

## MICRO-REPORT

# Chronic Absenteeism

## Breakfast After the Bell Can Significantly Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

**New research shows that serving breakfast as part of the school day is a powerful tool in reducing chronic absenteeism among students.**

Schools effectively help vulnerable children in the United States, from providing the lasting power of education to meals and necessary social services. Schools can only help students, however, if they show up.

Today, our schools are facing a crisis of chronic absenteeism: nearly 8 million students are missing at least three weeks of the school year, which equals 16% of all students in the United States. This problem starts earlier than you might think: approximately 3.5 million elementary school students are chronically absent each year.



Serving breakfast after the bell can **reduce absenteeism by an average of**

**6 percentage points**

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**Breakfast in the classroom is allowing kids to actually learn and focus. Because everyone can avail themselves of the free breakfast, there is no stigma about ‘you get breakfast and I don’t.’ We don’t have any of that. School breakfast has had a dramatically positive effect on my kids, their learning and the overall atmosphere of the school.”**

**NANCY BLOOM | Principal**

This can lead to reduced student achievement, an increased likelihood of dropping out and a greater risk of becoming unemployed adults.

Schools across the nation today are focused on finding ways to reduce chronic absenteeism, but they may not realize they already have access to an effective, powerful tool – school breakfast. Traditionally, this meal is served before the school day begins, which means many students aren’t able to participate. New research, however, shows that when schools shift the time breakfast is served, making it a part of the school day, they can potentially see chronic absenteeism rates drop by an average of 6 percentage points.

## Serving Breakfast After the Bell

The difficulties of getting children to school early are especially daunting for low-income parents, who are more likely to have limited transportation options and less flexible schedules. Those challenges are compounded by the stigma children face by being “one of the poor kids” eating in the cafeteria before the bell.

“**There’s a stigma attached to being hungry. Rather than ask for help or ask for food, students just don’t come to school. Our students’ reading levels are two grades below because they’ve missed so much school. But by serving breakfast in the classroom we’ve seen chronic absenteeism drop.**”

**CAMILA BARBOUR | Community Schools Manager**

Making breakfast part of the school day, frequently called “Breakfast After the Bell,” directly addresses these problems. When schools change the way they serve the morning meal, participation increases – especially important for kids from low-income families.

Our new research shows that, in addition to feeding more hungry kids, Breakfast After the Bell programs can significantly reduce chronic absenteeism.

## School Breakfast Can Significantly Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

The No Kid Hungry campaign commissioned a study examining whether serving breakfast after the bell as a regular part of the school day can reduce chronic absenteeism.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of California Santa Barbara, consists of two analyses: 1) an analysis of two states – Colorado and Nevada – that required higher-poverty schools to serve breakfast as part of the school day; and 2) a national analysis of young elementary school students that looked at access to breakfast served after the bell in their classrooms.

**The study shows that serving breakfast as part of the school day has the potential to decrease chronic absenteeism rates by an average of 6 percentage points.**



Nearly  
**8 million**  
students  
in the United States  
are chronically absent  
from school





## The Findings

**The state analysis** focused on Nevada and Colorado, which passed state legislation requiring schools to provide breakfast after the bell if at least 70 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The research looked at whether the schools newly implementing Breakfast After the Bell programs experienced decreases in chronic absenteeism. These findings showed:

- On average, there was a 6 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism after schools adopted breakfast after the bell.
- For context, a school where 22% of students were chronically absent (the average for the schools affected by policy changes in Nevada and Colorado) could potentially see chronic absenteeism drop to 16% after implementing breakfast after the bell, holding all other factors constant.
- A smaller subset of schools saw an even more pronounced reduction in chronic absenteeism. Researchers compared schools that were narrowly included in the new requirement with ones narrowly excluded and found an average 9 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism.
- The research also found that Breakfast After the Bell programs are particularly helpful in reducing chronic absenteeism in elementary and rural schools.

**The national analysis** examined whether young elementary school students attending a school that served breakfast in the classroom (a specific approach to providing breakfast after the bell) experienced decreases in chronic absenteeism and improvements in other areas, including test scores and social-emotional development. These findings showed:

- There was a 4 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism.
- There was a 5 percentage point decrease in the number of days students were absent.
- Although the main focus of the study was absenteeism, exploratory analysis also found that students saw a 1.5 percentage point improvement in reading achievement.
- Exploratory analysis also found a 6 percentage point improvement in a scale measuring “internalizing behaviors,” where teachers were asked to answer questions about student anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem and sadness.

## The Bottom Line

School breakfast is often viewed as something separate from school performance, but these findings reinforce that it is intertwined with student success. As educators, community leaders and policymakers look for ways to ensure that students are nourished and successful in school, serving breakfast after the bell stands out as an effective approach.

Educators across the nation are experimenting with ways to improve student attendance. This study shows that serving breakfast as part of the school day has an effect comparable to other evidence-based interventions that are found to reduce absenteeism.



## The No Kid Hungry Perspective

# Breakfast After the Bell: A Matter of Equity



Replicable  
and Scalable



Positive, with no  
additional burden  
on families



A key strategy in  
the fight to end  
childhood hunger

No Kid Hungry believes serving breakfast as a part of the school day is an effective way to build increased equity in schools. When all students start the day with breakfast, including those with the fewest resources and the highest hurdles to education, it can help level the playing field. Schools serving breakfast after the bell make sure more of their students have the morning nutrition they need for focus, attendance, health and emotional wellness.

## No Kid Hungry Breakfast Sponsors

- Citi
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- Amazon
- General Mills

## Details & Methodology

The study was conducted by Professor Michael Gottfried, PhD, and his PhD student Jacob Kirksey, MA, leading education researchers from the University of California Santa Barbara. Below are details on the two analyses that comprised the study.

### National Analysis

- **Scope:** A nationally representative sample of young elementary school students that included information on access to breakfast in the classroom, a particular approach to providing breakfast after the bell.
- **Data Source:** Nationally representative student-level data on Kindergarteners and 1st Graders from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (ECLS-K). Data originated in School Year 2010-2011 and was compared to 2011-2012.

### State Analysis

- **Scope:** Colorado and Nevada elementary, middle, and high schools. State policy required certain schools (those where 70 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals) to provide breakfast after the bell.
- **Data Sources:** Colorado and Nevada school-level chronic absenteeism data (United States Department of Education) and school breakfast administrative data (state agency) for School Year 2013-2014 and 2015-2016.

The detailed research brief is available on the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices site [here](#). For a PDF copy of the brief or the complete report, please contact Karen Wong of the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices: [kwong@strength.org](mailto:kwong@strength.org).



### No Kid Hungry

No child should go hungry in America. But millions don't know where their next meal is coming from. No Kid Hungry is ending childhood hunger by helping launch and improve programs that give all kids the healthy food they need to thrive. This is a problem we know how to solve. No Kid Hungry is a campaign by Share Our Strength, an organization working to end hunger and poverty.