



center for BEST  
PRACTICES



## ALL MEANS ALL: A BREAKFAST STORY FROM MARYLAND

Gaithersburg High School in Maryland has more than doubled breakfast participation since implementing Universal Free Breakfast, a program that ensures breakfast is available at no cost to all students.

### OPPORTUNITY

Only 8.1 percent of students were eating school breakfast at Gaithersburg High during the 2014-2015 school year. Across the country, many high schools see low student participation in the school meals program with especially low student participation in the School Breakfast Program. “Breakfast is a vital link to student learning and overall student success; we know hungry students can’t learn”, said Marla Caplon, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Director of Student Wellness Initiatives.

During the first 30 days of each school year, there is a carryover period for students who were eligible for free and reduced-price meals during the previous school year. This carryover allows students to continue receiving school meals benefits while new applications are processed. Gaithersburg High regularly enrolls many new students and these new students are not eligible for the carryover period and must pay full-price for meals, which can be a barrier to participation. Caplon, then the MCPS Food & Nutrition Services Director, realized that Gaithersburg High could offer breakfast to all students at no cost by offering Universal Free Breakfast and close what would otherwise be a 30-day gap in School Breakfast Program participation. Caplon said, “This is a way to encourage all high school students to begin the practice of eating a healthy breakfast every day. If a student’s free or reduced-price meal eligibility is in any way a barrier to breakfast participation, Universal Free Breakfast is the first step to remove that barrier.”

As a result, a one-month Universal Free Breakfast pilot was introduced at the start of the 2015-2016 school year. The goals were to:

- Encourage all students at Gaithersburg High to participate in school breakfast.
- Cover the cost of breakfast for newly enrolled Gaithersburg High students, which would remove a potential barrier to participation.

- Offer breakfast at no cost to all students, which would remove free and reduced-price school meals identification and hopefully reduce stigma.
- Create a sustained increase in student breakfast participation.

### **BREAKFAST IS ON THE RISE**

At the end of the month, breakfast participation had increased to 13.5 percent. Interest in breakfast was on the rise! Gaithersburg High school nutrition staff were engaging the students, listening to their menu requests and enthusiastically welcoming them to participate in the School Breakfast Program. A greater variety of menu items were offered to accommodate the preferences of the larger, more diverse customer base as well as “grab and go” items from the cafeteria.

Offering breakfast at no cost to all students came at minimal cost to the district, and no supplemental equipment was purchased. “Other than increased food expenses, the only additional cost to the district was a slight increase in labor costs to cover the additional preparation and serving brought on by feeding more students. “As I reviewed the student participation numbers and the revenue reports, I saw no reason not to continue”, said Caplon. She added, “I was thrilled to see so many additional students eating breakfast!”

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### **CONTINUED SUCCESS**

When Universal Free Breakfast is offered, a school continues to claim the federal reimbursement at the correct income category for each student. As a result, many schools find that Universal Free Breakfast increases participation so significantly that they do not actually experience a financial loss from otherwise paying students. This was the case for Gaithersburg High, where revenue reports indicated that the MCPS food service account was financially solvent. Caplon decided to continue the pilot for another month to see if the increase in breakfast participation could be sustained.

As the success of the pilot continued, Caplon offered Universal Free Breakfast throughout the first semester. The school noticed that attendance was higher and there appeared to be fewer behavioral problems. Without hesitation, Gaithersburg High continued the program for the rest of the school year. By the end of the 2015-2016 school year, breakfast participation had reached 17 percent. The MCPS food service budget saw a greater profit because of higher breakfast participation than the previous year. Universal Free Breakfast continued into the 2016-2017 school year and student breakfast participation reached 21 percent (a 12.9 percent increase compared to before Universal Free Breakfast was offered).

Universal Free Breakfast is now the norm at Gaithersburg High.

“The breakfast program has helped transform our  
school into a community.”

### **COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

Dr. Christine Handy, principal of Gaithersburg High School, said, “I love informing the students and parents about this amazing program. In the morning, it is so awesome to see students eating breakfast together in the cafeteria. It is also cool to see the student that is rushing, go quickly to the cafeteria and ‘grab and go’. I love that we have this program because I know that no student has to start class on an empty stomach and I know that all students are starting on an even playing field in the morning, no matter their personal circumstance. Our superintendent often says ‘all means all’ as it relates to supporting the academic success of all students and I am happy to say that at Gaithersburg High School, that goes for breakfast too!”

Carrie Bohrer, Parent Teacher Student Association President, said, “The free breakfast program for all students is an amazing program. Since Gaithersburg High School has done a wonderful job promoting that the program is for everyone, the pressure is removed from students. They can run by the cafeteria and grab breakfast before heading to class. The breakfast program has helped transform our school into a community.”