. But a high school might be better served by offering breakfast mid-morning, when teenagers — even those who ate at home — get hungry.

One example of how breakfast can work is Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, with 850 students in Cambridge and Somerville, about 65 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Nutrition director Michelle Doyle said since breakfast after the bell passed, the school has experimented with different initiatives.

The most successful program is at its upper elementary school, which provides around 10 minutes for students to eat hot breakfast in the cafeteria after the bell. Typically, around 90 percent of students eat. “Our kids are calmer, more attentive in the classroom because they all have something to eat. They’re not going to the nurse because they’re hungry or their stomach hurts,” Doyle said.

At the middle and high schools, Doyle said students can eat in the cafeteria before the bell, with an option to grab breakfast later (which many students do because they take public transportation). The school previously used a catering company to buy hot lunches and lacked an in-house kitchen. The school got a grant for equipment to prepare hot breakfast, which increased participation from about 15 percent to 25 to 30 percent at the middle and high schools, Doyle said. (The grant also allowed the school to start preparing hot lunches in-house this year.) Doyle hopes to eventually give the older divisions dedicated breakfast time during the day. “The biggest barrier is to get everyone on board, make sure there’s time during the academic day,” Doyle said.

The [Eos Foundation report](#) identifies wide disparities among high-poverty districts. In Springfield, 83.1 percent of students eat school breakfast. According to the report, Springfield had 44 percent of students eating school breakfast in 2015-2016. Then it started serving breakfast in the classroom. Participation spiked, and the school used the increased reimbursement to build a culinary nutrition center to prepare hot meals for breakfast and lunch.

Boston only serves 46 percent of its students breakfast. Boston Public Schools spokesperson Samara Pinto said the district has focused on improving meal quality, implementing on-site cooking, and adding options like salad bars and vegetarian, halal,

and kosher meals. Participation rates vary due to student schedules and routines. For example, students are likelier to eat at home at schools with later start times, and some older students buy food during their commute. “The BPS Food and Nutrition Services team continues to work with school leaders and educators to identify ways to make breakfast and lunch more accessible to our students,” Pinto said.

BPS is not the only lagging urban district. Lynn serves breakfast to 41 percent of its students, and Worcester to 38 percent.

No child should start their school day hungry. Passing a law was the first step; now districts need to implement it effectively.

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