



D.C. Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

The District of Columbia School Breakfast Scorecard for School Year 2024–2025

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About D.C. Hunger Solutions

D.C. Hunger Solutions, established in 2002 as an initiative of the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), is dedicated to eradicating hunger and poverty by enhancing the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income residents of Washington, D.C. The organization employs a three-pronged strategy: improving access through public policies related to hunger and nutrition, maximizing participation in federal nutrition programs, and educating the public about hunger and its root causes. By collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, government agencies, community organizations, businesses, and advocates, D.C. Hunger Solutions effectively reduces hunger, supports economic security, and improves health outcomes in the District. To learn more about D.C. Hunger Solutions, visit www.dchunger.org.

Introduction

Participation in the School Breakfast Program has proven to be vital to the health and well-being of students and the school community. School breakfast provides students with the nutrition they need to learn and thrive and decreases classroom distractions throughout the morning.¹ Additionally, the School Breakfast Program is a key component of the federal economic mobility system for families with low incomes. The program helps households stretch limited budgets and provides assurance for parents that their children will receive healthy meals at school each day. School breakfast has also been linked to improved academic performance, healthier diets, and lower rates of student obesity, tardiness, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems.²

In the District of Columbia, school breakfast reaches tens of thousands of students daily. On an average school day during the 2024–2025 school year, more than 37,000 students across D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) and D.C.

Public Charter Schools (DCPCS) participated in the School Breakfast Program.

School breakfast is served to all students in the District at no cost, due to the [D.C. Healthy Schools Act \(HSA\)](#) passed in 2010. The act calls for elimination of the reduced-price co-payment, increased physical activity, and improved nutrition standards through stronger [school wellness policies](#). HSA also requires high-poverty schools to adopt alternative breakfast models, such as breakfast after the bell and “grab and go,” to ensure students can easily access breakfast.* The [Community Eligibility Provision](#) (CEP) made this financially possible for many D.C. schools by providing additional federal reimbursement to high-poverty schools and decreasing administrative costs.

These efforts underscore the critical role school breakfast plays in advancing student success and strengthening the well-being of families and communities across the District.

Healthy Schools Act (HSA)

The Healthy Schools Act of 2010 is landmark legislation, unanimously passed by D.C. Council, designed to improve the health and wellness of students attending D.C. public and public charter schools. A 2009 report by the D.C. Department of Health (DOH) on obesity in the District of Columbia found that the District had the highest rate of adolescent obesity in the nation, with childhood obesity having severe lifelong health implications such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, dyslipidemia, liver disease, sleep apnea, and poor mental health.

To combat this epidemic, D.C. Councilmembers introduced HSA, to ensure District of Columbia Public Schools, public charter schools, and participating private schools provide a healthy environment for all students. It features key anti-hunger provisions, including free breakfast for all students, breakfast in the classroom and other innovative service models, coupled with the elimination of reduced-price co-payment for school meals.

Furthermore, the act established new health and nutrition requirements for all District of Columbia

schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.³

The Healthy Schools Act was amended by the [Healthy Students Amendment Act](#) (HSAA) in 2018, which builds on the success of the Healthy Schools Act by establishing annual \$2 per student subsidies for schools implementing breakfast in the classroom, strengthening nutrition requirements for sodium, milk, and whole grains, requiring vegetarian food options each week, and establishing age-appropriate physical education and physical activity goals that encourage school personnel to incorporate physical activity throughout the school day. In addition, HSAA requires schools to increase procurement of food consistent with the Center for Good Food Purchasing’s “[Good Food Purchasing Values](#)”: equity, local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and community health and nutrition.

Lastly, the act requires the mayor to build a central kitchen based on the Office of the State Superintendent of Education’s (OSSE) assessment and recommendations to improve meal quality and enable more scratch cooking.

* The proposed fiscal year 2027 budget includes the elimination of funding for alternative breakfast. As of the publication of this report, the budget has not yet been approved.

What is Community Eligibility (CEP)?

Authorized by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kid Act of 2010, the Community Eligibility Provision allows high-poverty schools or groups of schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no cost for all students and to realize significant administrative savings by eliminating school meal applications. Any local education agency (LEA), group of schools in an LEA, or school with 25 percent or more “identified student percentage” can choose to participate. “Identified students” include:

- children who have been directly certified for free school meals through data matching because their households receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits; and
- children who are certified for meals at no cost without an application because they meet the definition of unhoused, runaway, or migrant, or reside in foster care.

For school year 2024–2025, more than 200 schools in D.C. participated in CEP.⁴



What are Local Education Agencies

According to the National Archives and Records Administration, a local education agency, or LEA, is a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a state for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state, or for a combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a state as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools. In SY 2024–2025, there were 69 LEA's that had schools offering elementary, middle, and high school as well as schools specifically designated for adult, alternative, and special education students. There are 117 D.C. public schools serving more than 52,299 students and 134 public charter schools serving 47,173 students.⁵

About this Report

D.C. Hunger Solutions created this report to provide an overview of the School Breakfast Program in the District of Columbia. Our aim is to assist local education agencies, school administrators, principals, and teachers in identifying opportunities to boost breakfast participation. By analyzing data from the 2024–2025 school year, we examined the percentage of students taking part in the program, with a target participation rate of 70 percent or higher. This report explores what has made some schools successful in implementing school breakfasts and why others have faced challenges. For schools that fell short of the goal, we offer strategies to improve participation. This scorecard highlights the progress made and the opportunities ahead to ensure every student in the District starts their day ready to learn.

Benefits of School Breakfast

Studies have shown access to school meals improves students' dietary intake and provides the nutrition to stay focused and ready to learn during the school day. This includes school breakfast, which is proven to be critical to the healthy development and academic achievement of students, yet ensuring every child has access to a healthy breakfast remains an often overlooked tool for boosting academic performance.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention skipping breakfast and poor mental health co-occur, impeding students' readiness to learn.⁶ In contrast, students who participate in school breakfast exhibit fewer behavioral and psychological problems and have lower rates of absence and tardiness. Research also shows that providing breakfast in the classroom is associated with fewer disciplinary office referrals.⁷

Children and adolescents who eat breakfast, particularly school breakfast, are significantly less likely to be overweight, while skipping breakfast is associated with a higher risk of obesity. According to National Survey of Children's Health, from 2023–2024, the childhood obesity rate for ages 6–17 was 18.1 percent.⁸ Increased access to school meal participation may reduce obesity as more schools align meals with dietary guidelines.⁹

Addressing Food Insecurity

The prevalence of food insecurity among households with children translates into significant challenges for students both inside and outside the classroom. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service's *Household Food Security in the U.S.* report, in 2024, 18.4 percent of households with children (6.7 million) were food insecure.¹⁰ As reported, children who reside in food-insecure households tend to exhibit higher rates of hyperactivity/inactivity and emotional dysregulation than children who reside in nonfood-insecure households.¹¹

At the same time, rising household expenses continue to place additional strain on families. According to the Center for American Progress, child care costs have consistently outpaced the housing costs and the price of groceries since the 1990s, with median costs reaching \$800 per month and more than \$1,100 for parents and caregivers who require more than 20 hours of care services per month.¹² In the District, the average family spends 26 percent of their income on center-based child care costs.¹³ The First Five Years Fund reports D.C. families are spending approximately \$26,193 per year on center-based care.¹⁴ This represents an increase of more than \$4,000 compared to costs previously reported in 2023 by the Bainum Family Foundation.¹⁵

These overlapping financial pressures contribute to instability at home, which can carry over into the classroom. Children whose households experience severe income fluctuations are more likely to become disengaged in the school environment, underscoring the importance of

offering school meals at no cost to all students to reduce barriers to participation.¹⁶ This reinforces the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation for pediatricians to routinely assess the impacts of food insecurity in children, incorporating a screening process in their practice.¹⁷

How the District of Columbia's School Breakfast Program Works

Who Operates the School Breakfast Program?

Any public school, public charter school, nonprofit private school, or residential child care institution can participate in the School Breakfast Program and receive federal funds for each breakfast served. The program is administered at the federal level by the USDA, and in District of Columbia, through the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

Who Can Participate in the School Breakfast Program?

Any student attending a school that offers the program can access breakfast. As mandated by the Healthy Schools Act of 2010, every student in the District of Columbia receives school breakfast at no cost. However, schools are reimbursed based on whether the student qualifies for a free, reduced-price, or paid meal per the child's household income.

How Are Children Certified for Free or Reduced-Price Meals?

Most children are certified for free or reduced-price meals through applications collected by schools at the beginning of the school year or throughout the year. However, certain groups of children are categorically eligible (automatically eligible) for free school meals and can be certified without submitting an application. These groups include children in households participating in SNAP, TANF, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. Additionally, children who are classified as migrant, unhoused, or runaway, as well as those in foster care and Head Start participants, are categorically eligible.

Schools are required to directly certify children in SNAP households by matching SNAP records with school enrollment lists. School districts may also directly certify other categorically eligible children. [Medicaid Direct](#)

Certification Demonstration Project also allows schools to automatically enroll eligible students in free or reduced-price school meals based on their households participation

The District of Columbia currently does implement Medicaid Direct Certification for school meals.

in Medicaid without requiring families to complete a separate meal application. The District of Columbia currently does implement Medicaid Direct Certification for school meals. Schools should also utilize district data to certify categorically eligible students and may coordinate with personnel such as homeless and migrant education liaisons

to obtain necessary documentation. Despite these processes, some categorically eligible children may be overlooked, requiring their households to submit a school meals application. However, these households are not required to complete the income information section of the application.

How Are Schools Reimbursed?

Participating schools are reimbursed in two ways — through participation in the School Breakfast Program and through the Healthy Schools Act. Schools that satisfy Healthy Schools Act criteria are eligible to receive additional funding of 20 cents for every breakfast served and 10 cents for every lunch served. These reimbursement requests must be filed with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

The HSA offers an annual subsidy of **\$2 per student** to schools that use an approved alternative breakfast service method such as breakfast after the bell or “grab and go.” Schools may use these funds to purchase equipment and supplies for the program.

Schools receive an additional 5 cents reimbursement for a maximum of one meal daily when at least one element of a reimbursable breakfast or lunch consists of completely unprocessed, locally sourced food.

Due to federal changes in the dietary guidelines and following the passage of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, 2 percent and whole milk are now allowable in school meals.

The federal reimbursement rates the school receives for each meal served depends on whether a student qualifies for free, reduced-price, or paid meals. Schools also receive federal reimbursement for each meal served through the School Breakfast Program with higher “severe need” rates provided to schools serving a greater share of low-income students and standard “non-severe need” rates for others. For the 2024–2025 school year, D.C. schools served reimbursable meals at the following rates.¹⁸

Severe Need	Non-Severe Need
■ \$2.84 for free meals	■ \$2.37 for free meals
■ \$2.54 for reduced-price	■ \$2.07 for reduced-price
■ \$0.39 for paid	■ \$0.39 for paid

Key Findings Among LEA’s for the 2024–2025 School Year

More Than 75 Percent of D.C. Schools Reached the School Breakfast Participation Goal

Overall, most D.C. schools included in this report for school year 2024–2025 made strong progress toward increasing access to school breakfast. For the vast majority of schools, **43 out of 56 schools, or 77 percent, met or exceeded the Food Research & Action Center’s benchmark** of 70 students participating in the School Breakfast Program for every 100 students participating in the National School Lunch Program. Notably, the top 10 highest-performing schools achieved an average daily breakfast participation rate of 73 percent, demonstrating what is possible when effective breakfast models and strong school-level practices are in place.

This translates into significant reach with **more than 6.1 million breakfast meals served to students attending D.C. Public Schools and public charter schools over the course of the school year.** However, participation remains uneven across the District. The top 10 local education agencies (LEA’s) with the highest breakfast participation collectively served nearly 5 million meals, while the 10 lowest-performing schools served just over 61,000 meals in total. This disparity underscores the continued opportunity to expand access to school breakfast particularly in schools where participation remains low so that more students can start their day ready to learn.

Table 1: Ratio of 70 Students in School Breakfast Program (SBP) per 100 in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for all Reported D.C. Local Education Agencies During School Year 2024–2025

School	School Type	CEP	Ratio of 70 Students in SBP per 100 in NSLP
DC International School	Public Charter	No	182%
SELA PCS	Public Charter	No	162%
LEARN DC Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	156%
Two Rivers PCS	Public Charter	No	154%
Washington Yu Ying PCS	Public Charter	No	152%
Ingenuity Prep PCS	Public Charter	Yes	116%
DC Preparatory Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	111%
Bridges PCS	Public Charter	Yes	111%
Monument Academy Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	104%
Early Childhood Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	103%
Statesmen College Preparatory Academy for Boys	Public Charter	Yes	100%
Hope Community PCS	Public Charter	Yes	98%
Rocketship Rise Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	97%
Friendship PCS	Public Charter	Yes	96%
Perry Street Prep PCS	Public Charter	Yes	94%
Achievement Preparatory Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	93%
Center City PCS	Public Charter	Yes	93%
Mary McLeod Bethune PCS	Public Charter	Yes	91%
DC Scholars PCS	Public Charter	Yes	91%
Lee Montessori Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	89%
Mundo Verde PCS	Public Charter	No	89%
The Children's Guild Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	89%
Apple Tree Early Learning Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	88%
Richard Wright PCS	Public Charter	Yes	87%
Roots PCS	Public Charter	Yes	86%
Breakthrough Montessori PCS	Public Charter	No	85%
Shining Stars Montessori Academy	Public Charter	Yes	84%
Harmony DC PCS	Public Charter	Yes	83%
Cedar Tree Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	80%
Washington Leadership Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	80%
DC Bilingual Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	80%
Kipp/DC	Public Charter	Yes	80%
Inspired Teaching Demonstration PCS	Public Charter	No	78%
Creative Minds International PCS	Public Charter	No	78%
Meridian PCS	Public Charter	Yes	76%
The Sojourner Truth School Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	76%
Paul Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	75%
Washington Latin PCS	Public Charter	No	74%
Elsie Whitlow Stokes PCS	Public Charter	No	73%
DC Public Schools (DCPS)	Public	Yes	72%
Thurgood Marshall Academy PCHS	Public Charter	Yes	72%
Seed Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	71%
Capital City Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	70%
Basis DC PCS	Public Charter	No	68%
Briya PCS	Public Charter	No	68%
Capital Village Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	61%
EL Haynes Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	61%
I Dream PCS	Public Charter	Yes	61%
Social Justice School Inc.	Public Charter	Yes	53%
Latin American Montessori Bilingual PCS	Public Charter	No	51%
Idea PCS	Public Charter	Yes	51%
Washington Global Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	41%
Girls Global Academy Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	35%
Digital Pioneers Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	34%
Howard Univ. Middle School	Public Charter	Yes	31%
Cesar Chavez PCS	Public Charter	Yes	26%

Table 2: Breakfast Served in D.C. Public and D.C. Public Charter Schools During School Year 2024–2025

School	School Type	CEP	Enrollment	% Breakfast ADP to Enrollment	Number of Days in School	Total ADP	Total FR Priced Meals	% FR Meals	Total Breakfast Meals Served	Ratio of 70 Students in SBP per 100 in NSLP	# of Students in SBP per 100 NSLP	Additional Students Needed in Breakfast if 70 per 100 in Lunch
Achievement Preparatory Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	409	65%	180	267	48,056	100%	48,056	93%	93	7
Apple Tree Early Learning Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	658	52%	180	341	27,223	63%	43,335	88%	88	12
Basis DC PCS	Public Charter	No	694	9%	180	64	670	12%	5,799	68%	68	32
Breakthrough Montessori PCS	Public Charter	No	386	63%	180	245	6,751	31%	22,056	85%	85	15
Bridges PCS	Public Charter	Yes	369	61%	180	224	27,265	68%	40,318	111%	111	0
Briya PCS	Public Charter	No	769	5%	180	35	4,521	85%	5,320	68%	68	32
Capital City Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	1031	29%	180	299	45,781	85%	53,738	70%	70	30
Capital Village Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	93	25%	180	23	4,057	97%	4,199	61%	61	39
Cedar Tree Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	399	42%	180	167	29,984	100%	29,984	80%	80	20
Center City PCS	Public Charter	Yes	1447	48%	180	693	102,159	82%	124,828	93%	93	7
Cesar Chavez PCS	Public Charter	Yes	377	8%	180	32	5,742	100%	5,742	26%	26	74
Creative Minds International PCS	Public Charter	No	536	37%	180	197	19,825	56%	35,505	78%	78	22
DC Bilingual Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	622	43%	180	267	19,545	41%	48,025	80%	80	20
DC International School	Public Charter	No	1663	17%	180	276	24,263	49%	49,679	182%	182	0
DC Preparatory Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	2189	57%	180	1,242	221,677	99%	223,579	111%	111	0
DC Public Schools (DCPS)	Public	Yes	52299	41%	180	21,249	2,819,614	84%	3,361,014	72%	72	28
DC Scholars PCS	Public Charter	Yes	479	44%	180	211	38,023	100%	38,023	91%	91	9
Digital Pioneers Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	691	14%	180	99	17,812	100%	17,812	34%	34	66
Early Childhood Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	281	60%	180	170	30,558	100%	30,558	103%	103	0
EL Haynes Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	1190	26%	180	304	36,542	67%	54,664	61%	61	39
Elsie Whitlow Stokes PCS	Public Charter	No	708	58%	180	409	12,970	35%	36,811	73%	73	27
Friendship PCS	Public Charter	Yes	4417	47%	180	2,098	377,552	100%	377,552	96%	96	4
Girls Global Academy Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	184	14%	180	25	3,915	87%	4,502	35%	35	65
Harmony DC PCS	Public Charter	Yes	183	44%	180	81	14,522	100%	14,522	83%	83	17
Hope Community PCS	Public Charter	Yes	235	67%	180	157	28,175	100%	28,175	98%	98	2
Howard Univ. Middle School	Public Charter	Yes	271	12%	180	33	5,868	100%	5,868	31%	31	69
I Dream PCS	Public Charter	Yes	99	43%	180	42	7,625	100%	7,625	61%	61	39
Idea PCS	Public Charter	Yes	361	22%	180	81	14,497	100%	14,497	51%	51	49
Ingenuity Prep PCS	Public Charter	Yes	802	44%	180	349	60,565	96%	62,843	116%	116	0
Inspired Teaching Demonstration PCS	Public Charter	No	529	93%	180	492	78,179	88%	88,634	78%	78	22
Kipp/DC	Public Charter	Yes	7407	39%	180	2,868	515,622	100%	515,905	80%	80	20
Latin American Montessori Bilingual PCS	Public Charter	No	573	23%	180	131	1,017	9%	11,760	51%	51	49
LEARN DC Public Charter School	Public Charter	No	290	65%	180	188	6,040	34%	17,940	156%	156	0
Lee Montessori Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	548	38%	180	206	12,238	46%	26,601	89%	89	11
Mary McLeod Bethune PCS	Public Charter	Yes	313	78%	180	245	42,028	95%	44,064	91%	91	9
Meridian PCS	Public Charter	Yes	580	45%	180	260	46,765	100%	46,765	76%	76	24
Monument Academy Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	131	91%	180	119	15,233	71%	21,426	104%	104	0

Table 2: Breakfast Served in D.C. Public and D.C. Public Charter Schools During School Year 2024–2025

School	School Type	CEP	Enrollment	% Breakfast ADP to Enrollment	Number of Days in School	Total ADP	Total FR Priced Meals	% FR Meals	Total Breakfast Meals Served	Ratio of 70 Students in SBP per 100 in NSLP	# of Students in SBP per 100 NSLP	Additional Students Needed in Breakfast if 70 per 100 in Lunch
Mundo Verde PCS	Public Charter	No	1070	30%	180	323	21,484	37%	58,157	89%	89	11
Paul Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	773	44%	180	340	47,212	77%	61,265	75%	75	25
Perry Street Prep PCS	Public Charter	Yes	437	61%	180	265	47,633	100%	47,665	94%	94	6
Richard Wright PCS	Public Charter	Yes	303	50%	180	150	26,909	99%	27,053	87%	87	13
Rocketship Rise Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	1198	47%	180	561	101,013	100%	101,013	97%	97	3
Roots PCS	Public Charter	Yes	80	63%	180	50	8,844	98%	9,009	86%	86	14
Seed Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	247	36%	180	88	15,851	100%	15,851	71%	71	29
SELA PCS	Public Charter	No	303	57%	180	172	4,489	29%	15,508	162%	162	0
Shining Stars Montessori Academy	Public Charter	Yes	199	32%	180	64	9,800	85%	11,588	84%	84	16
Social Justice School Inc.	Public Charter	Yes	97	32%	180	31	5,624	100%	5,624	53%	53	47
Statesmen College Preparatory Academy for Boys	Public Charter	Yes	311	81%	180	251	45,254	100%	45,254	100%	100	0
The Children's Guild Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	250	48%	180	121	21,791	100%	21,791	89%	89	11
The Sojourner Truth School Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	294	30%	180	89	4,931	59%	8,331	76%	76	24
Thurgood Marshall Academy PCHS	Public Charter	Yes	377	19%	180	70	7,848	62%	12,603	72%	72	28
Two Rivers PCS	Public Charter	No	1032	30%	180	311	21,966	39%	55,961	154%	154	0
Washington Global Public Charter School	Public Charter	Yes	229	28%	180	63	6,783	78%	8,656	41%	41	59
Washington Latin PCS	Public Charter	No	1131	25%	180	287	9,379	35%	26,584	74%	74	26
Washington Leadership Academy PCS	Public Charter	Yes	394	24%	180	95	14,166	83%	17,102	80%	80	20
Washington Yu Ying PCS	Public Charter	No	702	33%	180	230	7,278	21%	35,360	152%	152	0
TOTAL			93,640	42%	180	37,751	5,201,134	76%	6,152,099	85%	85	1,190

Participation Varied Across Schools

According to this report, Inspired Teaching Demonstration Public Charter School had the highest percentage of breakfast participation relative to enrollment, with 93 percent of students served nearly 89,000 meals over the school year. In contrast, Briya Public Charter School had the lowest participation rate, with just 5 percent of enrolled students accessing breakfast with slightly more than 5,000 meals served.

D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) served the highest total number of breakfast meals at more than 3.3 million during the 2024–2025 school year with the highest average daily participation rate, reaching more than 21,000 students each day. However, when compared to overall enrollment, only about 41 percent of DCPS students participated in

breakfast, indicating room for growth in reaching more students. Meanwhile, Roots Public Charter School, despite having the smallest enrollment with only 80 students, achieved relatively strong participation, with 63 percent of students participating in breakfast based on an average daily participation of 50 students.

These disparities in participation rates may be driven by several factors, including differences in breakfast service models (such as breakfast in the classroom versus traditional cafeteria service), scheduling constraints, and the extent to which breakfast is integrated into the school day. School culture, staff engagement, and student awareness also play a role, as do logistical considerations like transportation timing and arrival patterns. Additionally, stigma associated with school meals and varying levels of outreach to families can influence participation.

Alternative Breakfast Models

One of the most effective strategies for increasing school breakfast participation is implementing a breakfast after the bell service model. This approach moves breakfast out of the cafeteria and integrates it into the regular school day after classes begin, making it more accessible to students. By addressing barriers related to timing, convenience, and stigma that often prevent children from participating in traditional school breakfast programs, this model has demonstrated significant success. The impact is further enhanced when schools offer breakfast at no charge to all students. Schools typically implement breakfast after the bell using one or more of three service options:

Second Chance

Second chance breakfast, served after first period during a morning nutrition break, works particularly well for middle and high schools. Older students are often not hungry early in the morning, and high school students tend to arrive closer to the start of the school day, leaving little time for a traditional breakfast. This model also reduces the social stigma sometimes associated with school breakfast among adolescents. Depending on the setup, students can eat in the cafeteria, similar to traditional breakfast, or take a bagged meal to be eaten between classes or during the next period. Second chance breakfast fits the needs of schools with later lunch periods and, if scheduled properly, does not reduce lunch participation

Breakfast in the Classroom

Offering breakfast in the classroom, where meals are delivered and students eat at their desks during the first 10–15 minutes of the school day, has proven to be one of the most effective strategies for increasing participation in the School Breakfast Program, especially for students in elementary schools. Food service staff typically transport meals from the cafeteria in containers or serve them from carts in the hallways. This approach reduces the stigma associated with school breakfast for children from low-income households by making the meal a shared classroom experience. Many teachers and principals also cite breakfast in the classroom as an opportunity to incorporate social-emotional learning and build relationships with students.

Grab and Go Breakfast

“Grab and go” breakfast provides remarkable flexibility for schools by helping them overcome many of the barriers that keep children from participating in the traditional program served before school starts. School nutrition staff pack breakfast meals in bags, which students pick up from the cafeteria or hallway kiosks as they arrive. Students then eat on the way to class or at their desks during the first 10–15 minutes of the period. This model is particularly popular among secondary schools and offers a practical option for schools that find it difficult to deliver meals directly to classrooms or that prefer food service staff to manage meal counting and claiming.

Challenges With Serving School Breakfast

Serving school breakfasts across schools in the District can present several challenges. Many families face rushed morning schedules, non-traditional work hours, and unpredictable bus arrivals, all of which make it difficult for students to access traditional before-school cafeteria breakfast service. When students arrive at school with little time before the first bell, they must often choose between eating and being late to class — a tradeoff that discourages participation even among students who would benefit most from the program. This is why alternative breakfast models are highly encouraged for increased participation.

Social stigma also poses a barrier, particularly in middle and high schools. Many students perceive school breakfast as a program intended only for low-income students and avoid participating to escape the judgment of their peers.¹⁹ This stigma can significantly suppress participation rates even when meals are readily available for all students regardless of background, undermining the program’s potential reach and impact.

Administrative and operational challenges in D.C. schools can complicate efforts to expand breakfast participation. According to *Food Procurement in the District of Columbia: A Weak Link in the Value Chain*, many D.C.



schools face barriers in food procurement, preparation, and service that limit flexibility.²⁰ Schools often rely on outsourcing to foodservice companies, a trend mirrored nationally, partly due to infrastructure constraints such as building code limitations that prevent additional self-prep sites.²¹ These restrictions make it difficult for schools to implement alternative breakfast service models like breakfast in the classroom or “grab and go” options that could boost student participation. Expanding self-prep operations also carries budgetary challenges, including the cost of equipment, additional staff for meal preparation, and other overhead expenses.

Addressing these barriers will require coordinated efforts among school administrators, food service staff, and facilities managers to identify practical solutions that expand access without compromising safety or compliance.

Supporting School Food and Nutrition Staff

Investing in the workforce behind school meals strengthens school breakfast programs and improves outcomes for students. Currently, the average hourly pay for food preparation and serving occupations in the District of Columbia is only \$18.22, with an annual median wage of \$37,893.²² Increasing compensation for food and nutrition workers is essential to attracting and retaining qualified employees in a competitive labor market. Ensuring that these positions include access to benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and retirement contributions further demonstrates that this work is valued and helps reduce turnover that can potentially disrupt

meal service. Moreover, workers need greater support and training to advance from entry-level roles to leadership positions with higher salaries over time.

Professional development opportunities also play a critical role in supporting food and nutrition staff. For instance, the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) has a [food safety management course](#) for food and nutrition staff to identify and avoid food contaminants, proper employee health and hygiene, cleaning and sanitation principles, and safe food handling practices.²³ Programs like [USDA Team Nutrition grants](#) provide funding for paid training in culinary skills and nutrition standards of compliance, helping staff build expertise while earning income.²⁴ These training opportunities not only improve the quality of meals served but also create pathways for career advancement, boosting morale, and long-term retention.

Finally, schools must ensure that food and nutrition staff have adequate time and support to manage meal service effectively. Understaffing during peak periods places excessive strain on workers, leading to rushed service, longer wait times for students, and increased burnout. Addressing staffing shortages and scheduling sufficient personnel during high-volume serving periods allows staff to serve meals efficiently while maintaining food safety and quality standards.

Local Foods in School Breakfast

The Healthy Students Amendment Act requires D.C. schools to align their food procurement practices with the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#) (GFPP), a national coalition working to create a transparent and equitable food system.²⁵ GFPP provides a metric-based, flexible framework that supports and encourages large institutions to direct their buying power toward six core values including: equity, supporting local economies, promoting environmental sustainability, valuing the workforce, ensuring animal welfare, and prioritizing nutrition.

Serving local foods in school breakfast programs offers wide-ranging benefits for students, schools, and communities. Research from USDA shows that farm-to-school programs can increase student participation in breakfast and lunch, improve consumption of healthier foods, and reduce food waste.²⁶ Students who participate in farm-to-school activities demonstrate greater knowledge of food and nutrition, make healthier selections during meals, and show increased willingness to try fruits and vegetables.²⁷

Local foods also tend to be fresher and of higher quality, contributing to more appealing and nutritious meals. Beyond the cafeteria, these programs create opportunities for agriculture, health, and nutrition education that reinforce classroom learning. Local procurement also strengthens regional economies by connecting schools with nearby vendors, suppliers, farmers and producers.

In D.C., local breakfast ingredients can include regionally grown grains for baked goods, shell eggs, dairy products like yogurt and cheese, and smoothies made with local milk and fruits.²⁸ District-wide celebrations such as [Growing Healthy Schools Month](#) and [Berries and Salad Greens Day](#) help raise awareness of farm-to-school efforts and encourage student engagement with local food initiatives.

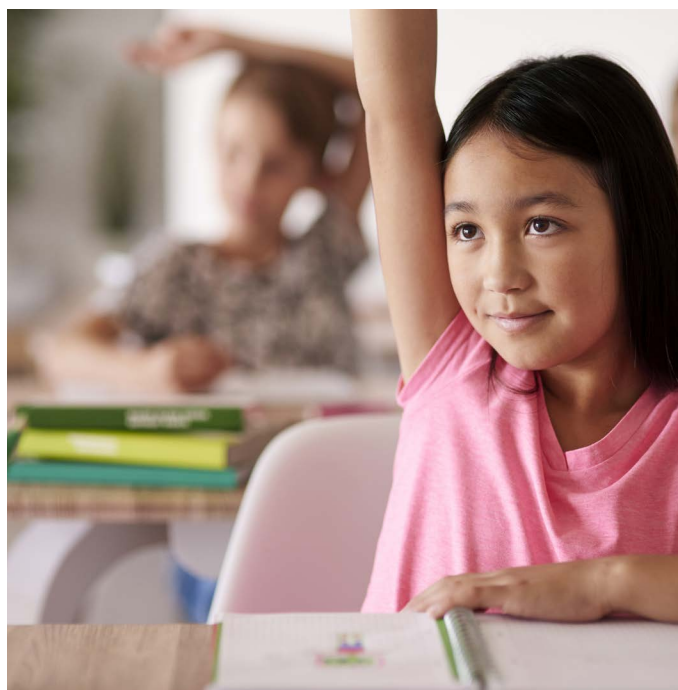
School Breakfast Vendors

Vendors contracted with the schools to provide meals for schools benefit from the consistent, high-volume demand that these programs generate. Because students rely on school breakfast for their morning meals each school day, vendors can count on regular orders throughout the academic year. This predictable demand creates a stable and reliable revenue stream that supports business planning and sustainability.

Increased participation in school breakfast programs translates directly into higher sales volume, helping vendors meet their financial targets and maintain healthy operations. By ensuring consistent business for local and regional food service providers, school breakfast programs contribute to a positive economic impact across the District while simultaneously serving students' nutritional needs.

Hear the Crunch

[Hear the Crunch](#) is an annual event led by D.C. Hunger Solutions in the District of Columbia that celebrates the benefits of school breakfast and recognizes nutrition staff for their contributions. Students, educators, families, policymakers, and advocates take synchronized bites into apples to show their support and highlight the ongoing collaboration among stakeholders working to ensure all D.C. students have access to a healthy breakfast at school.



Recommendations to Increase School Breakfast Participation

Universal School Meals

Universal school meals is an opportunity to provide school meals at no cost to students in the District of Columbia regardless of household income. Under this model, all students would have access to school meals, removing financial barriers that may discourage families from participating. School meals are a critical resource for reducing childhood hunger and improving academic achievement and offering them universally helps eliminate the stigma often associated with free and reduced-price meal programs. When all students eat the same meals under the same terms, participation becomes normalized and students are more likely to take advantage of the program. On January 31, 2025, Councilmembers Henderson, Allen, Frumin, Nadeau, Bonds, Parker, R. White, Lewis George, Pinto, and McDuffie introduced [B26-0108](#), the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2025, to the Council of the District of Columbia.²⁹ The legislation would provide “free universal school breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks to students in public, charter, and participating private schools in the District of Columbia.” If passed, this legislation would help reduce childhood food insecurity while creating a more inclusive environment in school cafeterias.

Increased Funding for the Healthy Schools Act and Healthy Students Amendment Act

Expanding funding for existing school nutrition legislation is another key strategy for boosting breakfast participation. The Healthy Schools Act of 2010 established foundational health requirements for D.C. schools, and the Healthy Students Amendment Act of 2018 strengthened these provisions by improving nutrition standards, increasing physical activity requirements, and allocating additional resources for health-related programs. Notably, the 2018 amendment introduced annual subsidies for schools that implement breakfast in the classroom; a service model proven to significantly increase participation. Continued investment in these programs will help schools overcome operational barriers and reach more students each morning.

Centering Student Autonomy

Student choice is essential for improving breakfast participation. According to the School Nutrition Association, perceptions of poor taste and nutritional quality are key reasons students skip school breakfast.³⁰ When students have a say in what is being served, they're more likely to eat the meals provided, reducing food waste and improving nutritional outcomes. A substantial amount of food is discarded in school breakfast programs, with milk, fruits, and 100 percent fruit juice being the most wasted items.³¹ Reducing food waste should be a priority in efforts to improve the sustainability of school meal programs, and part of the solution may lie in offering menu options that better align with students' preferences.³²

Schools should prioritize offering menu items that students have identified as favorites, as these proven popular options create positive associations with school breakfast programs. In a survey conducted by DCPS during the 2024–2025 school year, many students choose pancakes and waffles (87 percent), pastries (87 percent), cold cereals (86 percent), and yogurt (85 percent) as their favorites.³³ Fifty-four percent of the students surveyed shared that they would like to see more pancakes, waffles, and french toast.³⁴

Another important factor to increase breakfast participation involves establishing ongoing channels for student feedback — whether through surveys, taste tests, or student advisory committees to ensure that meal programs remain responsive to evolving preferences and dietary needs. By consistently listening to the students who participate in breakfast programs, schools can make

informed decisions about menu planning that reflect real student interests rather than assumptions. This student-centered approach not only boosts participation numbers but also empowers young people to take ownership of their nutritional choices and builds trust between students and school nutrition services.

Creative Menu Ideas

According to the *2026 FRAC Large District School Report*, District of Columbia Public Schools reported that they implemented incentives to increase breakfast participation: “DCPS self-operated sites implemented incentives for [high school] breakfast participation by adding breakfast bars, such as yogurt and breakfast bowls, as well as by entering students into a raffle who ate breakfast at school during the month of October.” — DCPS representative

Cultural Relevancy

Increasing school breakfast participation in the District of Columbia also requires meals served that are culturally relevant. Research has shown that students are more likely to eat breakfast when the meals reflect the foods they know and enjoy at home.

Culturally relevant meals acknowledge that food is deeply tied to identity, family, and community. When students see familiar foods on the breakfast line, they feel like their culture is valued within the school environment. This sense of belonging can encourage participation among students who might otherwise skip breakfast because the available options feel unfamiliar or unappealing. Studies have found that incorporating culturally diverse menu items often see increased meal consumption and reduced plate waste, as students are more willing to eat foods that resonate with their backgrounds. Suppliers and vendors in the District work with schools to serve culturally relevant meals in school meals, like “ropa vieja” and “pollo con arroz.”

Historically, school nutrition programs have defaulted to standardized menus that reflect dominant cultural norms, often overlooking the dietary traditions of Black, Latine, immigrant, and other students of color. This one-size-fits-all approach can alienate the very students these programs are designed to serve. By intentionally developing menus in partnership with families and community members, D.C. schools can address this inequity and ensure that school

breakfasts nourish all students — not just those whose food traditions have historically been centered.

Achieving culturally responsive meal programs requires investment in staff training, community engagement, and flexible food procurement. School nutrition teams benefit from learning about the cultural backgrounds of the students they serve and understanding how to prepare diverse foods safely and authentically. Gathering input from parents, caregivers, and students through surveys or taste tests can help schools identify which items to add to their menus. This can also be achieved through tying it to specific cultural celebrations, like having a taste test during Hispanic Heritage Month of foods from Latin American countries or sampling Indian food during Diwali. Additionally, self-prep schools and food service vendors can procure ingredients from local ethnic grocery stores or specialty vendors to expand the range of culturally appropriate options available.

School Meals Policy

School meals policy plays a critical role in ensuring that all students have access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally responsive meals during the school day. Beyond supporting student health and learning, these policies shape participation in programs like the School Breakfast Program, influence operational practices at schools, and guide how resources are allocated to address equity, accessibility, and food security. Thoughtful policy design can remove barriers to participation, foster culturally inclusive menus, and create a framework for schools to deliver meals that meet the diverse needs of their student communities.

- **Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025:** January 14, 2026, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 was signed into law. The legislation amends the National School Lunch Act to permit schools participating in the National School Lunch Program to offer whole and reduced-fat (2 percent) milk alongside existing low-fat and fat-free options. The law also exempts fluid milk from the weekly saturated fat limit for school lunches and expands nondairy beverage options. The law aligns with the [2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), which reintroduced full-fat dairy as recommended for a healthy diet.

Implementation will require schools to evaluate student interest, coordinate with suppliers on availability



and cost, and consider the law’s applicability across meal programs. Currently, schools in the District can immediately offer whole and 2 percent milk at lunch, but breakfast is still limited to low-fat (1 percent) and fat-free milk only.

- **2025 USDA Dietary Guidelines for School Meals:** In January 2026, the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services released the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which encourages the consumption of red meat and full-fat dairy and limit consumption of foods defined as highly processed.
- **Feed Hungry Kids Act:** Codifies the eligibility threshold for schools using the Community Eligibility Provision at 25 percent identified student percentage.
- **Military Dependents School Meal Eligibility Act of 2026:** Expands military families’ access to free and reduced-price school meals by removing servicemembers’ Basic Allowance for Housing from eligibility determinations and studies the feasibility of streamlining eligibility determinations by assessing the feasibility of direct certification for military families.

For more bills we are supporting, please visit: <https://frac.org/action/bills-we-are-supporting>.

Conclusion

Consuming breakfast has been shown to improve a child's nutrition and academic performance as well as lower rates of obesity, behavioral issues, and school absences. The School Breakfast Program supports students' health and academic success by providing the nutrition they need to learn and thrive in the classroom and beyond. Despite the many benefits of school breakfasts, too many children from households with low incomes attending schools in the District of Columbia are missing out on this important meal and the positive impact it has on health, well-being, and academic achievement.

Federal and local funding are available to LEAs to improve breakfast and increase participation, and with proper implementation, the District will be positioned to reach 70 percent of children with school breakfasts in participating D.C. schools. Having access to breakfasts at no costs in schools will allow more students' access to the nutrition they need for their health and well-being, setting them up to succeed in the future.



Technical Notes

Data for this report was provided by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. This report only includes data for participation in the School Breakfast Program for public schools and public charter schools in the District of Columbia. It does not include data for private schools, adult education, centers, residential child care institutions, religious schools, or alternative programs. The average daily student participation data for the 2024–2025 school year was calculated by dividing the number of breakfast meals served by the number of school days from September 2024 through May 2025. This report assesses the average daily school breakfast participation rate compared to the number of free and reduced-price meals served under the National School Lunch Program for school year 2024–2025.

Based on the top state and district performance, the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) has set an attainable benchmark for every state and school district to reach a ratio of 70 children receiving free or reduced-price breakfast for every 100 receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Because D.C. Hunger Solutions does not include private schools or residential child care institutions in calculations, the reported citywide breakfast participation rates may differ slightly from calculated rates published in FRAC's annual *The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch* report.

Appendices

Table 3: Breakfast Participation Among Students in D.C. Public and Public Charter Schools During School Year 2024–2025

School	Breakfast Participation Among Students (% Breakfast ADP to Enrollment)
Inspired Teaching Demonstration PCS	93%
Monument Academy Public Charter School	91%
Statesmen College Preparatory Academy for Boys	81%
Mary McLeod Bethune PCS	78%
Hope Community PCS	67%
Achievement Preparatory Academy PCS	65%
LEARN DC Public Charter School	65%
Breakthrough Montessori PCS	63%
Roots PCS	63%
Bridges PCS	61%
Total Average	73%

Table 4: Breakfast Participation in the Top 10 D.C. Schools During School Year 2024–2025

School	Total Breakfast Meals Served
DC Public Schools (DCPS)	3,361,014
Kipp/DC	515,905
Friendship PCS	377,552
DC Preparatory Academy PCS	223,579
Center City PCS	124,828
Rocketship Rise Academy PCS	101,013
Inspired Teaching Demonstration PCS	88,634
Ingenuity Prep PCS	62,843
Paul Public Charter School	61,265
Mundo Verde PCS	58,157
Total Meals	4,974,790

Table 5: Breakfast Participation Among the Bottom 10 D.C. Schools During School Year 2024–2025

School	Total Breakfast Meals Served
Capital Village Public Charter School	4,199
Girls Global Academy Public Charter School	4,502
Briya PCS	5,320
Social Justice School Inc.	5,624
Cesar Chavez PCS	5,742
Basis DC PCS	5,799
Howard Univ. Middle School	5,868
I Dream PCS	7,625
The Sojourner Truth School Public Charter School	8,331
Washington Global Public Charter School	8,656
Total Meals	61,666

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