

Breakfast for Success:

The Maryland Meals for Achievement Program

The [Maryland Meals for Achievement \(MMFA\)](#) program is a successful, state-funded universal classroom breakfast program that ensures that all students at participating low-income schools can begin the school day ready to learn with a nutritious school breakfast. The innovative and successful MMFA program responds to low rates of school breakfast participation by making breakfast a part of the school day. In so doing, MMFA removes common barriers that prevent students from participating in the traditional school breakfast that is generally served in the cafeteria. Research on MMFA demonstrates the positive impact the program has on academic performance, student behavior, and the school environment. This brief describes the history of the program, how it operates, and lessons learned, as well as options to consider for bringing this model to other states.



ABOUT THE NO KID HUNGRY FOR BEST PRACTICES

Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry® campaign is ending childhood hunger by connecting kids to the healthy food they need, every day; teaches families how to cook healthy, affordable meals through Cooking Matters®; and invests in community organizations that fight hunger.

The No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices provides the tools and resources needed to help elected officials and their staff, educators and community leaders achieve success in fighting childhood hunger. Learn what works in the fight against childhood hunger and discover toolkits, case studies, hunger stats, issue briefs, reports and more at BestPractices.NoKidHungry.org.

BACKGROUND ON MMFA

MMFA began as a pilot program in six schools in 1998 as a result of work led by the Maryland Food Committee working with leadership from six school jurisdictions, the state director of the child nutrition programs, and the Abell Foundation. In its initial year, the pilot program operated with private funding. In its second year, the Maryland State House passed legislation establishing the program, but without dedicated state funding. By the third year, the state appropriated funding for 50 schools and over the ensuing years, the program has grown to serve more schools reaching the current level of 271. However, despite this growth, MMFA is only available to about a third of eligible schools due to funding constraints. Advocates in Maryland are actively working on [an advocacy campaign](#) to fully-fund MMFA.

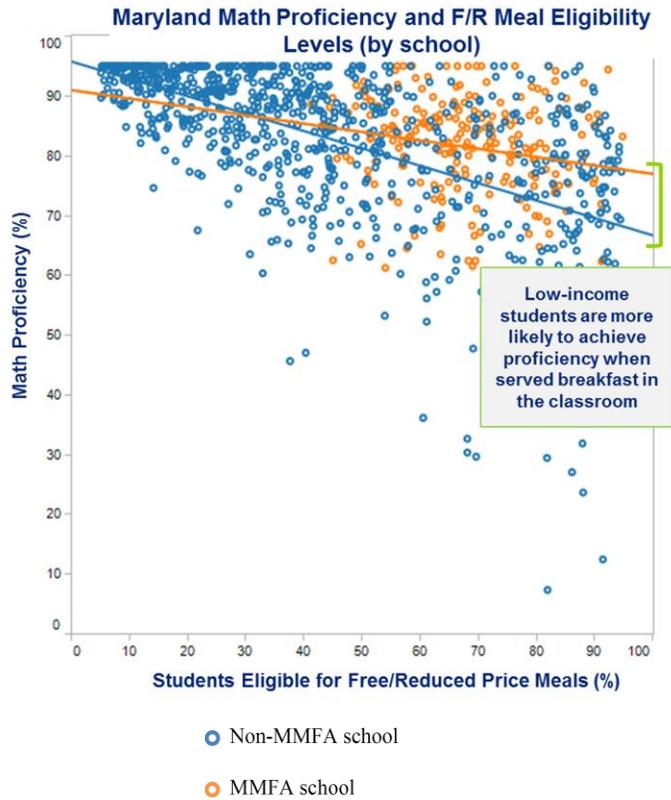
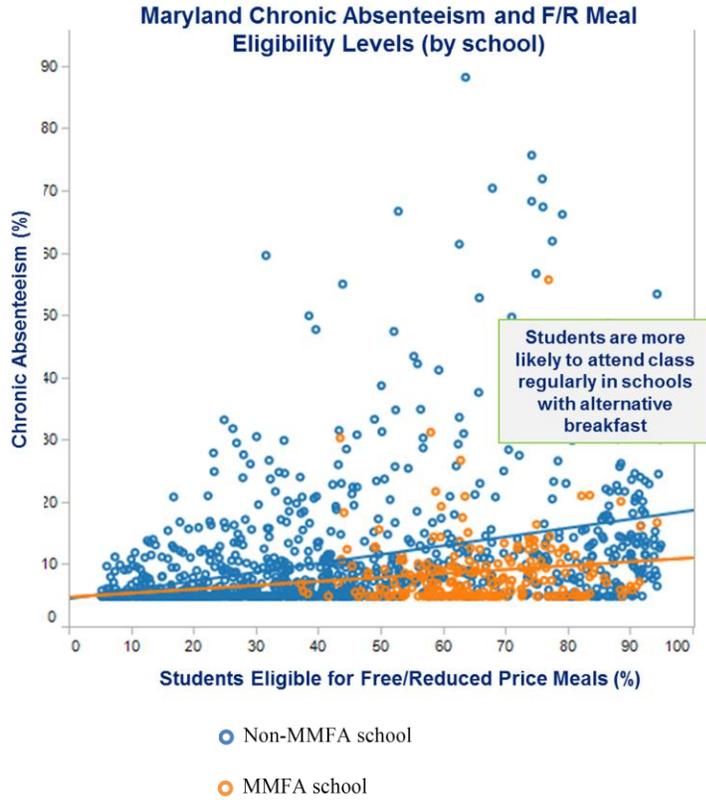
MMFA'S PROVEN BENEFITS

In 2001, researchers from [Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital](#) evaluated the effectiveness of the program and found a number of positive results, including:

- Participation in school breakfast in MMFA schools rose to an average of 72 percent from 11 percent, with some schools approaching 90 percent participation.
- MMFA schools showed an 8 percent decline in tardiness and a decrease in suspensions from 4.4 per month to 2.8 per month.
- MMFA schools saw a five point increase in Maryland School Performance Assessment Program Composite Index score.
- More than 8 of 10 staff, such as teachers, principals, nurses, and guidance counselors, reported improved learning environments at MMFA schools and 72 percent of staff reported better student behavior.

These benefits were sustained past the first year of program operation. The researchers also found strong support for the program with 99 percent of parents responding that the program helped the family and 81 percent of students reporting that they liked the school breakfast.

A [recent analysis](#) by Deloitte and the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices, Ending Child Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis, indicates that MMFA continues to have positive impact on schools and students. Compared to schools without MMFA funding, the analysis found that schools with MMFA had up to a 7.2 percent lower rate of chronic absenteeism and up to 12.5 percent more students achieving math proficiency. The impact was also seen to be stronger for schools with a higher percentage of low-income students.



MMFA IN ACTION

To be eligible for MMFA funding, a school must have at least 40 percent of its student enrollment approved for free or reduced-price meals. Schools that operate MMFA must implement a universal breakfast in the classroom program. This means that the school serves breakfast in the classroom for free to all students, regardless of their family's income. While students eat their breakfast at their desks, teachers can perform administrative tasks, such as attendance and announcements, or conduct activities, such as homework review, a nutrition lesson or quiet reading.

State funds are used to cover the cost of providing meals for free to all students. In a traditional model of serving school breakfast, students from families who earn between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level typically pay up to \$0.30 for breakfast and students from families who earn more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level typically pay the full price for breakfast, which can be approximately \$1.50.

MMFA is successful because it removes the common barriers that prevent students from taking advantage of the traditional model of serving school breakfast in the cafeteria. When breakfast is served in the cafeteria, students must arrive to school early and those from families who earn more than 130 percent of the poverty level generally must provide payment. Bus schedules often make it impossible for students to arrive early enough to eat breakfast in the cafeteria. For many families, busy morning schedules make it difficult to get their children to school on time for the morning bell; getting to school even earlier in the morning is an even larger obstacle. Another obstacle to participating in traditional, "before the bell" breakfast in the cafeteria is stigma. Students who eat breakfast in the cafeteria before the bell often feel stigmatized because it is seen as a program for "poor kids". Many students do not participate because of this stigma, and for some families who do not qualify for free meals, the payment can be a barrier.

MMFA schools serve breakfast in the classroom for free to all students. By serving breakfast for free to all students in the classroom, it removes the barrier of payment, the need to arrive to school early, and the stigma by making it a shared experience by all students.

MMFA APPLICATION PROCESS

Schools must annually apply to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the agency that administers the federal School Breakfast Program, to receive MMFA funding. The law requires that participating schools reflect geographic and socioeconomic balance. Over 90 percent of schools choose to remain on the program and re-apply each year. Some schools discontinue participation if they fall below the 40 percent free or reduced-price threshold, but most schools report positive experiences with the program and choose to remain. Demand for the program outstrips the allocated funding with over 800 schools eligible to receive funding, but only 271 participating as of the 2012-13 school year.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the years of operating this program, Maryland has learned lessons that would be valuable to other states interested in adopting programs like MMFA. To run a successful classroom breakfast program, it is necessary to achieve buy-in from school staff, including administrators, teachers, food and nutrition staff, and janitors. The school staff must understand changes that need to go into effect with breakfast in the classroom. Once the program is running, most staff support breakfast in the classroom, based on the positive outcomes they see. MSDE conducts trainings with schools to get them ready for implementing breakfast in the classroom and these trainings are crucial to the implementation process.

OPTIONS FOR REPLICATING THE MMFA MODEL IN OTHER STATES

As described above, MMFA requires that schools implement a breakfast in the classroom program and creates a threshold of 40 percent free or reduced-price student enrollment for a school to be eligible for funding. However, other states that are interested in establishing similar programs might consider allowing other models of breakfast delivery, such as Grab N' Go or hybrid models where breakfast is served in the cafeteria, but eaten in the classroom. States can also vary the eligibility threshold depending on the demographics of the state. Depending on the concentration of poverty in communities in a state, the threshold can be lowered or raised to ensure that the program is reaching the intended population.

Since 1998, Maryland has successfully increased participation in school breakfast through its innovative MMFA program. Research has demonstrated that MMFA schools have better academic and student performance and that school staff value the program. More students are participating in breakfast at these schools and start the day ready to learn. States in the rest of the country should build off the positive experience Maryland has with the program and establish similar policies to expand school breakfast participation.

MMFA is a successful policy with research supporting its impact on health and learning. For more information on additional policies states or school districts can pursue, visit our [school breakfast policy page](#).