

Increasing CACFP Afterschool Meals with Supper in the Classroom



Key Finding

Implementing Supper in the Classroom can lead to higher participation in the CACFP Afterschool Meals Program. Schools that adopted Supper in the Classroom reached an average of 80 percent of all enrolled students.

Overview: The CACFP Afterschool Meals Program

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal entitlement program that provides funding to help offset the cost of providing healthy meals to infants, children, teens, and adults in a variety of care settings. In December 2010, the At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program was authorized as a permanent part of the CACFP that could be implemented nationwide. The Afterschool Meals Program allows educational or enrichment programs in eligible low-income areas, whether school or community-based, to receive funding for up to one meal and one snack each day. This provides fuel for the long hours of afterschool activities that keep children and teens active and learning, and it is especially crucial to children who may not have access to nutritious food in the evenings.

The Need

Expanding the Afterschool Meals Program is critical to ending childhood hunger. Currently, for every ten children who receive a free or reduced-price lunch at school, only one has access to a meal or snack after school.¹ In a national survey of low-income parents, 59 percent reported that tight household budgets made it difficult to provide food for their kids after school, and a quarter worried that their children did not have enough to eat between lunch and breakfast the following day.²

The Afterschool Meals Program has great potential for growth. This growth could come from increasing the number of sponsoring organizations administering the Afterschool Meals Program, locations serving meals, or children receiving meals at each location. Since it is a relatively new program, many schools and organizations may not know about it or may need support in starting or expanding the program. Moreover, little research has been done to date to determine best practices for implementing an effective and accessible program. With this in mind, Share Our Strength is testing promising models in order to identify and promote tactics that will expand access to this vital resource. Increasing the number of children receiving afterschool meals at schools has been pursued as the most straightforward and immediate way to boost participation.

Supper in the Classroom

Schools can utilize Supper in the Classroom to dramatically increase the number of children participating in the Afterschool Meals Program. The Supper in the Classroom serving model relies on children eating together with their class at the end of the school day, usually with meals being delivered to each room by foodservice staff or student helpers. According to guidance from the US

¹ No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices (2016). "To Meet Need, Growth in Afterschool Snacks and Meals Must Continue: A Report on History and Trends." <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource-center/download?id=0B2DIBiC2i6EHaU5LOG4tWDVIUkU>.

² No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices in partnership with APCO Insights (2014). "National Afterschool Meals Program Survey Findings." <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource-center/download?id=0B2DIBiC2i6EHQVdfQU9rYkIpNGM>.

Department of Agriculture (USDA), meals do not have to be served in a central location like the cafeteria or multi-purpose room; instead, different groups may eat separately throughout the school grounds.³ An educational or enrichment activity is still required as part of the afterschool program, but homework assistance or another qualifying activity may be offered in the classroom.

Another benefit of the model is that all students, even those who need to catch the bus, have the opportunity to eat before going home because the meal is readily available to everyone as soon as the bell rings. In addition, extended day schools operating at least one hour longer than the minimum number of hours required by their local educational agency (LEA) for comparable grade levels may serve a snack or meal before the end of the school day.⁴

Innovation Pilot Testing

To better understand how effectively Supper in the Classroom could increase participation in the Afterschool Meals Program, Share Our Strength conducted a small-scale experiment in four elementary schools during the fall of 2015. There were two schools each in two separate districts. In addition, Share Our Strength staff conducted interviews and site visits with eight schools across four districts that had already implemented Supper in the Classroom. Those four districts were all located in a state authorized to reimburse afterschool meals through the CACFP prior to 2010, so some veteran schools had been offering Supper in the Classroom for well over a decade.

The schools selected to participate in the Supper in the Classroom pilot test received incentive grants of \$2,500-\$3,500 per school depending on needs. Pilot schools were responsible for:

- Serving afterschool meals in the classroom for a one-month pilot period;
- Reporting participation data to Share Our Strength; and
- Having school staff complete a pre- and post-pilot survey.

Elementary schools were selected for the pilot since younger children have the least control over how they spend their afternoon and are most dependent on the bus or other transportation.

Overall, Supper in the Classroom proved to be highly effective and worked well once initial concerns and logistical considerations were overcome.

School Characteristics and Implementation

All 12 of the schools that agreed to test or had already implemented Supper in the Classroom exceeded state or local instructional time requirements, but only one of those schools officially qualified as an extended day school. In schools that did not qualify as extended day, the official school day was shortened so that supper could be served after the final bell with minimal disruption to teacher and bus schedules. In one pilot district, adjusting the final bell time was also accompanied by shortening lunch, recess, and other periods of the school day by one to two minutes each in order to maximize the time available for the meal and enrichment.

The other pilot school district and two of the districts that had previously implemented the model made district-wide adjustments to their bus schedules. Another district that had previously

³ US Department of Agriculture (April 2017). "Child and Adult Care Food Program At-Risk Afterschool Meals Guide," page 54. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp/cacfp-handbooks>.

⁴ US Department of Agriculture (January 21, 2011). "Eligibility of Expanding Learning Time Programs for Afterschool Snack Service in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)," Memo Code SP 04-2011, CACFP 01-2011-Revised. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/eligibility-expanded-learning-time-programs-afterschool-snack-service-nslp-and-cacfp>

implemented the model worked to improve the efficiency of moving students onto buses in order to provide extra time at the end of the day.

In total, schools found that carving out 15 to 20 minutes was sufficient for Supper in the Classroom, although some younger children required up to 30 minutes.

Share Our Strength's national teacher survey on Breakfast in the Classroom found that the meal service takes 15 minutes on average.⁵

One of the pilot districts opted for cold meals, while the other served hot meals. All of the pilot schools delivered meals to classrooms, either by food service staff or student helpers. This was also the case in all but one of the schools that had already implemented the model. At the school that did not rely on delivery to each room, classes dismissed in a staggered schedule, went to the cafeteria together, picked up meals, and returned to their classroom to eat. The same model was already in place for breakfast and lunch. This was the only school that reported utilizing offer versus serve (OVS) for Supper in the Classroom, although others had instituted sharing tables for unwanted food.

As with Breakfast in the Classroom, Supper in the Classroom can require investment in additional storage and delivery equipment. One district reported that with 350-400 children receiving afterschool meals at each school, they needed nearly \$12,000 total between the two schools for new equipment and supplies, such as carts, insulated carrier bags, and extra trash cans. Fortunately, grants may help to cover these up-front costs, and the costs may be offset by the increased reimbursement achieved through high participation.

One of the pilot districts actively promoted Supper in the Classroom by sending a letter home to parents. Similarly, the districts that had previously implemented Supper in the Classroom send fliers or letters to parents annually explaining both the afterschool enrichment options and the afterschool meal. One of the districts reported working with the parent's association on communication as well.

Implementing Supper in the Classroom Increased Participation and Revenue for Schools

At the four experimental schools implementing Supper in the Classroom, an average of 80 percent of all students participated in the Afterschool Meals Program during the pilot period. At each of the schools, the number of students eating supper after school was higher than the number of students eating lunch. On average, afterschool meal participation was ten percent higher than lunch participation.

From a Food Service Director in Michigan:
Since the pilot ended, "the kids are missing it. They got used to it and liked it. One of my staff members is a bus driver, and she said, 'the kids are like, 'dinner's gone!'" [...] As soon as the school board approves it, we will have it back in place within days."

A school with 450 students that achieves 80 percent participation in the Afterschool Meals Program and serves suppers Monday through Friday during a typical school year would generate **over \$224,000 reimbursements and commodities over the course of the year.**⁶ All of the schools interviewed reported that the reimbursement payments covered the cost of food and labor.

⁵ No Kid Hungry in partnership with APCO Insights (2013). "Hunger in Our Schools: Share Our Strength's Teacher Report 2013."

⁶ The "free" reimbursement rate for lunches and suppers from July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018 is \$3.23 per meal. An additional \$0.2325 in donated (commodity) foods or cash-in-lieu of commodities is also provided for each meal served.

Key Lessons

There were several important lessons learned from this research that can help to inform future adoption of the Supper in the Classroom.

Food preparation and storage equipment needs will increase, though the costs can be mitigated.

Schools reported that preparing such a large number of additional meals required additional kitchen equipment and storage space. One of the schools that had previously implemented the model used grant funding to purchase an additional walk-in refrigerator and other kitchen supplies, while their vendor supplied additional storage racks and prep tables. One of the pilot schools obtained grant funding for an additional milk cooler. Another school began having milk delivered twice per week – up from once every two weeks – because of the lack of storage space to accommodate the increased demand for milk with Breakfast and Supper in the Classroom.

Teacher resistance is common in the beginning, but it can be overcome.

As occurs with many new initiatives, initial resistance from teachers was reported by all of the schools when implementing Supper in the Classroom. Fortunately, all but two schools overcame this barrier and continued Supper in the Classroom with the support of their teachers.

The teachers' resistance stemmed from a variety of concerns, including reduced instructional time, increased mess and trash in their rooms, and responsibilities outside of their usual scope of work. In addition, some teachers did not see hunger as an issue in their school, leading them to feel that supper was, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, a contributor to overeating, obesity, and food waste. With more than half of all public school students eligible for subsidized school meals and tens of thousands of high-need schools nationwide, these perceptions may not match the reality that students face. As discussed in the recommendations below, there are numerous ways to address resistance depending on the nature of the teachers' concerns.

Supper in the Classroom is most successful when both the food service director and district administrators champion the cause.

When changes like adjusting the final bell time or bus schedules are needed, it is critical to obtain the support of district administrators, such as the superintendent or school board. District leaders are also important for building support among principals and, in turn, teachers and other staff members.

Food service directors must also be committed to the success of Supper in the Classroom. There are staffing considerations with any Afterschool Meals Program serving model, but Supper in the Classroom requires additional attention to the logistics of meal delivery, equipment retrieval, and record keeping. While administrators can generate high-level support, it is often the food service director and food service staff who must respond to the day-to-day concerns of teachers and staff.

Recommendations

Based on pilot findings and experience from the field, the following recommendations provide additional guidance to schools and advocates interested in achieving higher student meal participation through Supper in the Classroom.

Target schools that exceed instructional time requirements.

The major challenges to implementing Supper in the Classroom are modifying teacher and bus schedules when adding a meal after the final bell. Especially in schools with strong union

representation for teachers, asking teachers to stay beyond the end of the traditional school day may not be feasible. In addition, bus schedules may need be modified so that a majority of students can stay to take advantage of the meal. This is easiest to address during the bus schedule planning process in advance of the school year, but it still requires strong support from the LEA.

Extended day or expanded learning time schools may serve meals before the final bell, which means that no changes to teacher or bus schedules are required in order to serve meals in the classroom.

The Potential of Expanded Time Schools

According to a 2015 report from the National Center on Time & Learning, over 2,000 schools nationwide meet their definition of expanded time. (They define “expanded time” as seven or more hours in a school day, regardless of state or local requirements.) The number of expanded time schools has nearly doubled since 2012, and for the first time, more district schools meet this definition than charter schools. Moreover, “nearly 70 percent of expanded time schools have student populations that are at least 75 percent free or reduced-price lunch eligible.”⁷ This makes expanded time schools an excellent fit for the Afterschool Meals Program and Supper in the Classroom specifically. With over a million children enrolled in expanded time schools, these schools represent the potential for a large impact.

Schools that do not qualify as extended day or expanded learning time but still exceed the minimum required instructional time are also excellent candidates for Supper in the Classroom. Although the meal cannot be served as part of the regular school day, the official bell time may be adjusted. This enables schools to meet the requirement of serving meals after the end of the school day without adjustments to the current teacher work hours or bus schedules. Schools should work with their LEA and state education agency to ensure that the instructional time requirements have been met prior to shortening their official school day.

Learn from Breakfast in the Classroom.

The premise of Supper in the Classroom is similar to Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC), and it has many similar requirements, such as procuring carts and insulated bags for delivering meals; developing systems for delivery, distribution, and clean up; and gaining the support of teachers and janitors for in-class meal service.

Some best practices gleaned from work on BIC that may help those new to the concept include:

- Soliciting input and ideas from teachers and other staff members from the beginning.
- Serving easy-to-eat foods with minimal condiments or other items that could spill.
- Enlisting students to pick up meals from the cafeteria, serve meals, and clean up afterward, which minimizes the burden on the food service, teaching, and custodial staffs.
- Delivering cleaning supplies along with the meals to streamline the clean-up process.
- Placing an extra trash can in each room to accommodate food waste, and using a bucket for leftover milk so that trash bags do not leak.

⁷ National Center for Time & Learning (2015). “Over One Million Students Attend Schools with Expanded Time, New Report and Database Show” [Press Release]. http://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/press/press_release_learning_time_in_america_2015.pdf

Educate Teachers.

Even in a school with a high level of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, teachers may not be aware of the need or do not automatically appreciate the benefits of afterschool meals. In two schools that ended Supper in the Classroom after the pilot period due to teacher resistance, over 90 percent of

students were eligible for subsidized meals. However, teachers were not aware of the high student need: only a little more than a third of the teachers surveyed were aware that 80 percent or more of their students relied on school meals for some of their daily nutrition. Another third were under the false impression that less than half of their students relied on school meals—a drastically different school profile. In contrast, at two other slightly lower-need schools with 60 to 70 percent of students eligible for subsidized meals, the teachers surveyed were much more likely to report that the students relied on schools meals, and three quarters said that Supper in the Classroom was a positive experience because “I knew students had been fed a meal they needed.” Supplementing statistics with stories – perhaps from a school nurse who sees frequent tummy aches and headaches due to hunger – can help to show teachers that the need is real.

From a Food Service Director in Oregon:

“It was the stories. How these kids a lot of times don’t get dinner, they nibble on a box of cereal. That’s what won the teachers over – these kids aren’t eating when they go home.”

Describe the Alternatives.

In a national survey with a representative sample of low-income parents, 92 percent reported that their child usually eats something between lunch and dinner, and 48 percent said that their child often snacks on junk foods like chips and candy after school.⁸ In the same survey, nearly half of parents reported that it is difficult to provide healthy dinners during the school week. When students’ typical choices are considered, the staff may realize that a balanced and nutritious meal at school is a better alternative than what students may eat otherwise.

Rebrand “Supper” as a “Super Snack.”

Even with knowledge of the common unhealthy alternatives to an afterschool meal, some communities might voice resistance to the idea of serving a supper, citing concerns about unhealthy weight gain or taking away families’ opportunity to eat together in the evening. One way to combat these perceptions is to rebrand the supper or meal as a “super snack.” A “super snack” meets the CACFP supper meal pattern requirements with all five components, but just the minimum required portion is provided for some or all components. The portions are quite small compared to typical adult serving sizes. A “super snack” is typically made up of uncooked items, such as string cheese, yogurt, nuts or nut butter, whole-grain crackers, or small wraps or half sandwiches. By avoiding traditional dinner foods and keeping portions small, this can manage kids’ expectations for the meal and reassure parents and staff that the meal does not need to replace dinner.

Implement Offer Versus Serve (OVS) or Provide Share Tables.

Schools may choose to implement OVS for the afterschool meal, which can help to mitigate waste and overeating concerns. Likewise, a “share table” where students leave unopened but unwanted food items can serve this purpose as long as applicable state or local health requirements are met.

⁸ No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices in partnership with APCO Insights (2014). “National Afterschool Meals Program Survey Findings.” <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource-center/download?id=0B2DIBiC2i6EHQVdfQU9rYkIpNGM>.

Take Advantage of New USDA Guidance that Allows One Item to be Carried Off-Site.

In a memo released on August 10, 2016, the USDA announced that Afterschool Meals Programs could allow children to take one component off-site and still claim the meal for reimbursement.⁹ Prior to this, all required components of the meal had to be consumed in the congregate setting. Now, children may save one vegetable, fruit, or grain item to eat later. This option can help students who are not as hungry during the meal service and also reassure teachers that the meal does not contribute to overeating or waste.

Conclusion

Supper in the Classroom is a promising strategy that can be extremely successfully for the right schools. Although it may seem challenging to implement, schools have proven that it is possible to overcome barriers and resistance. Once the initial concerns and logistics have been settled, there is a huge payoff for schools and students alike.

For more information about the Afterschool Meal Program, please visit the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices [website](#).



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⁹ US Department of Agriculture (August 10, 2016). "CACFP 22-2016: Taking Food Components Off-Site in the At-Risk Afterschool Component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program." http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cacfp/CACFP22_2016os.pdf.