

Maryland Hunger Solutions

Policy Brief: Breakfast in Maryland's Counties

October 2008

Breakfast in Maryland's Counties: Summary

- Breakfast is the most important meal of the day for children, but only 43.7 eligible low-income Maryland children participated in the School Breakfast Program for every 100 who participated in the National School Lunch Program during the 2007-2008 school year.
- Participation varied widely from county to county, from a high of 70.88 percent in Somerset County to a low of 20.39 percent in Howard County.
- Counties with smaller populations had a greater percentage of schools participating in Maryland Meals for Achievement – a very successful state program that supports breakfast in the classroom initiatives – and had higher participation rates in school breakfast as a result.
- Maryland should considerably increase funding for Maryland Meals for Achievement to allow more schools to participate.
- Even without more or adequate state funding for this initiative, however, many schools can use federal School Breakfast Program funds to implement programs, such as serving breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day or offering “grab and go” carts in the hallways, that are proven to boost participation.

Introduction

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day – especially for learning, but also for supporting health and preventing obesity. A key piece of boosting children's well-being and improving schools is to ensure that each child can start the day right with a healthy breakfast at school.

- **Breakfast helps children learn.** Numerous studies show that breakfast improves learning and attendance, and reduces absenteeism, behavior problems and tardiness. Children who eat breakfast at school – closer to test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.
- **Breakfast promotes good health.** Eating breakfast at school results in fewer visits to the school nurse, improves children's diets, reduces absenteeism, and helps build healthy eating habits. Children who start the day with a good breakfast are less likely to be obese.

Yet, many children skip breakfast because their families struggle to put a meal on the table. In 2007, 10.5 percent of Maryland's children lived in poverty. For children living in these households, a filling, nutritious meal every morning is often beyond their parents' ability to provide. For others, eating breakfast is a matter of time, not money. As the

2007-2008 School Year Students Participating in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) per 100 in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

County	Ratio
TOP FIVE	
Somerset	70.88
Dorchester	70.87
Kent	67.89
Washington	66.93
Allegany	58.93
BOTTOM FIVE	
Baltimore City	37.73
Calvert	32.82
Charles	32.05
Carroll	27.13
Howard	20.39

Based on Maryland State Department of Education, 2007-2008 school year data, September – May breakfast and lunch meal counts. Calculations by Maryland Hunger Solutions.

demands on working parents have grown, and parents face longer commutes or jobs with nontraditional work hours, sitting down to a healthy breakfast is rare for many families. And, many children do not have an appetite when they first start the day, so skipping breakfast becomes an unhealthy routine for many.

The benefits of breakfast are evident, but too many children in Maryland miss out on a healthy start to their day. During the 2007-2008 school year, only 43.7 eligible low-income children across the state participated in school breakfast for

every 100 who participated in school lunch. By county, the results varied widely. Howard County had just 20.4 percent of eligible children participating, while 70.88 percent in Somerset County participated.

Because eating breakfast is essential to children’s ability to learn, stay healthy, and behave in school, it is vital to monitor how well schools, school districts, counties, and the state as a whole are doing in reaching students, especially low-income students, with school breakfast.

In a time when families are struggling with rising food costs and a weakened economy, expanding the reach of the School Breakfast Program in Maryland not only can reduce hunger and boost learning among low-income children, it can help struggling families and allow the state to access more federal dollars.

Key Findings

In the 2007-2008 school year, almost 91,000 low-income children in Maryland participated in the national School Breakfast Program on an average school day. When children who paid for their meals (as do households with income above 185 percent of the federal poverty level) are included, total participation rose to nearly 130,000 children on an average morning.

When compared against school lunch participation in Maryland, however, breakfast participation fell far short. Because there is very broad participation in the National School Lunch Program, Maryland Hunger Solutions uses it as a benchmark against which to measure participation in

County	Additional Students Who Would Be Served	Dollars Lost
Baltimore City	13,117	\$2,834,140
Prince George’s	12,549	\$2,705,473
Montgomery	7,410	\$1,597,494
Baltimore	6,591	\$1,435,962
Anne Arundel	2,468	\$ 543,237

Based on Maryland State Department of Education, 2007-2008 school year data, September – May breakfast and lunch meal counts. Calculations by Maryland Hunger Solutions.

school breakfast. During the 2007-2008 school year, 43.7 low-income students received free or reduced price school breakfast for every 100 that received free or reduced price school lunch. While the state’s breakfast participation rate has followed the national trend and slowly risen over the last five years, Maryland has consistently remained below the national participation rate each year.

In counties across the state, the rate of student participation in the School Breakfast Program varied widely. Ten counties reached at least 50 of their eligible low-income children with breakfast for every 100 eating lunch, with Dorchester County and Somerset County reaching nearly 70 children for every 100 eating lunch.

Participation in many counties lagged badly, with the bottom five counties all serving fewer than 40 eligible low-income children for every 100 eating lunch. Four of these counties –

The Basics of School Breakfast

The School Breakfast Program is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, and at the state level by the Maryland State Department of Education. The federal government provides reimbursements to local school food authorities for each breakfast served. During the 2007-2008 school year, schools were reimbursed \$1.35 for each free breakfast served; \$1.05 for each reduced-price breakfast served; and \$0.24 for each “paid” breakfast served. Schools that serve at least 40 percent free and reduced-price lunches are considered to be “severe need.” Severe need schools are eligible for an additional \$0.26 in federal funding for each free or reduced-price breakfast served.

Any public school, nonprofit private school or residential child care institution can participate. Any student attending a school that offers the program can eat breakfast. The amount the school is reimbursed by the federal government depends on the student’s family income. Families must complete an application, or be cross-certified by their eligibility in another means-tested program, to determine eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. Based on their family income, children fall into one of three groups:

- Free*: Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level eat at no cost to their families.
- Reduced-Price*: Children from families with incomes between 130 percent (currently \$22,321 for a family of three) and 185% (\$31,765 for a family of three) of poverty can be charged no more than \$.30 per breakfast.
- Paid: Children with family incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty level pay for most of the cost of their meals at rates set by the schools.

*Students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals are considered “low-income” in this report.

Calvert, Charles, Carroll and Howard – served fewer than 35 low-income children breakfast for every 100 eating lunch. These four counties also had some of the highest median incomes in 2007 and are among the wealthiest in the country. Since we are measuring their relative ability to reach their low-income children, however, their affluence does not explain poor participation rates.

Low participation in the School Breakfast Program has real consequences, both for the children who are not receiving a healthy meal and for education budgets. In 2007-2008, Maryland schools lost \$1.35 every day in federal funding for every child who would have received a free breakfast and \$1.05 for every child who would have received a reduced-price breakfast, but was not served. If those children attended a “severe” need school – one in which at least 40 percent of lunches served were free or reduced-price – an additional \$0.26 per child was forfeited.

Those meals add up to millions of dollars in federal child nutrition funding going unclaimed by Maryland every year.

In the 2007-2008 school year, if Maryland reached a reasonable target of 70 children eating breakfast for every 100 eating lunch, almost 55,000 more children would have received a healthy school breakfast every day, and Maryland would have received an additional \$11.8 million in federal child nutrition funding (not counting additional “severe need” funds). Most of this money was lost by the counties with larger populations. Five areas around the state – Baltimore City, Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County – together lost more than \$9 million.

The Impact of Maryland Meals for Achievement

Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) is an important state-funded breakfast program. First started in 1998 in several Maryland elementary schools, MMFA allows schools to offer breakfast for free to all students in the classroom regardless of their family income. MMFA in-classroom breakfast increases breakfast participation among all students, but most importantly among those eligible for free

2007-2008 School Year Low-Income Student Participation in Free and Reduced-Price (F&RP) School Lunch (NSLP) and School Breakfast (SBP)

County	F&RP* SBP Students	F&RP NSLP Students	F&RP Students in SBP per 100 in NSLP	Rank in State	Additional Low-Income Students in Breakfast if 70 per 100 in Lunch	Additional Federal Funding if 70 Low-Income Breakfast Students per 100 Receiving Lunch
Allegany	2,130	3,614	58.93	5	400	\$84,499
Anne Arundel	4,925	10,561	46.63	12	2,468	\$543,237
Baltimore	11,858	26,355	44.99	14	6,591	\$1,435,962
Calvert	550	1,677	32.82	21	623	\$134,733
Caroline	825	1,875	44.00	15	487	\$105,325
Carroll	650	2,396	27.13	23	1,027	\$221,880
Cecil	1,797	3,289	54.63	7	505	\$110,253
Charles	1,475	4,604	32.05	22	1,747	\$379,463
Dorchester	1,256	1,772	70.87	2	N/A	N/A
Frederick	2,363	5,146	45.92	13	1,239	\$258,157
Garrett	796	1,463	54.40	8	228	\$47,646
Harford	2,810	6,422	43.76	16	1,685	\$361,200
Howard	961	4,710	20.39	24	2,336	\$505,132
Kent	489	721	67.89	3	15	\$3,335
Montgomery	11,166	26,536	42.08	19	7,410	\$1,597,494
Prince George's	20,610	47,370	43.51	17	12,549	\$2,705,473
Queen Anne's	390	918	42.47	18	253	\$52,895
St. Mary's	1,563	2,822	55.41	6	412	\$88,259
Somerset	855	1,206	70.88	1	N/A	N/A
Talbot	474	932	50.83	10	179	\$38,165
Washington	3,985	5,954	66.93	4	183	\$39,770
Wicomico	2,724	5,258	51.80	9	957	\$212,180
Worcester	829	1,702	48.68	11	363	\$79,222
Baltimore City	15,337	40,648	37.73	20	13,117	\$2,834,140
State Total	90,815	207,950	43.70		54,774	\$11,832,420

* F&RP stands for Free and Reduced-Price.
Based on Maryland State Department of Education, 2007-2008 school year data, September – May breakfast and lunch meal counts and days of service.
Calculations by Maryland Hunger Solutions.

2007-2008 Maryland Meals for Achievement Program

District	Total Number of Schools in District	Number of Schools Eligible for MMFA	Number of Schools Participating in MMFA	Percent of Schools Eligible for MMFA	Percent of Eligible Schools Participating in MMFA	Percent of All Schools Participating in MMFA
Allegany	24	19	9	79.17%	47.37%	37.50%
Anne Arundel	118	25	17	21.19%	68.00%	14.41%
Baltimore	164	71	23	43.29%	32.39%	14.02%
Calvert	23	0	0	0.00%	N/A	0.00%
Caroline	11	7	3	63.64%	42.86%	27.27%
Carroll	41	1	1	2.44%	100.00%	2.44%
Cecil	30	7	7	23.33%	100.00%	23.33%
Charles	35	6	4	17.14%	66.67%	11.43%
Dorchester	13	8	6	61.54%	75.00%	46.15%
Frederick	65	6	6	9.23%	100.00%	9.23%
Garrett	16	10	7	62.50%	70.00%	43.75%
Harford	55	7	6	12.73%	85.71%	10.91%
Howard	71	1	1	1.41%	100.00%	1.41%
Kent	8	4	4	50.00%	100.00%	50.00%
Montgomery	209	61	29	29.19%	47.54%	13.88%
Prince George's	214	141	24	65.89%	17.02%	11.21%
Queen Anne's	14	2	2	14.29%	100.00%	14.29%
St. Mary's	24	6	5	25.00%	83.33%	20.83%
Somerset	8	7	4	87.50%	57.14%	50.00%
Talbot	11	1	1	9.09%	100.00%	9.09%
Washington	43	19	16	44.19%	84.21%	37.21%
Wicomico	26	18	5	69.23%	27.78%	19.23%
Worcester	19	7	4	36.84%	57.14%	21.05%
Baltimore City	203	197	9	97.04%	4.57%	4.43%
State Total*	1445	631	193	43.67%	30.59%	13.36%

Based on Maryland State Department of Education Free and Reduced Price enrollment data as of October 31, 2006. Calculations by Maryland Hunger Solutions. www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/schoolnutrition/docs/Free+and+Reduced-Price+Meal+Data

**Does not include non-public schools*

and reduced-price meals. It plays a considerable role in improving children’s learning and achievement.

Maryland Meals for Achievement was legislated after private foundations, including The Abell Foundation, studied the impact of serving breakfast in the classroom at the beginning of the school day to all students regardless of family income. The study demonstrated a dramatic increase in breakfast participation – from about 18 percent before the pilot began to 85 percent within two months of serving breakfast in the classroom.

The initiative sought to reduce the stigma children may feel about participating in a program that’s seen as only “for poor kids” by serving breakfast to all students, and it sought to make it easier to serve breakfast to students who may have been unable to participate in the cafeteria before the school day began by serving breakfast in the classroom early in the school day. An evaluation by researchers from Harvard University found that MMFA schools reported a decrease in

tardiness and suspensions and an increase in Maryland School Performance Program (MSPAP) scores and grades.

Schools with more than 40 percent free and reduced-price meal enrollment can apply for the limited state MMFA funding. The state seeks applications from all schools that are eligible. Factors taken into consideration include geographic diversity and varying rates of free and reduced price school enrollment. The state provides funding to the schools for the meal costs or proportion of meal costs that are not reimbursed by the federal government. For the 2007-2008 school year, 196 schools across Maryland were funded to participate in the MMFA program.

Counties with a higher percentage of MMFA schools also tend to have higher general breakfast participation. Somerset, Dorchester, Kent, Washington and Allegany counties had the highest breakfast participation rates and had MMFA programs in more than one-third of their schools. In a number of smaller counties, all of their schools eligible

for the MMFA program participated in the program. Larger counties were more likely to have a lower percentage of eligible schools that participated in MMFA.

The benefits of MMFA are clear – higher breakfast participation and a positive impact on education. Across the state, more than 630 schools were eligible for MMFA in theory for the 2007-2008 school year, but the state funding level did not cover all of these schools. For the 2008-2009 school year, the program was funded at \$3.1 million dollars – enough funding to cover just one-third of eligible schools. Moreover, because of the state’s budget deficit, the Maryland Board of Public Works recently approved the governor’s proposed budget cuts, which included a 10 percent cut to the MMFA program for the 2008-2009 school year.

These cuts are alarming not only because of the harm to children but because funding for MMFA yields a significant return on investment to the state. As the Maryland State Department of Education projected costs to the state against the federal school breakfast reimbursements coming into the state for each school receiving MMFA, they determined that for every \$1 that the state invested in MMFA, the state received more than \$3 in federal school breakfast reimbursements.

Increasing Breakfast Participation in Schools without MMFA

Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) does not reach all the schools that need it. However, school district officials that are committed to increasing breakfast participation can still use the lessons learned from the MMFA experience. Schools can implement universal breakfast programs (breakfast at no cost to all students) and offer breakfast in

the classroom – strategies proven to boost breakfast participation.

Schools that serve a large percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals can break even when they serve breakfast at no charge to all students – even without MMFA. The increased participation brings in a sufficient amount of revenue to cover the additional costs.

School districts also may want to consider offering meals for free to students who are eligible for reduced price meals. Washington County has eliminated the reduced price meal category and serves breakfast for free to all students whose family income falls under 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Prior to eliminating this category during the 2002-2003 school year, approximately 12 percent of those students ate breakfast. During the 2007-2008 school year 28 percent of these students were eating breakfast. Although a small change, this has made it easier for more students to eat breakfast in Washington County.

Additionally, schools can use methods such as “grab and go” where meals are served from the hallway or cafeteria and then taken to the classroom or (especially in high schools during breaks) to common areas to be eaten. Anne Arundel County has instituted “Breakfast with Class” for some of their schools that were not eligible for Maryland Meals for Achievement. “Breakfast with Class” is an innovative breakfast delivery program that allows students to receive breakfast in the cafeteria but eat breakfast in the classroom. During the allotted time set for school breakfast, students stream through the cafeteria serving line with personal bags in which to place their breakfast items. Students still pay according to eligibility. They then bring

Baltimore City: A District Nutrition Program in Transition

During the 2007-2008 school year, Baltimore City began offering universal breakfast (in which all children, regardless of income, can eat at no cost) to reach more children with a healthy morning meal. Despite making this improvement, Baltimore continued to have a low rate of breakfast participation. After a breakfast to lunch ratio of 37.7:100 during the 2007-2008 school year, Baltimore City school officials were eager to take added steps to grow participation and feed all of their students.

During the 2008-2009 school year, Baltimore City schools and the new Food and Nutrition Director, Anthony Geraci, began working with the community, the state, local businesses and the anti-hunger community to make Baltimore a model for school breakfast. With grant assistance funded by an alliance including East Side Entrees, the Clinton Global Initiative, the “got breakfast?” Foundation, the National Dairy Council and other food suppliers, Baltimore City is focusing on ways to boost participation by introducing new breakfast packages and intense marketing to help turn the participation rate around. School officials started the year with several media events that highlighted breakfast in the schools. They have also started marketing “breakfast boxes” that include incentives to encourage students to eat breakfast. Additionally, the district is reaching out to school principals around the city to support them in using innovative ways to serve breakfast that will increase participation.

With these efforts, Baltimore City has significant potential to deliver breakfast to a large number of low-income students.

their bags to their classrooms and eat breakfast in the classroom. Teachers also are offered breakfast and are encouraged to join with their students. Anne Arundel has seen higher breakfast participation rates for schools that have “Breakfast with Class” than schools that do not.

Recommendations

Schools should make increased availability and participation in school breakfast one of their highest priorities in order to reduce hunger and support the educational and health potential of their students, particularly low-income students. Adequate nutrition and freedom from hunger are absolutely essential for good health and academic achievement, and yet these goals are not always achievable for families who are struggling to make ends meet. School breakfast programs make critical contributions to children’s nutrition, education and health.

Maryland should increase funding for the Maryland Meals for Achievement in-classroom breakfast program to serve more schools. MMFA has demonstrated its success by increasing breakfast participation among all students, but most importantly those eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Schools should ensure their students start the day with a healthy breakfast by implementing universal breakfast programs (breakfast at no cost to all students) and flexible

serving methods, such as serving breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day or offering “grab and go” carts in the hallways. These models are proven to maximize participation by low-income students. It is possible for some schools that serve a large percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals to break even when they serve breakfast at no charge to all students – even without MMFA. The increased participation brings in a sufficient amount of revenue to cover the additional costs.

District leaders should support and provide leadership in implementing programs. When district leaders put their full support behind a universal breakfast program with alternative service strategies, participation reaches its fullest potential.

School districts, anti-hunger organizations and state agencies should collaborate to provide the technical assistance and support that schools need to maximize breakfast participation.

To meet this goal, Maryland Hunger Solutions can share best practices and help develop a breakfast service model that will work in each school. Visit Maryland Hunger Solutions’ Web site www.mdhungersolutions.org.

Resources

Maryland Hunger Solutions, an anti-hunger and nutrition organization, is dedicated to ending hunger in Maryland by raising awareness of the problem among the public, media, and policymakers, and changing policy and practice to connect struggling families to the School Breakfast Program and other federal nutrition programs. Maryland Hunger Solutions is an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center.

www.mdhungersolutions.org

The Food Research and Action Center, a national anti-hunger nonprofit organization, has information and resources on the School Breakfast Program and other federal nutrition programs, including state-by-state data and a toolkit on ways to expand breakfast participation.

www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/sbp.html

The Maryland State Department of Education’s Eat Smart Maryland Web site has an overview of the child nutrition programs available to state residents, including school breakfast.

www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/schoolnutrition/

USDA has a toolkit for schools and advocates to help start and maintain successful breakfast programs.

www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Breakfast/toolkit

The National Dairy Council’s Nutrition Explorations Web site has information on the School Breakfast program, including helpful suggestions on how to start up a program.

www.nutritionexplorations.org/sfs/programs_breakfast.asp

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was prepared by Kimberley Chin, Madeleine Levin, Jennifer Adach and Cristina Sepe.

Maryland Hunger Solutions gratefully acknowledges the Maryland State Department of Education School and Community Nutrition Programs, particularly, Robin Ziegler, Carol Fettweis, Brenda Schwaab, Linda Worrel, and Robert Wancowicz for their assistance.