



Supporting Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom (Partners for BIC) came together in 2010 in response to their shared passion for improving childhood nutrition and its potential to have a positive impact on educational outcomes and child health. Partners for BIC has worked with school districts across the country to increase school breakfast participation through the implementation of free breakfast after the bell models (breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” and second chance) that are offered to all students. The traditional school breakfast program – served before school in the cafeteria – misses too many children due to barriers such as timing, convenience, and stigma associated with the program. Moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and into the classroom, making it part of the school day, removes these barriers, ensuring all students have access to nutritious breakfast. This best practice shows how social-emotional learning (SEL) can be incorporated into breakfast after the bell programs and the benefits that can result.

What is Social-Emotional Learning?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Research shows that well-implemented, evidence-based SEL programs contribute to improved academic achievement, lead to improved behavior, and have a strong return on investment. To read more about this research, visit <https://casel.org/impact/>.



“As teachers, relationships with our students [are] by far the most important thing because if you don’t have that, you’re not going to teach, [and then] you’re not going to succeed, [and then the students are not] going to succeed. [S]o having that little connection in the morning means a lot to me and hopefully to [my students].”

– Norah Silard, teacher, Austin Independent School District, Texas

Breakfast After the Bell and SEL

Students are learning all the time, even at breakfast. Breakfast after the bell programs can help support SEL by contributing to a positive social climate, building relationships between staff and students, and helping students develop skills. A recent Partners for BIC-funded evaluation of several programs by Child Trends, a Washington D.C.-based research organization, which is focused on improving the lives of



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children and youth, found that breakfast after the bell programs contribute to many positive benefits:

- **A start to the school day that is warm and nurturing, as well as a more supportive classroom environment.** Providing breakfast to all students after the bell gives students the chance to eat in a relaxed manner and helps send the message that the school and staff care about them.

"I see the Breakfast in the Classroom program as ... almost like a gateway to how we can do education differently in the sense of social-emotional support and fulfilling basic needs."

– Jayma Vaughn, teacher, Austin Independent School District, Texas

- **Increased social engagement between students and their peers and between students and staff.** Eating together with classmates, teachers, and paraeducators can create opportunities for conversations that might not otherwise occur. This often allows for teachers to see, hear, and learn things about their students that can influence how they interact with and instruct them. Conversations among students can help build positive peer relationships that extend beyond breakfast time. And all of these conversations can help build language skills that contribute to improved social interactions.
- **Opportunities for students to demonstrate responsibility and independence.** Students can play an active role in breakfast after the bell programs, doing everything from serving to cleaning up, and students can learn the life-skills that accompany those tasks.

- **Reduced stigma around eating breakfast at school.** Research has shown that stigma is one of the major barriers to participation. When everyone eats, everyone is equal, resulting in significantly less stigma and students feeling better about themselves.

Building Relationships Over Breakfast

At the heart of all the ways that breakfast after the bell can support SEL is the building of strong relationships between staff and students and their classmates. There are a number of ways to foster these relationships.

- **Eat with students.** When adults and students share a meal together, they have a chance to engage in conversation. As one teacher describes it, "I kind of look at it as if this was our kitchen table and we're eating together." Sometimes eating with students can help foster conversations that might not happen otherwise. Jayma Vaughn, a high school teacher in Austin, Texas, says, "I had a couple of students last year that were really struggling outside of my classroom to get along. I had heard that there were some issues going on in other places, but I started sitting with them in the morning when class would start, and we would all be eating, and we just started having [a] dialogue."
- **Encourage students to use the time to talk with their classmates.** While some schools like to use breakfast time to take care of administrative tasks, such as calling the roll or making announcements, it is also a great time for children to talk with each other. Claudia Garza, a school registrar in Austin, notes that every classroom is unique: "[For] [s]ome classes, it's their social time, where they talk about their evening and their morning, and they use that time to really build relationships." Norah Silard, a high school teacher, who is also in Austin, describes how her school's breakfast in



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the classroom program has contributed to improving the sense of community in her classroom: "I think it also helps increase the community vibe. There's more of an atmosphere like you're eating together, you feel closer."

One way the conversations that happen during breakfast can support students is by giving them the opportunity to learn about each other's cultures and traditions. Silard observes how her students ask each other questions about the foods they eat or don't eat. There is also an opportunity to foster respectful discussion if students are fasting due to religious or other reasons.

"This process allows students to forge relationships they might not have forged with classmates and with [the] homeroom teacher. And then they know that they can go to that teacher to meet other needs at any time."

– Carolyn Vosburg, principal, Livingston Parish Public Schools, Louisiana

- **Encourage food service staff to engage directly with students and vice versa.** When breakfast is served in the cafeteria before the bell, there may be little opportunity for students and food service staff to interact and develop relationships. One model that can change that is "grab and go," where food service staff bring the food to one or more locations around the school, and students pick it up on their way to class. Sommer Purvis, the administrator of special programs for child nutrition at Livingston Parish Public Schools in Louisiana, shares some of the changes she has seen: "Because we've removed that serving line at breakfast, it really gives students a chance to interact with our cafeteria staff. They learn their names ... To see some of these kids high-five their cafeteria technician on the way to breakfast, or for a

technician to tell somebody, 'Make sure you do good on that test today,' some of those are the intangible successes we see daily with breakfast in the classroom."

Similarly, Cassie McGowan, the food service director of Logan-Hocking School District in Ohio, says, "I do know some of the cooks have received letters from some of the kids thanking them and saying, 'We appreciate what you do.'" Even a school that uses a direct-delivery model of breakfast in the classroom can encourage this kind of appreciation for the food service staff who are preparing and delivering the food. Creating opportunities for students to get to know these staff members can help enlarge students' sense that the school is full of adults who care for and support them.

- **Promote student involvement and responsibility.** An important element of building an environment that promotes SEL is helping students develop practices and skills that contribute to the community. Sherry Knott, a second-grade teacher in Logan-Hocking School District in Ohio, describes how her school took this on: "We decided here at Green Elementary School to make the kids responsible for a lot of the things. Let them take on that leadership, that responsibility, for cleaning up the messes that they make. Taking the bags and putting them away. Bringing the bags into the classroom. Keeping track of who ate and who didn't. And the kids really took that on and enjoyed that."

One of the most common concerns expressed by educators considering breakfast after the bell programs, specifically breakfast in the classroom, is worry about spills and messes. Here, too, students can be taught skills that address these problems and build their competence. Connie Fleming, another second-grade teacher in Logan-Hocking School District, says, "We did have some spills,



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but the kids love the dustpan [and] the broom, so they are really good about cleaning up after themselves." But it's not just elementary school students who pitch in. Silard, the high school teacher in Austin, says, "I have a rule. You eat; you sweep. And I have a broom [and a] dustpan. They make a mess; they know they clean it up." Other teachers talk about using classroom meetings to help students decide how to best handle cleaning up.

- Recognize that a positive SEL climate includes feeding the adults, too.** In many school districts, adults, such as teachers and paraeducators who are in the classroom, are included in the breakfast program. The benefits of that are described by Christina Steele-Hantgin, the interim principal of Travis High School in Austin had this to say: "So having that extra meal in the box for them is comforting for me to know that it's available if they need it, and I think that it helped them realize that we were trying to take care of the larger community."

"Now I am able to ... have more of a relationship with [students], and now they confide in me, they trust me, they trust us more."

– Felicia Lee, food service technician, Livingston Parish Public Schools, Louisiana

Regardless of the students' age or the service model used, breakfast after the bell programs offer a powerful opportunity to promote SEL in school. Brandon Stratford, PhD, the deputy program area director for education at Child Trends and one of the authors of the breakfast after the bell evaluation referenced earlier, says that the most important thing a school can do to maximize SEL in breakfast after the bell programs is to be intentional by engaging everyone in the school.



"Strategies to support SEL through breakfast after the bell programs don't have to take a lot of time or resources, but they do need to be done intentionally," says Stratford. "Engaging everyone in the school in these efforts can result in better integration of SEL supports and a greater sense of community."

About Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom

The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom (Partners for BIC) is a consortium of national education and nutrition organizations, including the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), the School Nutrition Foundation (SNF), the NEA Foundation, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Foundation.

With the generous support of the Walmart Foundation, Partners for BIC has provided technical assistance and over \$11 million in funding to support the implementation of breakfast after the bell models in more than 500 schools in 70 districts, leading to over 100,000 additional children eating a healthy school breakfast since 2010.

More information on Partners for BIC, as well as information on how to increase participation in your school breakfast program, can be found at <http://breakfastintheclassroom.org>.