

How to Launch a Successful School Breakfast Challenge



School Breakfast Challenges can be an effective strategy for generating interest in and awareness of the School Breakfast Program. Breakfast Challenges offer cash rewards or prizes to schools or districts that achieve the largest increases in participation. Breakfast Challenges are great tools for generating awareness and buzz around increasing school breakfast, and identifying champions who support these efforts. However, more successful Challenges will promote and provide support for Breakfast After the Bell models, such as Breakfast in the Classroom. Participation increases gained by schools during Challenges are not sustained long-term unless significant changes are made to the breakfast program. It is also common during most Challenges for the winning schools with the greatest increases in breakfast participation to be those that implement Breakfast After the Bell.

What is a School Breakfast Challenge?

A School Breakfast Challenge is an effort to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program that recognizes and rewards schools or districts that achieve the greatest gains in students eating breakfast at school. Challenges are an effective way to generate media attention about the importance of school breakfast and to create opportunities for school districts to share stories of success with state and local leaders. If planned properly, the Challenge can also incentivize schools to substantially increase participation in their breakfast program.

The structure and details of a Challenge vary across states but they typically include these common elements:

- **Issued from the top** – A typical Challenge involves a champion--someone who has the prominence and authority to issue a challenge to the state, and the influence and credibility to inspire action. In many cases, a Governor, First Spouse, or State Superintendent issues a Challenge.
- **Operates state-wide** – Every school within the state should have the opportunity to participate and receive resources and support to facilitate their efforts.
- **Rewards success and recognizes efforts** – Cash or other types of prizes for the largest increases in participation and recognition of participation on websites or through the media can help drive schools and districts to participate in the Challenge.
- **Involves cross-sector collaboration** – A successful Challenge requires buy-in and participation from many stakeholders throughout the state and school system. Ideally, the Challenge will be a collaboration among the state education agency, the Governor's office, and private nonprofits and corporations. Together, these entities can provide funding, help with promotion, and offer technical assistance and other support to schools. Dairy Councils and No Kid Hungry campaigns have been sponsors and active partners in a number of Challenges.

Designing a School Breakfast Challenge

When partners come together to plan a Challenge, there are several decisions to make which will have implications for resource needs.

Identify a champion(s) to issue the Challenge

The best champion will be someone who has the prominence and authority to issue a challenge to schools across state and who can generate media buzz and excitement: ideally the Governor or First Spouse in partnership with leadership from the education sector. For example, Nebraska First Lady Sally Ganem and the state's Commissioner of Education, Dr. Roger Breed, launched the state's first Challenge.

Map out a timeline

The Challenge can begin and end during the same school year or span multiple years. Some states have opted to launch a Challenge at the beginning of the school year and award prizes in the spring. The advantage of this option is that it helps maintain energy and enthusiasm and ensures the same food service staff, administrators and students who participate in the Challenge are there when winners are announced. However, running the Challenge for the entire school year allows more time for schools to make meaningful changes to their program and ensure that any participation increases are sustained. In this case, Challenges can also start as school starts, officially end when school ends, and prizes can be awarded at the beginning of the following school year.

Decide whether to enroll schools or have schools opt in

Schools can be automatically enrolled in the Challenge or interested schools can apply to participate. Automatic enrollment maximizes participation and sets the expectation that all schools should participate. Asking schools to enroll provides a sense of how engaged the schools are with the Challenge and allows partners to prioritize outreach and technical assistance. However, enrolling schools also requires more work, including developing a website or process for schools to sign up.

Have schools identify strategies and need for support

If schools must enroll to participate in the Challenge, you can also have them explain how they plan to increase breakfast participation and what kind of support they anticipate needing. Maryland, for example, asks schools to select which activities they plan to engage in during the Challenge. Knowing ahead of time which schools plan to implement Breakfast After the Bell will enable you to more effectively target your limited resources and technical assistance.

Decide how to determine winners

First, determine if there is a minimum participation goal or specific requirements that must be met to be eligible for support and/or recognition. For example, to be eligible for grants, prizes or other recognition in Nebraska's Alternative Breakfast Challenge, schools had to already operate or launch an alternative breakfast program by the start of the Challenge, and increase average daily school breakfast participation by at least 25 percent.

Challenges determine winners based on changes in average daily breakfast participation (ADP) in the breakfast program or based on changes in the participation rate. Participation rate is calculated by taking the ADP of students and dividing it by that year's school enrollment.

To produce a reliable picture of a school's breakfast participation, calculate participation increases during the entire course of the Challenge. For example, compare SY 2016-17 to SY 2015-16 or Sept-Dec 2016 to Sept-Dec 2015. If you can only use one month's participation data to determine the winners, you should make sure that you compare the Challenge month to the same month in the preceding school year (e.g. October 2016 to October 2015).

Set the number, type, and amount of prizes to be awarded

Prize structures will depend on the amount of resources you have available. Most Challenges have multiple prize levels (e.g. Gold, Silver and Bronze), often with more than one award in each level. Some opt to group districts by size or region and award prizes for each group. You are not limited to only providing awards to the top schools that compete in the Challenge and should design your prize structure to support the objectives of your Breakfast Challenge. For example, if you are particularly focused on increasing participation at high schools, you should set up your prize structure to incentivize them to participate.

Prizes and Awards Options

Cash Incentives. Most Challenges use this option to reward multiple levels of achievement. In Iowa, for example, the Challenge awarded four Gold Awards of \$4,000 each and four Silver Awards of \$2,500 each with the prize money divided between district general funds and child nutrition funds. Some states have provided equipment or other types of non-cash prizes, such as special events at the winning schools or visits from professional athletes.

Per Meal Reimbursement. Though not commonly used, this method provides a per meal reimbursement for each additional breakfast served over the previous year. In Minnesota, for example, participating schools received a 25-cent per meal reimbursement for each additional breakfast served compared with the previous year.

Incentives for Breakfast After the Bell Implementation. If the Challenge isn't limited to Breakfast After the Bell implementers, providing incentives to implement these models could ensure more widespread adoption. For example, Maryland awards a grand prize available only to schools that implement a Breakfast After the Bell model during the Challenge.

Implementing a School Breakfast Challenge

Communication and technical assistance are two important components for achieving meaningful participation in the Challenge.

Promote the Challenge

A Breakfast Challenge requires a great deal of communication with schools to be successful. Plan ahead to get the right messages to the right audiences.

- **Hold a launch event:** This is a great opportunity for the state's Breakfast Champion who issued the Challenge to reinforce the importance of school breakfast to the general public. Consider holding a press event to officially kick-off the Challenge.
- **Promote through mail/email:** In the months and weeks leading up to the launch, reach out to schools and districts directly with letters or emails providing information about the Challenge. Present the Challenge at state or regional meetings of superintendents, principals and school nutrition directors.
- **Design outreach materials:** Challenge specific logos and materials can help draw attention to the Challenge and increase its visibility and awareness.
- **Create a website:** Have a virtual hub with the information schools need to be a part of the Challenge and resources to help them increase participation in the school breakfast program. The site can be a page on the state Department of Education's website, a Facebook page, or a page on a community partner's website.
- **Provide schools with marketing materials:** Providing schools with materials to promote the time and location that breakfast is provided can help them to get the word out and attract new children to participate.

Provide technical and financial assistance

Once school leaders decide to take the Challenge, they may need help determining how best to increase breakfast participation. This is where nonprofit organizations and No Kid Hungry Campaigns can help support schools.

- **Share breakfast expansion toolkits:** Although many states have created branded breakfast expansion toolkits for their Challenge, there are many good [tools](#) already available.
- **Use breakfast specialists:** Nonprofits involved in the Challenge often use outreach specialists to provide technical assistance to schools and districts. The specialists work directly with principals and food service directors to implement changes at the school level. For example, in Minnesota, the Children's Defense Fund sent outreach coordinators to visit schools during the Challenge to connect them with resources and other schools to implement practices that increase participation.
- **Convene Challenge schools:** By hosting conference calls and webinars, you can reach a large number of schools to provide information and best practices about expanding breakfast, promote resources and technical assistance, and answer any questions they have about the Challenge.
- **Provide small grants:** Making critical changes to a school's breakfast program to increase participation may require small investments in new equipment such as carts, point-of-sale technology, insulated bags or disposal gear. With tight school budgets, providing opportunities for small grants or gifts to cover startup costs can help make it possible for schools to expand breakfast service. In Colorado and Nebraska, the regional Dairy Council provided funding and technical support for breakfast expansion programs. In Michigan's 2013-2015 Breakfast Challenge, the United Dairy Industry of Michigan and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan awarded grants ranging from \$3,000 to \$9,000 to support equipment and marketing materials.

Celebrate success

Once the Challenge is complete, it's time to publicly announce and reward the winning schools or school districts. This is also a great opportunity to quantify and report improvements in breakfast participation across the state, reinforce the importance of breakfast, and thank all of the partners that made the Challenge possible.

If there are significant improvements in breakfast in many places, consider collecting and sharing stories from across the state. These stories can help to inspire innovation and continue to motivate schools to increase breakfast participation. They can also provide other schools that are struggling to increase breakfast participation with some concrete models to help them be successful. After its 2008-2010 Challenge, Michigan [compiled](#) success stories and produced a resource to highlight how the winning schools were able to achieve such significant increases in participation during the Challenge. New Hampshire published a [summary sheet](#) of the outcomes of the first year of the two-year Challenge and a [table](#) showing the specific changes in breakfast participation rates of each school.

School Breakfast Challenge Websites

Learn more about the **School Breakfast Challenges** featured in this document:

- Maryland School Breakfast Challenge—[No Kid Hungry Maryland](#)
- Michigan School Breakfast Challenge—[United Dairy Industry of Michigan](#)
- Nebraska Alternative School Breakfast Challenge—[Hunger Free Heartland](#)
- New Hampshire School Breakfast Challenge—[NH Hunger Solutions](#)
- North Carolina School Breakfast Challenge—[No Kid Hungry North Carolina](#)