

# Ohio School Breakfast Challenge Case Study

## Introduction

In 2013, the American Dairy Association Midwest convened several organizations who were committed to child nutrition and valued school breakfast for its positive impact on students and learning. These organizations included Ohio Action for Healthy Kids, Children’s Hunger Alliance and School Nutrition Association of Ohio. The Ohio Department of Education, Office of Integrated Student Support, extended their support and engagement when the Ohio School Breakfast Challenge (OSBC) launched.

Recognizing that school breakfast helps students start the school day ready to learn, these organizations collaborated to create, sponsor and implement the OSBC, a statewide initiative to increase access to school breakfast.

## A Two Prong Approach

1) Identify and celebrate schools with defined levels of school breakfast participation and those schools demonstrating a collaborative culture in expanding/improving students’ school breakfast experience.

Each year, the OSBC recognizes schools meeting school breakfast participation criteria as “*Breakfast All-Stars*.” The OSBC also awards schools using innovative and collaborative efforts to build their School Breakfast Program as “*Champions of Breakfast*.”

Schools receiving these awards are highlighted as “Best Practices” at state education association conferences and in journal articles, and mentor other schools starting or enhancing their School Breakfast Program.

Since 2012, Ohio experienced a steady increase in school breakfast participation despite a decline in [public school district and building enrollment](#).<sup>1</sup> From 2013 to 2018, enrollment declined by 61,348 students whereas breakfast participation increased by 8 percent, equating to 4.5 million more school breakfasts served in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

2) Galvanize and activate the leadership of state education associations to support the School Breakfast Program and encourage their membership to promote school breakfast at the building/district level.

In Ohio, the leadership of state education associations, representing teachers, principals and other administrators, superintendents, school boards, school business officials, school nutrition and classified staff, are key to raising awareness of the evidence-based research linking breakfast to academic success.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

On behalf of the OSBC, leadership of the state education associations surveyed their membership to understand their beliefs about school breakfast. The majority of school administrators, superintendents and teachers responding to the survey, believe school breakfast is important for all students, provides access to food, is a key part of the learning environment and supports academics. (Figure 1)

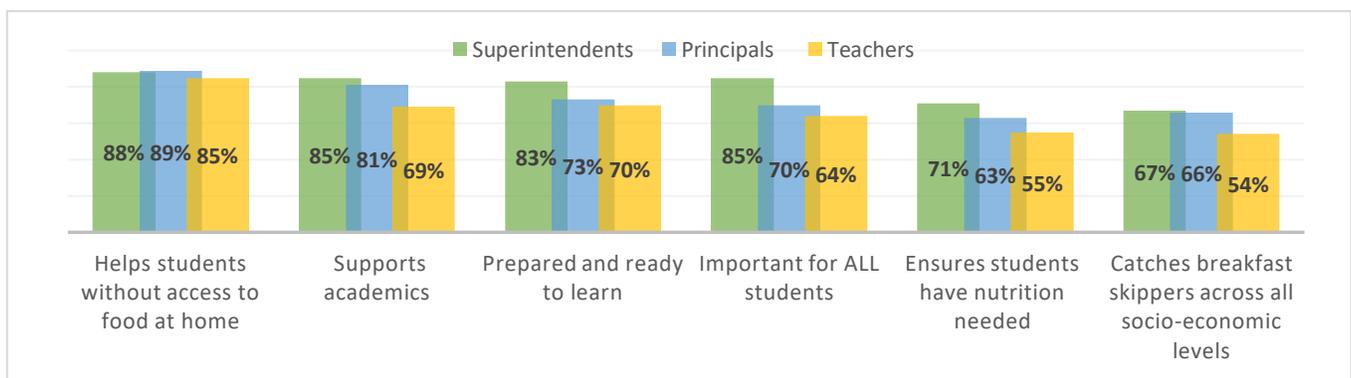


Figure 1\*

## Engaging the Leadership of State Education Associations

The purpose of bringing the leadership of state education associations together was to educate them on the School Breakfast Program and share research proving that breakfast supports a healthy school culture, prepares students for academic success and is an important part of the school day.<sup>3</sup>

The initial priority was to listen and learn what they understood about school breakfast, how they viewed their role and what resources were needed to help promote and grow School Breakfast Programs.

Meeting with the leadership of state education associations was key to gathering information. These meetings were both formal and informal, and included discovery sessions with association leadership, and facilitated focus groups and surveys with their membership. The conversations helped identify topics that needed addressed, gaps in resources and how to work together and communicate most effectively.

Specific actions identified as helpful include:

- **Provide a greater comprehension of the USDA School Breakfast Program.** Coming together helped state education association leaders better understand the USDA School Breakfast Program and how schools receive federal funding for *all* students that participate, with funding being greater for those with severe need.
- **Understand the context and external factors impacting schools and the families they serve.** Nearly all state education association leaders shared issues facing the schools, families and students they serve throughout the state.
- **Identify the best ways to communicate to and engage with members.** The state education association leaders knew their membership's preferred methods of communication and the best way to engage. This included newsletters, content for social media posts, workshops and education trainings, regional meetings and more. Armed with this knowledge, the OSBC developed education-centric breakfast messaging to resonate with association members.
- **Share and streamline opportunities.** The leadership of the state education associations said that coming together provided an opportunity to learn, share and discuss outcomes and opportunities, such as funding and national/state grants.

For example, the Ohio Education Association identified member school districts eligible for grants to expand their School Breakfast Program. OEA provided a staff person to help schools secure grant funding and worked with building administrators and teachers to successfully implement the expansion of breakfast in their school buildings.

With OEA's leadership and organizational support, 35 schools in 14 school districts received \$750,000 in grants from [Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom](#),<sup>6</sup> a consortium of national organizations supporting breakfast and learning. Many of these grant-funded schools have been recognized as "Breakfast All Stars" and/or "Champions of Breakfast" by the OSBC.

### State Education Associations in Ohio

- Ohio School Boards Association
- Buckeye Association of School Administrators
- Ohio School Business Officials
- Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators
- Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators
- Ohio Education Service Center Association
- Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools
- Ohio Education Association
- Ohio Federation of Teachers
- Quality School Alliance

- **Share best practices.** Collectively, the state education association leaders shared successful strategies that could be applied to the issue of school breakfast.

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*“Bringing the state education association leaders together helped them collectively identify the problem, the solution and the implementation so everyone was on the same page.”*

—Dr. Richard Murray  
Interim Executive Director, Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools

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The OSBC’s “Breakfast All Stars” and “Champions of Breakfast” recognitions also serve as a continual source of “best practices” that are innovative, creative and collaborative.

For example, “Champions of Breakfast” award winner Indian Creek School District in Wintersville, Ohio recognizes that school breakfast has a positive impact on academic outcomes, student behavior and on-time attendance.

With *Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom* grant funding and assistance from the OEA staff, the district implemented Breakfast in the Classroom so that ALL students had access to a nutritious breakfast every day. The District’s child nutrition staff collaborated with administrators and teachers to ensure a smooth start.

Wintersville Elementary started Breakfast in the Classroom the first day of school but had a delivery challenge – the school has five levels and lots of stairs. Some creative thinking and collaboration with the high school’s Key Club and other students resulted in a unique solution.

Indian Creek High School students assist in breakfast delivery at the elementary each morning and earn their community service hours necessary for graduation.

**Indian Creek School District  
Wintersville Elementary**

**Goal**

Feed more students breakfast

**Serving Strategy**

Breakfast in the Classroom

**Results**

- Breakfast participation increased 34% over the previous year
- Attendance has increased
- Tardiness has decreased
- School nurse visits for the “10:30 hunger bug” have decreased

“A giant collaboration of people wanting to do the right thing came together to make sure students were well-nourished to start their school day.”

—Eric White  
Food Service Director,  
Indian Creek School District

**Strategies for Engaging Leadership of State Education Associations**

**Ask leaders to participate**

Many of Ohio’s state education association leaders said that this was the first time they were asked to be a part of a concerted effort to increase student access and participation in the School Breakfast Program. Others admitted that school breakfast wasn’t on their radar until they were invited to participate in the OSBC initiative. However, when questioned what the impetus was for working together on this issue, all identified the same reason – *they were asked, and it’s for the kids!*

The OSBC gained support from all its state education associations. One association shared that having everyone else at the table created incentive, or “peer pressure,” for others to join. State education associations wanted to ensure their members and viewpoints were part of the larger conversation, and they didn’t want to be the only group not participating.

To assist with engagement of state education associations, it is helpful to identify a breakfast champion that is a well-known, trusted and a respected leader within the education community. As a respected leader, this individual can start the conversation and encourage the state education associations to be involved in advocating and promoting school breakfast with their membership.

### **Connect school breakfast to the priorities of state education associations**

To increase interest and build support, it is important to focus on student-centered positive outcomes. School breakfast prepares students for learning, and contributes to academic success for *all* students, regardless of their socio-economic status.<sup>4</sup>

“We think this program is going to help your kids should be the first words out of your mouth,” advised one member of a state education association. Using this “for all students” message resonates with educators that support the [Whole Child](#)<sup>7</sup> approach and ODE’s [Ohio’s Strategic Plan for Education: 2019-2024, Each Child, Our Future](#)<sup>8</sup> that references three core principles: equity, partnerships and quality schools as critical to supporting a culture that can improve the likelihood of student success.

When communicating with state education association members, connect breakfast to their association’s specific priorities. Each association has their own strategic plan, so be prepared to offer resources that fit into the context of their unique platform. If an association wants to promote programs with a local focus, school breakfast is a local initiative. If they are prioritizing initiatives that can enhance the positive image of educators and schools, then a strong breakfast program can be a great public relations tool.

*For example, the CFO for Columbus Public Schools presented at the Buckeye Association of School Administrators conference on the financial health of their district’s Child Nutrition Program and its positive impact on their students and the community. Offering concrete examples of how an association can be involved clarified each association’s unique role.*

### **Bring everyone to the table**

The OSBC convened the leaders of state education associations at a luncheon three times per year and reported on specific goals and activities, solicited feedback and recognized each association’s progress in activating their membership.

The state education association leaders were brought together to “collaborate, not delegate” around expanding school breakfast, and no one claimed to come with all the strategies, observed one education group member. Instead, there was an intense interest to work together to develop a plan of action.

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*“The positive attitude was an extension of the positive energy from the conveners.”*

*— Julie Davis*

*Executive Director, Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators*

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Each member organization brought a diverse perspective in advancing school breakfast. For example, the school business officials worked on the financial aspect of school breakfast, while elementary and secondary principals and teachers shared the important link to academics.

### **Do your homework**

Before approaching state education associations about school breakfast, have a basic understanding of each association: who it represents, its goals and its structure. A solid understanding of each association and the methods they use to communicate and activate their membership can help effectively deliver breakfast messages.

Questions to ask before approaching a state education association may include:

- **Does the organization represent all or most aspects of their profession?** What is the relationship of the association to its members? Does membership extend out-of-state?

*The Ohio School Boards Association membership includes 610 of the 611 school district boards. The OSBA hosts an annual state conference with more than 10,000 attendees, which reaches far beyond their membership.*

*The Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators, representing principals and athletic directors, is the third largest in the nation, with 2,300 members. Some state education associations are not as large; some may have an overlap in who they represent. It's important to understand the association's reach and if any gaps exist.*

- **What is the size of the organization?** The staff size of the association can impact how it engages with its membership. Providing turnkey activations and communications that can easily be shared helps with membership of all sizes, especially those with small staffs.
- **What committees do they already serve on?** The leadership of education associations may serve on other committees or be involved in other initiatives. Knowing where and how they serve can help identify opportunities to include school breakfast into their agenda or existing work.

## Outcomes and Learnings

### Lessons Learned from Engaging Education Associations

Engaging state education association leaders and members has been a key part of Ohio's success in expanding school breakfast over the past three years. Other states may find Ohio's learnings and strategies helpful in starting or expanding their school breakfast initiatives.

- **Educate and activate state education associations around the School Breakfast Program.** Awareness of the School Breakfast Program differed among the demographics of the student body. In higher poverty areas, administrators were more aware of the program and its availability. A recent survey of almost 1,700 school administrators and educators reported that breakfast benefits *all* students and catches breakfast skippers across all socio-economic levels. (Figure 1\*)

The survey also identified the best methods to engage members on the topic of breakfast, which included highlighting innovative school breakfast strategies and cost effectiveness, research supporting the connection between breakfast and academics, and education via presentations and promotion materials.

- **Recognize that school nutrition program staff are part of the "school building team."** Include the Child Nutrition Program staff on the district and/or school building team strengthens the School Breakfast Program and encourages a school culture that supports the Whole Child approach. The state education association leadership identified that there is often a disconnect between administrators/educators and the district/building Child Nutrition Program staff. *"This disconnect often causes a barrier in successfully implementing the School Breakfast Program,"* said Ken Baker, Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators.
- **Engage education leaders with support and positivity.** Positive support and acknowledgement from the state education association leaders and members are essential for engagement and success. Schools have many requirements in providing a well-rounded education for their students. Often the discussion at school revolves around where gaps exist in the education system whether perceived or proven. This can be challenging to public schools as they are asked to become a hub for a multitude of services beyond education. Positive messages emphasizing school breakfast as part of the solution can help change public perception.

State education associations provide periodic training to their members in Ohio. A key learning was to offer school breakfast training to new members. For example, the Ohio Administration of Elementary and Secondary School Principals Association offered a “New Principal Academy” for all new principals. The OSBC and the Ohio Department of Education, Office of Integrated Student Support, educates 100 new principals each year about school breakfast, how it aligns with the Whole Child approach, and how to explore and determine what breakfast solutions might best suit the needs of their student population.

- **Position school breakfast as well-supported, sustainable and in alignment with the Whole Child approach.** State education associations are asked to be involved in a wide array of different taskforces, committees, coalitions and partnerships. Therefore, the ask must be thoughtful and realistic as there are many competing priorities. Make it easy for them to engage and emphasize the added value of their membership involvement.

School breakfast is sustainable as schools receive [federal funds](#)<sup>9</sup> for every student breakfast plus commodity foods, up to 20 cents on their food dollar, to help reduce meal costs.

Ohio Strategic Plan for Education: 2019-2024, Each Child, Our Future,<sup>8</sup> aligns with the Whole Child approach and ensures students are well supported and reach their full potential.

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*“I work in a school where all children get free breakfast and free lunch. I think that this is fantastic.”*

*“Almost all students in my school district do participate in the School Breakfast Program. I am grateful they are provided two meals at school.”*

*“I work at a school with a 100% poverty level. All students are given free breakfast and lunch. It is just a normal part of their day.”*

*-Benefits: Quotes from Principals and Teachers*

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- **When launching a collaborative effort, recommend a timeframe that syncs with school calendars.** Timing is a key consideration and depends on academic calendars when determining the extent of engagement among state education association leaders to support school breakfast initiatives. Summer can be a prime time to engage with associations, as they are planning for the upcoming school year.
- **Communicate breakfast messages that resonate.** When communicating with state education association leadership about school breakfast, it’s helpful to know what messages will resonate most effectively with their membership. The top messages identified through in-person interviews and surveys with superintendents, principals and teachers were: *(Figure 1\*)*
  - School breakfast helps students that don’t have access to enough food at home.
  - Breakfast supports academic achievement.
  - Ensures students are prepared and ready to learn.
  - Breakfast is important for all students.
  - School breakfast ensures students have the nutrition they need.
  - School breakfast helps catch “breakfast-skippers” across socioeconomic levels.

- **Identify and address the barriers.** In-person interviews of leadership and almost 1,700 surveys completed by school administrators and teachers recognize the importance of school breakfast and its link to academic achievement.<sup>6</sup> However, many identified barriers that hinder participation in school breakfast.
  - Time constraints ranging from tardiness, long lines, having to split time between breakfast, meeting with teachers, homework, late buses, and not enough time allocated for breakfast were identified as the greatest barriers to participating in school breakfast. Even educators that reported all students eating at no cost still mentioned that time constraints prevented all students from accessing the service.
  - Other barriers that were identified were food quality and healthiness (including lack of variety, taste, high sugar content and lack of protein served were often cited as a concern), social stigma, cost and lack of awareness of importance of breakfast.

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*“Their understanding of how rest and a meal can help them stay focused during the school day.”*

*“In my school, the greatest barrier is time. The bus arrives after the scheduled breakfast time, and students choose to skip breakfast to get to class.”*

*“Students do not know about the program... Parents also need to be educated on the importance of breakfast.”*

*“Time - some students get to school late and feel they need to go to class over eating breakfast.”*

*“I think the biggest barrier is that students do not think it is that important... I do not think they understand the correlation between their success and breakfast.”*

*-Barriers: Quotes from Principals and Teachers*

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- Questions about funding were identified by superintendents, as they were unclear if expanding breakfast participation would add to the food service budget or require additional investment in the district’s budget.

It is important to address barriers up front and develop viable solutions that involve state education associations leadership and their members. Ideas that leadership and members suggested were examples of breakfast best practices, grant opportunities to start-up or expand access to school breakfast and the academic benefits of school breakfast. (see addendums for more information)

### **Everyone has a Role to Play**

The OSBC, with the support of state education associations, has helped make great progress advancing school breakfast since 2012. Ohio Strategic Plan for Education: 2019-2024, Each Child, Our Future,<sup>8</sup> recognizes the importance of meeting the needs of the Whole Child and in-school child nutrition programs as a priority strategy. Combining this strategic state-level plan with the current leadership support for school breakfast reinforces that breakfast is an important part of the day for *all* students so they are ready to learn.

State education association leaders believe that their members have a role to play in expanding student access to the School Breakfast Program. The OSBC will continue to support the state education associations with tools, resources and messaging appropriate for their membership to aid in transforming School Breakfast Programs.

## More about the Ohio School Breakfast Challenge

The goal of the OSBC is to encourage schools to promote and expand access to school breakfast within their buildings. Over the past three school years, Ohio has seen an increase in number of students eating school breakfast as well as number of meals served.

### Awards and Recognition

The OSBC publicly recognizes, celebrates and thanks schools and state education associations for their work to expand access to school breakfast. The OSBC recognitions include:

- **Breakfast All-Stars:** Identifies, recognizes and celebrates Ohio schools serving school breakfast to more than 50 percent of students.
- **Rising Star:** Recognizes those schools that demonstrate a 30 percent improvement in breakfast participation over the prior year
- **Champions of Breakfast:** Honors schools demonstrating innovation and collaboration in their school building or district in breakfast service, enhancement and/or growth.

The OSBC has found creative ways to celebrate the award winners such as featuring them at state education association meetings or events to share their school breakfast experiences. Award-winning schools have also been recognized by their school boards, principals and other education/professional organizations.

For additional information, visit [www.ohioschoolbreakfastchallenge.com](http://www.ohioschoolbreakfastchallenge.com).

\*Surveys were conducted by Share Our Strength for this project. Almost 1700 State Education Association Membership (school administrators, principals, teachers, and school business officials) responded to the survey. See addendums for additional survey details.

### Citations

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