

# **CONNECT STUDENTS TO SCHOOL MEALS: A Meals in the Classroom Implementation Guide with the COVID-19 Pandemic in Mind**

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# MEALS IN THE CLASSROOM

**WHAT** Serving meals in the classroom is modeled after Breakfast After the Bell, a nationally recognized approach to increase participation in school meals. School nutrition staff, students, or teachers deliver meals to classrooms or students pick up meals from multiple locations at school, then students eat in their classroom. Serving meals in the classroom and during the school day is a critical step to connect students to nutrition they need and may be helpful in providing more space for students to eat.

**HOW** Schools serve meals in the classroom through two models: Delivery and Grab and Go.

**Delivery:** Meals are delivered to and served in the classroom at the start of the school day for breakfast, and before lunch for midday meal service. Prior to COVID-19, serving meals in the classroom was a best practice for all schools, especially schools offering universal meals.

**Grab and Go:** Schools set up multiple points of service at carts or kiosks for students to pick up meals across the schools, then return to the classroom. Points of service should be strategically located: by near the bus drop off or at the main entrance. For smaller schools with centralized cafeterias, students can pick up meals in the cafeteria then go to their classroom.

**WHY** Serving meals in the classroom and during the school day is a nationally recognized approach to increase participation in school meals. Increased meal participation helps schools reduce student food insecurity, improves educational outcomes, and promotes racial equity.

## School meals reduce food insecurity:

- 1 in 6 kids in the US could face hunger this year because of COVID-19. School meals help students meet nutritional needs, many of whom consume up to half their daily calories at school.
- Prior to COVID-19, more than 30 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program and nearly 15 million participated in the School Breakfast Program.

## School meals improve educational outcomes:

- On average, students who eat school breakfast achieve 17.5% higher scores on standardized math tests and attend school more regularly (1.5 more days per year).
- Students who get enough nutritious food have significantly lower levels of behavioral, emotional, and educational problems.

## Meals in the classroom helps promote racial equity:

Black, indigenous, and people of color are at much greater risk of hunger and poverty than the overall US population because of the impacts of structural racism. As of September 2020, 40% of Black families with school-age children were food insecure, compared to 15% of white families. Two-thirds of all families reported that their children were not receiving meals from schools, suggesting that the **most vulnerable children may not be benefiting from school-based nutrition resources.**<sup>i</sup>

Serving meals in the classroom improves the nutritional well-being of students in Washington, especially in schools located in concentrated areas of poverty with high percentages of students of color. Inclusive and non-stigmatizing school meals, specifically those served in the classroom, can help address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and students of color.

## RELEVANT WASHINGTON STATE CHILD NUTRITION LEGISLATION

### Washington Kids Ready to Learn Act of 2018 (HB 1508)

Beginning in School Year 2019-2020, and each year thereafter, public schools **with enrollment of 70% or more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals** (or a claiming percentage of 70% or more if operating the Community Eligibility Provision) in October of the previous school year are mandated to offer Breakfast After the Bell. Suitable models include Meals delivered to the classroom, grab and go, and second chance breakfast.

- Even schools below 70% should participate! Breakfast After the bell breaks down barriers to students accessing breakfast. Every school should ensure all students have the option to eat school breakfast every day.
- By serving meals in the classroom, you are ensuring your district is following the Washington Kids Ready to Learn Act.

At minimum, every student must have the opportunity and adequate time (10 minutes or more) to eat school breakfast after the bell rings. This applies to all students, regardless of what time they arrive to school, meaning offering Breakfast After the Bell to only late students is not adequate.

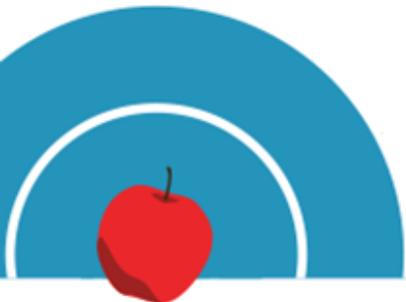
- Remember: **The time designated to eat breakfast at the start of the school day counts as instructional time**, so long as students are provided an educational activity relevant to their instructional program offered concurrently with the consumption of breakfast

### The Hunger-Free Schools Act of 2020 (HB 2660)

Washington schools with students in or below grade eight with an identified student percentage (ISP) of at least 62.5%, determined annually by April 1st, must participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Schools, groups of schools within a district, and entire districts with at least 40% ISP are eligible and are encouraged to participate in CEP.

- Participation in CEP will not impact an LEA's Title 1 allocation. Title 1, Part A funding is not based on enrollment, free and reduced-price percentages, or participation in CEP.
- Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding does use free and reduced-price percentages to allocate both LAP Base and LAP High Poverty funds. HB 2660 includes a LAP Hold Harmless that ensures districts and schools will not lose LAP funding by participating in CEP. Districts may use Free and Reduced-Price data from the year preceding CEP adoption for LAP purposes. This also ensures schools maintain "LAP High-Poverty" status when moving to CEP.
- The Family Income Survey replaces the School Meals Application. When schools collect and process more eligible Family Income Surveys, they will see an increase LAP funding!



# Make It Happen: Resources for Stakeholders

Adopting *Meals in the Classroom* involves school nutrition, principals, teachers, custodians, and students! Through collaboration, schools will implement programs that reduce stigma and increase participation.

## School Nutrition Directors

Assemble a Meals in the Classroom planning team. Bring together stakeholders to share the *importance* of expanding meal access, address concerns, and explain how the new model may alter daily routines. Include school business officers, principals, and custodial staff. Convene regularly to facilitate planning, troubleshoot, manage expectations, and develop powerful advocates to promote the program among peers.

For the first meeting, prepare the selected model for each school, with corresponding equipment needs, and suggested timing. Don't forget to mention the benefits school meals have on students, the school, AND your program's bottom line.

School nutrition staff should communicate with planning team to:

- Present at existing principal/teacher/all-staff meetings,
- Share the plan with the district's re-opening committee (advocate for a seat at the table)
- Work with your district's communications team to build out a communication plan. Offering meals in an innovative way is big news and families and students should know about it!

**Equipment:** Nutrition programs may need to procure specific equipment to transport food from the cafeteria to the classroom.

- **Delivery:** Schools may need cooler bags, rolling coolers, bins for food storage, and/or travel carts. Consider what classroom items teachers and students will need to participate e.g., meal roster or other system for counting meals, and cleaning supplies for students/teachers.
- **Grab and Go:** Carts or tables located in high-traffic areas. Package meals as one unit so students can easily carry their meal to the classroom. Technology for mobile point of sale (e.g., laptop or tablet) may be necessary as food service staff take a point of service meal count.

**Menu Planning Ideas:** School nutrition programs adopted innovative meal delivery programs as schools closed due to COVID-19. For meals in the classroom, school nutrition programs should replicate favorite meals from emergency feeding menus.

- [Alliance for A Healthier Generation's Smart Foods Planner](#)
- [OPSI's School Breakfast Meal Pattern, Menus, and Recipes Page](#)
- Washington Dairy Council's School Meals Recipes Page: <https://wadairy.org/school-recipes/>
- The Lunch Box Scratch Cooking Recipe Resource: <https://www.thelunchbox.org/recipes-menus>
- Don't forget to incorporate local, Washington grown food!

**Grants:** Many organizations can help fund your meals in the classroom program, seriously, you don't have to do this alone!

- [The Washington Dairy Council](#) equipment grants, contact Brianne Kappel: [brianne@wadairy.org](mailto:brianne@wadairy.org)
- UWKC & No Kid Hungry partner to provide grants on a regular basis, contact [schoolbreakfast@uwkc.org](mailto:schoolbreakfast@uwkc.org)
- [OSPI's Child Nutrition Services](#) administers a variety of grant opportunities throughout the year

## Principals & Administrators

Many students do not get the nutrition they need to learn throughout the day. Research shows hungry students do not perform as well academically, are more likely to have behavioral and attention problems, and are more likely to be absent and tardy from school.

Before COVID-19, **over half of teachers in urban and rural districts reported buying food for students at least a few times each month.** Given unprecedented economic and health impacts of the pandemic, we know these numbers will rise.

School principals and administrators can work *in partnership* with school nutrition staff, teachers, and students to implement a successful *Meals in the Classroom* model. Innovative meal service invites all students to eat at school, ensuring they have the nutrition they need.

### TO-DO LIST:

- ✓ **Be an active participant** in the planning process for meal service at your school, if you have not heard from your school nutrition director, invite them to a meeting.
- ✓ **Make room** at the table for school nutrition staff.
- ✓ **Be excited** about meals in the classroom!
- ✓ **Make space** for staff concerns, validate those concerns, and message that school meals are about student health, well-being, and academics.
- ✓ **Provide adequate mealtime** and remember that breakfast does not take away from instructional time. When meals are served in the classroom, teachers use the time to take attendance, collect homework, or make announcements. During COVID-19, teachers may read to students or play music or podcasts to reduce conversation.
- ✓ If you are already a school meal advocate, **share your school or district's success** with your peers!

Strong leaders can make *a Meals in the Classroom* program successful; your staff will look to you to make sure this is the right choice. Message to staff that serving breakfast and lunch in the classroom is the *most* effective way to boost meal participation, improve student attendance, academics, and behavior, and that the more students that participate in the school meals program, the more federal reimbursement schools will receive. As districts face pandemic related short falls, additional funds can be used to offset other school nutrition program costs.

### TALKING POINTS & TEMPLATE LETTERS:

- Meals in the classroom may be a safer option than serving meals in the cafeteria. Meal service in the classroom allows for social distancing, which is necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19, especially among younger, unvaccinated students.
- Serving meals in the classroom helps support the school nutrition program. Higher participation means increased funding, enabling schools to serve even more students, hire more staff, and further invest in high quality meals.
- When all students access school meals, participation increases, eliminating stigma attached to eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. Inclusive & non-stigmatizing school meals, especially meals served during the school day, can help address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and students of color.
- [No Kid Hungry Talking Points for Breakfast After the Bell](#)
- [Template Letters from Schools to Teachers](#)

## Teachers

Hunger in the classroom is real and teachers know that hungry students do not perform well academically. Teachers are uniquely positioned to encourage student participation in school meals programs.

As a teacher serving meals in the classroom, here is what you can expect:

1. **Filling out daily accountability roster**, checking the names of students who take a complete meal. Accurate counting of meals is essential so that the school and district can be reimbursed per meal.
2. **Giving students adequate time to eat.** In Washington state, Breakfast counts as instructional time.
  - **TIP:** While students eat meals in the classroom, complete administrative functions (check in library books, take attendance) discuss plans for the day, or lead an educational activity. You can reduce student conversations by playing a podcast, videos, or reading to your students.
3. **Creating a calm, comfortable atmosphere during mealtimes** so students can enjoy their food while developing a sense of community in the classroom. Meals in the classroom can help students' social emotional learning by contributing to a positive social climate and environment for students. Positive environments are essential during COVID-19, a time of general anxiety and uncertainty.
4. **Eat alongside students.** Many districts offer incentives for teachers to eat breakfast and lunch with their students. Modeling behavior makes students feel more included.
  - **Did you know?** School meals are healthier than you think: Schools participating in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program adhere to nutrition guidelines provided by the USDA. Even though breakfast items provided to students at school sometimes look like the same breakfast items found in stores, these items have more whole grains and less sugar, sodium, fat & calories.
5. **Supervising student disposal** of trash in the trash bag and placing the trash bag and meal delivery equipment in the hallway outside the classroom.

## ORGANIZATIONS & RESOURCES locally and nationally. You're not alone!

- [The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction Child Nutrition Department](#) (OSPI) houses the state's school nutrition experts. Contact your school district's program specialist for guidance and assistance.
- [United Way of King County's Fuel Your Future](#) connects students to federal meal programs, including the School Breakfast Program. UWKC's school breakfast work focuses on providing resources and technical assistance to schools implementing Breakfast After the Bell. Our staff is dedicated to making meals in the classroom and Breakfast After the Bell work for you, let us know what on-the-ground support you need: [schoolbreakfast@uwkc.org](mailto:schoolbreakfast@uwkc.org)
- [No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices](#) one-stop shop for information, tools, and resources to end childhood hunger.
- [Food Research and Action Center:](#) research briefs and one-pagers on school nutrition programs and effective solutions on hunger.

## Success Stories

Serving meals in the classroom is not a temporary program. We encourage *all* schools to offer breakfast in the classroom, grab and go, or second chance model long term. **Connect with other school districts that successfully serve breakfast as part of the school day.** There is no competition in sharing ideas! If you do not know where to start, reach out to OSPI or UWKC.

**OTHELLO SCHOOL DISTRICT:** Dining Director Janette Root reported “elementary participation after one month is up to 75% and rising!” after implemented breakfast in the classroom.

**HOOD CANAL SCHOOL DISTRICT:** In 2019 Nutrition Director Lois Wagner partnered with their Superintendent to establish Breakfast in the Classroom. Her team packs breakfast burritos, classroom-friendly mini waffles, and bagel breakfast pizzas in insulated transport bags. Staff or students deliver the bags to the classrooms After the first week of school, more than twice as many students ate breakfast! “It’s been a little crazy, but well worth it knowing so many of our kids that never ate breakfast are now eating breakfast every day.”

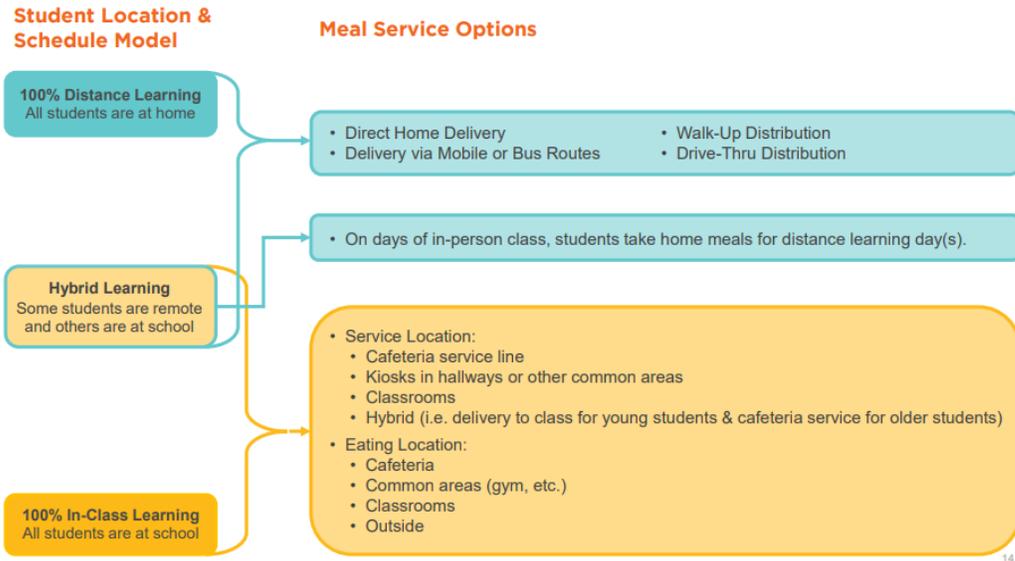
**GRANDVIEW SCHOOL DISTRICT:** At the start of the 2019-2020 school year, Marcia Wagner worked closely with principals, teachers, nutrition staff, and custodial staff to implement Breakfast After the Bell. At the elementary level, Grandview experienced increased participation by over 200 students per day. Wagner and team even made the decision to try Breakfast in the Classroom at the middle and high school. Both schools now serve over 800 breakfasts per day.

**TACOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS:** TPS implemented a “Grab ‘n’ Go” program at 26 schools that have at least 70 percent free and reduced lunch students, where students can drop by the cafeteria to grab some food before heading to class. The district also developed the “Breakfast in the Classroom” program at two schools. Breakfast participation jumped from 55% to more than 70% and went from 25 students to more than 200 respectively.

## Additional Resources

- [Pandemic EBT Guidance for School Districts](#): Benefits, eligibility, resources, & FAQs for P-EBT.
- [Pandemic EBT Guidance from DSHS](#): Updates and additional information on P-EBT in different languages.
- [Basic Food Promotion for Schools and School Staff](#): Basic Food resources for schools to share with families and communities
- [OSPI Breakfast After the Bell Implementation Guide](#): General overview of Breakfast After the Bell.
- [No Kid Hungry 2018 Breakfast After the Bell Implementation Toolkit](#): Resources for stakeholders and real-world examples of Breakfast After the Bell.
- [School Nutrition Association’s Dining Guide for Meals in the Classroom](#): Resources for school nutrition professionals
- [Resources to encourage your community to #SupportSchoolMeals](#): Resources to share with families and community on the importance of participating in school meals.
- [No Kid Hungry Back-to-school Meal Service Toolkit](#): Feeding Students During the 2020-21 School Year Amidst the Ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic
- [Milk Servings Conversion Chart](#): printable conversion chart for calculating milk servings.

# Tips for Coordinating In-School & At-Home Meal Service



Many schools may continue to offer hybrid learning models which will result in a combination of student meal distribution models. Hybrid learning means that some students attend school in-person and eat meals at school, some students learn remotely and pick-up meals or receive delivered meals, or some combination of the two. School Nutrition staff should work with administrators to stagger school entrance, dismissal, and mealtimes to support social distancing and student access to on-campus and take-home meals.

**No matter how meals are distributed, accurate meal counts prevent duplicate meals claims.** OSPI requires a Point of Service (POS) Meal Counting and Claiming System is in place:

At sites where students eat on campus and where meals are available for community/parents pick up, a **“by-name” meal count system** may work best. A “by-name” meal count system can include:

1. Pre-Order System: Have students or families pre-order meals (using POS system or google/outlook form) to plan meal prep. This ensures every child is served and limits food waste. Consult with your IT department to determine what’s possible.
2. Electronic/Automated System (districts have used their current POS)
3. By-Name Student Rosters
4. By-Name Student Roster System with use of alternative identifiers
  - Associated Student Body (ASB) cards
  - Meal Card

Do not forget to communicate meal distribution procedures with staff and families, along with other important community resources. Message on the district web site and social media portal as well as flyers and direct mailers.

- Let households know that only two meals are available to each child each day, per USDA guidance.
- Students receiving meals at school cannot pick up meals for the same day from a community meal service location.
- Students receiving meals, who also receive P-EBT benefits, should continue picking up meals! These programs work together to support families.

## Tips for Safe & Healthy Meals in the Classroom

School districts are responsible for setting up policies and practices for their buildings. Below are several mitigation strategies schools can implement while providing critical meals to students:

- Teachers and children should wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol before and after eating.
- Provide tissues and no-touch or foot pedal trash cans, where possible, for employees, volunteers, and students to use.
- If possible, install touchless payment methods (pay without touching money, a card, or a keypad). Provide hand sanitizer right after handling money, cards, or keypads.
- Ensure the district School Food Safety Plan is being followed, including the temperature of foods delivered to the classroom.<sup>ii</sup>

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR COVID-19 SAFE MEALTIME GUIDANCE:

- [Washington DOH K-12 Guidelines](#)
- [CDC Guidance for What School Nutrition Professionals and Volunteers at Schools Need to Know about COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Guide for Safely Distributing School Meals During COVID-19](#)
- [CDC: Modifying School Spaces During Mealtimes to Reduce Spread of COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Mask recommendations](#)

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<sup>i</sup> Data from “Forty Percent of Black and Hispanic Parents of School-Age Children Are Food Insecure”

<sup>ii</sup> Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that handling food or consuming food is associated with COVID-19 (source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/food-and-COVID-19.html>)