

IMPACT OF FREE BREAKFAST FOR ALL BOISE SCHOOL DISTRICT 2025



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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

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IMPACT OF FREE BREAKFAST FOR ALL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 2024-2025 academic year, Boise School District implemented a district-wide Free Breakfast for All program to ensure all students had access to a morning meal, regardless of income. This initiative, supported by local funding and guided by a commitment to educational equity and student well-being, aims to improve student performance, attendance, behavior, and perceptions of all school meal programs.

This mixed-methods evaluation was conducted by Boise State University's Idaho Policy Institute and Syringa State Community Research Lab in partnership with the Boise School District and Boise Schools Foundation. The research team analyzed quantitative and qualitative indicators and engaged directly with parents/guardians and staff through surveys and focus groups.

Key findings from the evaluation indicate:

- Strong community support for the free breakfast program from both parents and staff, with over 75% of parents and 83% of staff reporting approval.
- Perceived improvements in student behavior and engagement, particularly among younger students, with more than half of staff reporting decreases in disruptive behavior and increased focus.
- A modest but notable increase in test scores among economically disadvantaged students, particularly in math and reading.
- Reductions in stigma around school meal participation, especially in schools where breakfast is offered outside the cafeteria setting.
- Increased breakfast participation across the district, with the largest gains observed at Community Eligibility Program schools.
- Ongoing concerns about nutritional quality, equity across school sites, and logistical challenges related to in-classroom meal distribution and late-arriving students.
- Parents and staff strongly support expanding the program to include free lunch for all.

The report concludes with considerations for sustaining and improving the free breakfast initiative, including more consistent communication with families, enhanced attention to nutritional quality and cultural diversity in menus, and potential expansion to a universal free lunch program.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the 2024-2025 academic year, Boise School District (BSD) launched its Free Breakfast for All initiative to ensure every student had access to a nutritious morning meal, regardless of income level or school designation. While nearly half of BSD schools already participated in federal nutrition programs, such as Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the district now appropriates funds to provide free breakfast to all students across all the district's schools.

The design and delivery of breakfast varies by school type and CEP status. In elementary CEP schools, students receive a grab and go breakfast after the bell in the classroom without individual tracking. Schools that qualify as CEP schools do not need to track who eats because all students are free. In a CEP school, the district identifies the number of students who ate and submits the number to the USDA for reimbursement. These schools aim to feed the greatest number of students which is why breakfast is served in the classroom rather than the cafeteria. Food served in the classroom is self-serve and requires individual packaging for food safety reasons.

In non-CEP elementary schools, students access breakfast before school in cafeteria lines, where eligibility status is recorded. Secondary schools offer a mix of traditional breakfast and a mid-morning "second chance" breakfast to accommodate student schedules. The district tracks who eats breakfast to submit reimbursements for those students who qualify for free and reduced meals.

Both the food served in the classroom and in the cafeteria for breakfast are specifically crafted to meet the USDA nutritional guidelines.

The program has multiple goals: to improve academic performance and behavior, increase attendance and reduce tardiness, eliminate stigma associated with receiving school meals, and support students' emotional well-being. Recognizing the value of data-informed decision-making, BSD partnered with Boise State University to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the program's impact. The findings aim to inform not only BSD's future food policy decisions but also broader conversations about universal school meals and student experiences.

At some points throughout the data collection process, parents, staff, and students referred to the Fresh Fruits and Vegetable program believing it was linked to the free breakfast program. This program is currently not related to the free breakfast program. For more information, see Appendix A.



RESEARCH APPROACH

This report explores BSD's Free Breakfast for All implementation and outcomes through quantitative data such as attendance, test scores, participation rates, and qualitative insights, including surveys and focus groups with parents/guardians and staff.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

BSD provided data used for the quantitative analysis, including enrollment, attendance, tardy, and breakfast and lunch data. Performance data was gathered from the State Department of Education through the Idaho Report Card website. The analysis compared data from the 23-24 and 24-25 school years to observe the differences before and after the introduction of the free breakfast program. For more information about the calculation of school breakfast participation, see Appendix B.

SURVEY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

The research team worked collaboratively with BSD to design two surveys. One survey was sent out to parents/guardians and the other to school staff/teachers to understand their perceptions of the free breakfast program and any impacts they have noticed since implementation. The district distributed both surveys directly to the target populations. The parent/guardian survey received 2,400 responses, while the staff/teacher survey received 856 responses.

FOCUS GROUPS

Each of the surveys ended with a question asking if the participant would be interested in sharing more information in a focus group. Additional surveys requesting participation were sent out in June and August of 2025 respectively to those who indicated interest. Once a sufficient number of survey responses was collected from each group, Syringa State Community Research Lab (SSCRL) began facilitating separate focus groups for parents/guardians and staff. These focus groups lasted approximately one hour each and ranged from 3-6 participants. For more information on focus group organization, see Appendix B. Student focus groups were done with middle and high school aged students and were instead organized and facilitated by the BSD.

PARENTS

Seven focus groups were conducted with parents throughout June and August of 2025. Five focus groups were with parents with positive views of the free breakfast program and two were with those with negative views. Questions aimed to understand overall attitudes toward the free breakfast program, impacts the program had on children at home and at school, possible points of growth for the program, and receptiveness to a free lunch program.

STAFF

Four focus groups were conducted with staff in September of 2025. Questions aimed to understand overall attitudes toward the free breakfast program, impacts the program had on students and their classrooms, possible points of growth for the program, and receptiveness to a free lunch program.

STUDENTS

In the Spring of 2025, the district conducted focus groups with junior high and high school students. The district facilitates these groups every year to gather student perspectives on various aspects of their educational experience. In Spring 2025, the district added two questions to the focus group protocols about the free breakfast program. Findings from the responses to these questions are included throughout the report.

FINDINGS

PARENT SUPPORT

In focus groups, parents saw the program as a logical step for the district and an overwhelmingly positive resource for students whether they were food insecure or not. Crucially, free breakfast was linked to not just meeting any need for food but also with improving the school and learning experience of students. In most cases, feeding school-aged children was viewed as the responsibility of society, which the district was fulfilling by implementing its program.

The nature of the support hung on how parents drew the line between nutrition and the simple need to provide calories. The vast majority highly prioritized getting any food at all. Parents with this belief would not debate about nutrition because their conviction regarding the need for ensuring children are fed was so strong.

“You can’t be a good citizen, you can’t be a good person, you can’t grow without being fed.”

“The kids that are enrolled are required to be at school, and so, when they’re required to be there for 8 hours a day, I don’t think it’s unreasonable for us to be required to feed them.”

“We have to take care of those kids in the future. They’re going to be a part of society. We want well-fed and well-educated kids for the future of this country, so everyone should get together and take care of them.”

However, a highly-vocal minority championed bringing greater nutrition to the breakfasts. The two general perspectives held that (1) breakfast was good, but really needed more nutrition, and (2) for a small number of parents and teachers, the poor nutrition unfortunately made free breakfast more harmful than good. The harm mentioned included students experiencing sugar crashes in the afternoon and some students eating food they have intolerances to, resulting in poor reactions. Students shared some of these same concerns, with some stating that school breakfast would be more appealing if the provided options had more protein and if there was a greater variety of healthy options. They also expressed concerns that the healthy options provided (oftentimes fruit such as apples and oranges) were not fresh or appetizing, which discouraged students from eating them. It is valuable to note that all food served meets USDA nutritional requirements.

Despite this debate, parents were almost totally united in seeing free breakfast and free lunch as the same issue. Every parent/guardian spoken with saw feeding children as a social rather than individual responsibility and felt free lunch was a core aspect of this.

TEACHER SUPPORT

Almost all (90%) of the staff surveyed reported believing the overall impact of the free breakfast program on students as positive for students. Staff also reported often encouraging and helping students and parents learn more about the program (see Table 1) which could increase overall participation and demonstrates some of their support of the program.

TABLE 1: PERCENT OF STAFF ACTING IN SUPPORT OF THE BREAKFAST PROGRAM

Since the introduction of the free breakfast program - have you ever:	Percent
Encouraged a student to participate in the breakfast program.	79%
Answered a student question regarding the process to receive breakfast.	52%
Explained the free breakfast program to a parent/guardian.	42%

In focus groups, teachers strongly supported the concept of free breakfast and free lunch, even if they had other concerns about the nutritional quality or the logistics of the program. Students also expressed overwhelming support of the free breakfast program. Many stated that, even if they themselves did not take advantage of the program every day, they appreciated the good that it did for students who may not have the time or resources to have breakfast at home each morning. All of the teachers in the focus groups explicitly stated that feeding kids makes school and society better and that it should be a priority. Students agreed with this sentiment, and they appreciated that free breakfast provided for all does not single out students who may not have been able to afford breakfast otherwise.

Similar to parent/guardian responses, all teachers saw providing food as a fundamental necessity, including lunch, but there were some concerns around nutrition. Teacher support also varied regarding cleanliness and disruption. Most teachers saw feeding students as the priority and were willing to accept some inconveniences. Other teachers noted the responsibility of cleaning up falls solely on the teacher. In some cases, teachers have purchased their own supplies (e.g., Lysol wipes) to ensure a sanitary classroom environment.

Some teachers also reported struggles with building breakfast time into their instructional time. A few teachers described their successful methods for integrating breakfast into the classroom including starting the day with seated coursework, incorporating food into morning meetings, or instituting community-building activities.

Teachers also noted challenges with small portion sizes and classroom management. For instance, some reported spending their own money on food in order to have appropriate portion sizes indicating the portions provided by the school were too small for the students to rely upon.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Both parents and staff were surveyed about their perceived impact of the free breakfast program on student behavior. Staff were asked if they observed a change in both disruptive behavior and student engagement since the introduction of the program. 52% reported a decrease in disruptive behavior and 81% reported an increase in student engagement.

In focus groups, teachers and staff tended to speak positively about student behavior in more general terms. Teachers largely supported the free breakfast program because it improved students' behaviors overall, particularly in students' abilities to focus and engage, especially amongst younger students.

Some elementary teachers lamented the afternoon energy slump. Those who brought it up felt an afternoon snack would be very helpful, and frequently teachers provided this out of their own pockets.

Students also noticed increased focus and positive attitudes amongst themselves and their peers due to the free breakfast program. Both junior high and high school students said that they were able to pay closer attention in class when they were not thinking about eating. They also noticed that their friends were happier after they had eaten breakfast.

"I've been in other schools where it's not free. And you can definitely tell the kids who are food insecure, and if they don't eat, you get belly aches, you get headaches, you get work avoidance. You kind of eliminate that with the free food program, the free breakfast and lunch, because then it's available for them. They have to choose to eat it still, but it's available."

"So when COVID came, and all these kids came in, you could see in the classroom the difference: they ate, they weren't hangry, they were more engaged, they weren't sleeping. Then, after the free meals went out, our numbers went back down."

"It's cool to see someone eat food and then their presence in class totally change— raising hands, answering questions, etc."

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

Though parents cannot report on student behavior in school, they did note positive behavior changes from their child on the survey, like easier morning routines (60%), improved mood in the morning (38%), and an increase in energy (33%).

In focus groups, parents' reports regarding student behavior most often had one of two focuses. Either they focused solely on their own child's behavior when it was affected negatively, usually due to dietary restrictions. Or, they zeroed in on the negative behaviors that can occur when the food being served is not healthy, particularly in regard to sugar. These concerns were not representative of a lack of support for a free breakfast program, rather they simply align with one of parents' biggest concerns and desires for improvement-- healthier, more nutritious food.

"And so I was seeing the same things: high blood sugar spikes, and then in the afternoons, really low energy levels, to the point that my son was just like, 'I'm so tired' around one or two o'clock"

As previously stated, these concerns do not necessarily reflect a lack of support for the free breakfast program but instead indicate points of growth.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Overall, the district did not have a significant change in students reaching proficiency on standardized tests between the 2023-24 school year and the 2024-25 school year. The percentage of students reaching proficiency was either the same or an increase of 5% or less in both the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) and the Idaho Standard Achievement Test (ISAT).

Among subgroups, the number of students considered economically disadvantaged reaching proficiency on standardized tests increased by 6% or more district wide, with the greatest increase seen on the Math ISAT (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: PERCENT CHANGE OF STUDENTS REACHING PROFICIENCY ON EACH STANDARDIZED TEST

Change Between 2023-24 and 2024-25 School Years				
	ISAT English	ISAT Math	IRI Fall	IRI Spring
All Students	1.2%	5.8%	0.0%	1.0%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	6.5%	13.1%	7.3%	7.1%

*Data from Idaho State Department of Education

In schools with the greatest increase in school breakfast participation, some subgroups did see greater change than others, specifically in Hispanic and Latino students on the English Language ISAT and economically disadvantaged students on the Spring IRI, but otherwise there are no patterns.

These changes in performance on standardized tests may not be easily attributed to free breakfast, but research does show that students learn better when they are fed¹, and this could lead to better results on tests toward the end of the year.

Data collected in the survey indicates district staff are noticing a change. More than half of surveyed staff (60%) reported seeing improved student grades since the introduction of the program.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

Parents generally reported student performance with generalizations about the positive effects of access to food rather than specific performance changes with their child. These positive effects focused on how breakfast results in better learning and focus for students as a whole.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND TARDIES

Data provided by the district does not indicate a correlation between the free breakfast program and the percentage of students in attendance or the average daily absences in the district. Between the 23-24 and 25-24 school years, all schools exhibited a less than 1% change in attendance percentage, and the data shows no pattern in the change of average daily absences after the free breakfast program was implemented. Some schools saw an increase in average daily absences while some saw a decrease, but the change was seldom more than one or two students per day.

¹Lundqvist M., Vogel N. E., & Levin L.- Åke. (2019). Effects of eating breakfast on children and adolescents: A systematic review of potentially relevant outcomes in economic evaluations. Food & Nutrition Research, 63. <https://doi.org/10.29219/fnr.v63.1618>

TABLE 3: PERCENT CHANGE IN TARDIES COMPARED TO BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION IN THE 2023-24 TO 2024-25 SCHOOL YEARS

School	Change in Tardies	Change in Breakfast Participation
Taft Elementary	-39.0%	17.2%
Maple Grove Elementary	-28.0%	6.6%
Hillside Junior High	-27.3%	12.1%
South Junior High	-24.8%	17.7%
Borah Senior High	-20.7%	9.8%
Owyhee Elementary	-20.0%	25.7%
White Pine Elementary	-18.6%	6.9%
Valley View Elementary	-18.2%	42.3%
Morley Nelson Elementary	-17.6%	8.4%
Hilcrest Elementary	-15.3%	1.5%

* See Appendix C for tardy data for all schools

Tardies in the district did decrease by 4.2% overall between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school year. All schools with the greatest decrease in tardies also experienced an increase in breakfast participation. However, in schools with the greatest increase of breakfast participation there is no pattern of decrease in tardies (see Table 3). The when, how, and what breakfast is served could impact tardies across schools in the district.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Survey responses seem to align with the variable attendance and tardy data. Nearly half (44%) of staff reported noticing a decrease in student tardiness, and only 38% reported noticing a decrease in student absences.

In focus groups, many teachers mentioned seeing a connection between a reduction in stigma around the free breakfast program and school attendance.

Teachers and staff from schools that close access to breakfast once school starts noted that students who arrive at school late and have not eaten breakfast end up putting additional strain on their teachers, the school nurses, and the school staff to provide food. Some teachers felt these students were often the ones in most need of free breakfast.

“I think that it helps some kids actually go to school, because they know that they are going to have food there and if it’s free... Things aren’t triggering and everybody can just go in, and they don’t have to think about the haves and the have-nots. They can just go.”

To address these gaps in feeding tardy students, many parents and teachers suggested implementing food stations or mini-fridges in the front office or around the school to ensure that tardy students also get a chance to eat.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

Only 16% of surveyed parents reported noticing an improvement in attendance or punctuality in their child. However, many parents in focus groups felt the program acted as a healthy motivation to attend school early or on time because students recognized the opportunity to spend more time with friends and desired that unstructured social interaction. This mainly applied to situations where free breakfast was offered before school began rather than in the classroom.

STIGMA

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Over half (59%) of surveyed staff believe the free breakfast program has affected stigma around students receiving school-provided meals. In focus groups, teachers felt that free universal breakfast and lunch can reduce stigma. They noted that the reduction in stigma was beneficial for students across income levels, frequently citing a sense of camaraderie, rather than judgement, that emerged around food.

Teachers expressed concern that students would choose to go hungry before putting themselves in a socially awkward situation. Free breakfast for the whole school was important because students can bring their friends and not feel singled out for being the only one that eats free food.

Although an overwhelming majority of teachers found that stigma was reduced due to the universal free breakfast program, some mentioned a new stigma—one centered around not taking resources away from people who “truly” need access to food, even if the student is hungry and wants the food. This concern of taking food “away” from people who “really” need it emerged in both teacher and focus parent/guardian groups. However, both groups mentioned that more education around the purpose of free breakfast and lunch programs would address this “secondary” stigma and further reduce any other stigma around eating school breakfast and lunch.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

In surveys, 45% of parents believed there was stigma associated with school breakfast participation before the free breakfast program. This level of agreement was similar across income brackets and school levels. Almost half of parents (49%) reported believing there was a significant reduction in the stigma around eating school-provided meals as a result of the free breakfast program.

Many parents were clear in their opinion that having universal free breakfast reduced stigma related to getting “free food”, noting that it is now difficult to know who needs free or reduced meals or who just wants them.

Some reported remaining stigma, especially for children with dietary restrictions or allergies who could not eat the same food as other students. Other parents reported stigma in upper-level schools around food in general. This stigma is more related to what type of foods are “cool” or “uncool” to eat rather than the affordability of the food.

Overall, parents felt making breakfast free for all reduced the perception of students being “different” for needing free food. Breakfast at school was reported as becoming normalized as a typical part of the school day rather than something unusual.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

Parents and teachers in focus groups described a range of social and household impacts from the free breakfast program. While many reported positive effects, including increased convenience, improved social integration, and greater equity, others raised concerns about nutrition, dietary restrictions, and inconsistencies between schools.

CONVENIENCE

For many families, the free breakfast program simplified mornings and reduced stress around ensuring children had eaten before school. Parents described the program as a valuable support for working families and a way to promote consistent routines.

SOCIALIZING

Parents noted the program's positive social effects. For many students, breakfast served as a time to connect with peers and begin the day in a relaxed environment. "The kids who eat breakfast together tend to be closer friends than the kids who don't," reported one parent. Another stated, "I think there's just a positive of just them kind of sitting in the camaraderie." These observations, and others, suggest that the breakfast program not only provides access to food but also fosters community among students, contributing to a sense of belonging.

DISPARITIES BETWEEN SCHOOLS

A smaller number of parents and teachers raised concerns about disparity in menus as well as the lack of cultural representation in school meals. The main disparities mentioned were healthier options at some schools (e.g., fresh fruits, eggs, and yogurt) compared to all packaged foods with high sugar and carb content. This lack of equity was a particularly upsetting point for parents. Providing more context to parents regarding the differences between school breakfasts may increase support.

Also, while some schools serving refugee populations were viewed as more responsive to cultural and dietary needs, others were seen as offering meals that did not reflect the diversity of the student body.

SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAMS

Participation in school provided lunches did not experience a noticeable change between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, with just a 2% increase in use. During the 2024-25 school year, participation in school lunch programs remained at relatively consistent levels across the months of the year, with about half (47%) of schools seeing a slight decrease of 1-3% from September to April. Only five schools in the district saw a decrease of more than 4%, with the largest decrease being around 6%. Of the schools that saw an increase in school lunch participation, all saw slight increases of 5% or less.

An overwhelming majority of parents (89%) and staff (91%) surveyed support the district providing free lunch for students. Most staff surveyed (91%) also said they believed free lunch for all would have a positive impact on students. Parents tended to view free lunch as a natural extension of the breakfast program, describing universal meals as a way to "feed the kids" and promote equity across schools.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Teachers unanimously supported school lunch, with many seeing it as a natural progression after the breakfast program. One teacher mentioned that some parents have wondered why one meal is free and not the other.

Multiple teachers mentioned that providing universal free lunch would help students who are new to the school district or are switching between schools. The change could be confusing and add a cost burden for a student coming from a CEP school into a school without the program. Universal lunch would smooth this transition.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

About a third (36%) of surveyed parents reported their child eating school lunch every day both in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school year. About a fifth (21%) report their child as never eating school lunch while another 20% reported their child eating school lunch more frequently in the 2024-25 school year than the one before.

School lunch programs naturally came up in conversation during the focus groups with parents. Parents shared challenges associated with the lunch program as it currently runs and not necessarily through the lens of cost. Challenges shared included not having enough of the food that their child wanted, students not having enough time to eat, the money loading process for lunch cards, and nutrition of the food, which reflected the same quality concerns as breakfast.

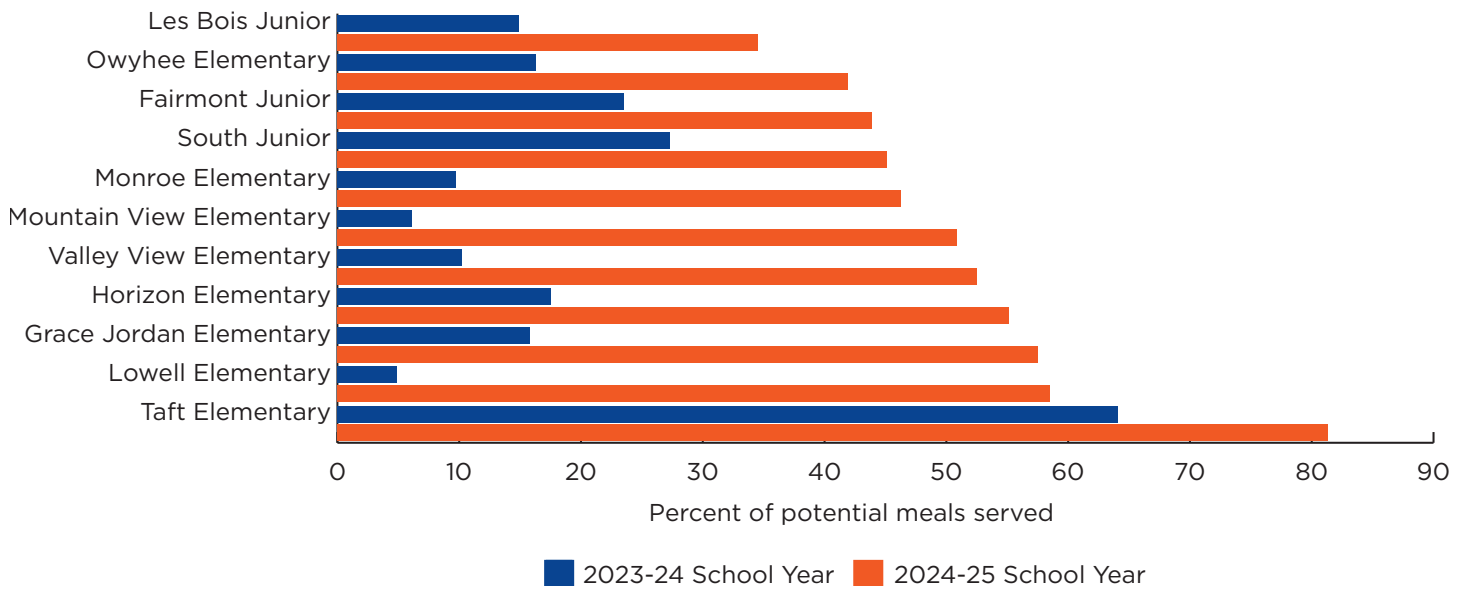
Overall, parents strongly supported a free school lunch program, all conversations around the topic focused on improvements rather than if the program should exist.

SCHOOL BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION

Across the district, school breakfast participation increased by at least 5% at 32 of the 46 schools observed. Lowell Elementary School saw the highest increase in school breakfast participation, going from 4.8% of potential breakfasts served (See Appendix B for methodology) in the 2023-24 school year to 58.6% of potential breakfasts served in the 2025-25 school year. The largest increases were seen at CEP schools, which comprised 11 of the top 12 schools with the most increased participation.

CEP schools also made up 8 of the 10 schools with the smallest changes in participation. Koelsch, Whitney, and Whittier Elementary specifically were the only schools to have a slight decrease in participation in the school breakfast program. Many of the schools that exhibited the least amount of growth already had many students eating breakfast at school in the 2023-24 school year. Because these schools already had upwards of 40% participation in school breakfast programs, their high participation rates left less room to grow when the free breakfast program was implemented.

FIGURE 1: LARGEST INCREASES IN SCHOOL BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION



*See Appendix D for breakfast participation changes for all schools

Over the course of the 2024-25 school year, participation in the free breakfast program was consistent. From September to April, the district saw a less than 1% average decrease across all schools observed. CEP school rates saw the most decline, which were anywhere from 1-16% over the course of the year. Alternately, non-CEP schools saw an increase of 1-6% in participation as the year progressed.

Both surveyed parents and staff noted a change in free breakfast participation in the 2024-25 school year. A majority of staff (76%) reported observing an increase in participation of the program at their school. Many surveyed parents (75%) reported their child eating school breakfast at least occasionally in the 2024-25 school year, and 30% reported their child eating breakfast every day at school. Of the parents who reported their child eating school breakfast every day this year, 19% said their child did not eat breakfast at school at all the year prior.

When asked why their child does not eat breakfast at school, 50% of parents said their child prefers to eat at home, 17% said there was not enough time in the morning to get to school in time for breakfast, and 16% were concerned about the nutrition of the breakfast.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Teachers in focus groups were split between believing their schools did a good job at advertising and explaining the process of the free breakfast program and believing their schools did not do a good job. It seems on a school-to-school basis there is room for improvement in communicating the free breakfast program to raise awareness and influence the level of participation in the program.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES

Most parents in focus groups reported that their child was participating in the school free breakfast program. Their support for the free breakfast program was reflected in their child's enjoyment and usage. Free breakfast, in some ways, acted as a safety net so students always knew they would have something to eat. Some parents also mentioned that their child knowing the food was available and learning how to access it eased a lot of anxiety for the student.

Similar to staff comments, many parents also felt the availability and process of the program is not well communicated, noting that many parents do not even know the program exists. Again, the level of communication seemed to differ across schools.

Communication problems specifically noted included concerns with the frequency of email and newsletters sent to parents, how prominently the program was publicized, and discrepancies in what parents reported was being served to their children and what the schools' menus showed.

CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings from this evaluation demonstrate that BSD's Free Breakfast for All program has been both effective and broadly supported by families and staff. As BSD continues to build on this foundation, several considerations may strengthen program delivery, promote consistency across schools, and inform future planning.

COMMUNICATION AND CONSISTENCY ACROSS SCHOOLS

Parents and teachers emphasized the importance of consistent communication regarding breakfast offerings, timing, and procedures. In some cases, families were unaware that breakfast was free or unsure when and where it was served. Strengthening districtwide communication—through enrollment materials, regular newsletters, and visible signage in schools—could ensure that all families understand program availability and benefits.

Similarly, differences in implementation between schools created perceptions of inequity. Standardizing the why between differences in practices such as breakfast timing (before or after the bell), serving style (grab-and-go versus in-classroom), and menu variety would help ensure a more consistent experience across the district. If standardization is not possible, communicating the reasoning behind delivery differences may help increase parent support.

NUTRITIONAL QUALITY AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Nutrition was the most frequently raised concern among both parents and teachers. While families valued the availability of breakfast, many expressed a desire for more nutritious and culturally diverse options. BSD could explore ways to include additional fresh, protein-rich, and lower-sugar items while maintaining compliance with USDA guidelines. Partnering with local producers or culinary programs could enhance food quality, reduce packaging waste, and reflect community values around health and sustainability.

CLASSROOM INTEGRATION AND TEACHER SUPPORT

Teachers expressed strong support for the program but also noted challenges related to time management, cleanup, and administrative requirements. Some staff noted that current reporting requirements create additional administrative tasks, suggesting the need for simplified breakfast tracking procedures. Simplifying recordkeeping procedures, providing adequate cleaning supplies, and offering clear guidelines for breakfast routines could help reduce classroom burden. Sharing examples of effective classroom models—such as beginning the day with seated work or community-building activities during breakfast—may also promote smoother implementation across schools.

ACCESS FOR LATE-ARRIVING STUDENTS

Teachers and parents observed that students arriving late often missed breakfast, which could negatively affect their focus and well-being. Schools that do not already have an after-the-bell program may consider flexible access points, such as front-office or hallway breakfast stations, to ensure that all students have an opportunity to eat regardless of arrival time.

PATHWAYS TOWARD UNIVERSAL FREE LUNCH

Both staff and parents expressed overwhelming support for expanding universal free meals to include lunch. Building on this momentum, BSD could evaluate the fiscal and operational feasibility of such an expansion. A phased approach—beginning with a small number of non-CEP schools—could help assess participation rates, costs, and logistics before pursuing districtwide implementation.

ONGOING EVALUATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Maintaining a cycle of data collection and feedback will be essential for sustaining the program's success. Continued monitoring of participation rates, attendance, behavior, and academic outcomes will help identify long-term impacts and areas for improvement. Regular opportunities for feedback from parents, students, and staff—through annual surveys or focus groups—could also support responsive adjustments to menus, communication strategies, and operations.



APPENDIX A

FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES PROGRAM

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered by the Idaho State Department of Education in Idaho. Its goal is to introduce elementary school children to a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and encourage healthier eating habits.

School Eligibility - To qualify, a school must:

- Be an elementary school (the program is not available to middle or high schools).
- Operate the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) — schools not participating in NSLP are not eligible.
- Have at least 50% of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals based on the most recent October lunch count data.

Selection Process:

- All eligible elementary schools can apply annually to the Idaho State Department of Education for consideration.
- The SDE then ranks applications based on the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals, with priority given to schools with the highest percentages (i.e., the most economically disadvantaged schools).
- Because funding is limited, not all eligible schools are selected each year — it is competitive.

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY NOTES

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS METHODS

Program participation is measured as the percentage of meals served versus potential meals served at each school every month over the course of the two years. The potential meals for each school per month is calculated by multiplying the number of students enrolled at the school by the number of school days in each month. This number is the potential meals served each month if every student at the school chose to eat school breakfast. Then, the number of meals served at each school is divided by the potential meals and converted to a percentage. The change in this percentage between the 23-24 and 24-25 school years is used to illustrate the impact of the free breakfast program.

FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Using data provided by the BSD, SSCRL started by distributing two different surveys through email for parents/guardians of children in the BSD and for staff working at schools in the BSD. The umbrella term of staff included teachers and other workers.

These surveys collected basic information including name, email, school(s), grades attending or level working with, availability, followed by a sliding scale question of 1-4 indicating feelings toward the current free breakfast program: strongly disapprove, disapprove, approve, strongly approve. This was in preparation for requesting focus group participation.

The survey data for parents who expressed interest in being part of a focus group had a total of 116 responses. The distribution of grades for parents' children was heavily weighted for elementary aged children, with the most children reported as 2nd graders (23 children), 5th graders (22 children) and 3rd graders (21 children). It should be noted some parents did have multiple school-aged children. Out of the 116 survey responses, a total of 7 focus groups were conducted with parents throughout June and August of 2025. Parent focus groups were organized based on the recipient's response to the sliding scale question; aiming to keep disapproving respondents together and approving respondents together to reduce focus group tension.

Over 77% (90 parents) strongly approved of the free breakfast program in the BSD while just under 9% (10 parents) disapproved or strongly disapproved of the program.

Five parent focus groups were in the approving range (3-4), and, with few disapproving responses, two focus groups were in the disapproving range (1-2). The number of parents per focus group ranged from 3-6. Parent focus groups lasted a total of sixty minutes each. A set of guiding interview questions were used to facilitate. These aimed to understand overall attitudes toward the free breakfast program, impacts the program had on children at home and at school, possible points of growth for the program, and receptiveness to a free lunch program. Questions were adjusted according to the responses of participants and the overall direction of the focus group.

The parent participants in the five approving-leaning focus groups' discussions highlighted perceived overall success of the program and reflected on the importance of community, with concerns of nutrition raised only as secondary. The two disapproving-leaning focus groups discussions highlighted strong concerns for nutrition and functionality but generally supported the purpose of the program.

The survey data for staff had a total of 49 responses. Similar to parents, the grade levels staff reported working with were also heavily weighted for elementary aged children, with 33 staff reporting they work with elementary students, 7 reporting they worked with high school students, 5 reporting they worked with junior high students, and 4 reporting outside those three categories. Once the survey data was collected, staff focus groups began after the 2025-2026 school year started. In September of 2025, a total of 4 focus groups were conducted with staff. Staff focus groups were also generally organized based on the recipient's response to the sliding scale question; aiming to keep disapproving respondents together and approving respondents together to reduce focus group tension. Over 83% (41 staff) approved or strongly approved of the free breakfast program in the BSD while slightly over 16% (8 staff) disapproved; no staff marked they strongly disapproved of the program.

APPENDIX C: TARDY DATA

CHANGES IN TARDIES BETWEEN 2023-24 AND 2024-25 SCHOOL YEARS

School	Percent Change
Taft Elementary	-39.0
Treasure Valley Math & Science	-30.5
Maple Grove Elementary	-28.0
Hillside Junior High	-27.3
South Junior High	-24.8
Borah Senior High	-20.7
Owyhee Elementary	-20.0
White Pine Elementary	-18.6
Valley View Elementary	-18.2
Morley Nelson Elementary	-17.6
Hillcrest Elementary	-15.3
Roosevelt Elementary	-13.3
Riverside Elementary	-13.1
Grace Jordan Elementary	-12.7
Hidden Springs Elementary	-12.3
Monroe Elementary	-9.4
Timberline Senior High	-9.3
North Junior High	-8.1
Frank Church High	-7.9
Washington Elementary	-6.4
Shadow Hills Elementary	-6.4
West Junior High	-5.4
Capital Senior High	-5.2
District Average	-4.3
Hawthorne Elementary	-4.0
Whitney Elementary	-3.9
Lowell Elementary	-2.8
Longfellow Elementary	-1.6
Koelsch Elementary	1.1
Pierce Park Elementary	3.0
Riverglen Junior High	3.2
Les Bois Junior High	3.6
Liberty Elementary	3.6
Mountain View Elementary	5.5
Garfield Elementary	5.8
Boise Senior High	6.4
East Junior High	8.5
Highlands Elementary	12.4

School	Percent Change
Whittier Elementary	15.2
Fairmont Junior High	21.7
Cynthia Mann Elementary	25.5
Horizon Elementary	28.2
Amity Elementary	31.4
Jefferson Elementary	33.9
Adams Elementary	37.3
Dennis Technical Education	39.4
Dallas Harris Elementary	42.9
Collister Elementary	43.1
Trail Wind Elementary	43.2

* Data from Boise School District

APPENDIX D: BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION

CHANGES IN BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION BETWEEN 2023-24 AND 2024-25 SCHOOL YEARS

School	Percent Change
Lowell Elementary	53.7%
Mountain View Elementary	44.9%
Valley View Elementary	42.3%
Grace Jordan Elementary	41.7%
Horizon Elementary	37.7%
Monroe Elementary	36.7%
Owyhee Elementary	25.6%
Fairmont Junior High	20.4%
Les Bois Junior High	19.6%
South Junior High	17.7%
Taft Elementary	17.2%
West Junior High	14.2%
Riverglen Junior High	13.9%
Pierce Park Elementary	12.1%
Hillside Junior High	12.1%
Timberline Senior High	10.9%
Boise Senior High	10.6%
East Junior High	10.5%
North Junior High	10.2%
Borah Senior High	9.8%
Shadow Hills Elementary	9.3%
Capital Hills Elementary	9.1%
Longfellow Elementary	8.6%
Morley Nelson Elementary	8.4%
White Pine Elementary	6.9%
Amity Elementary	6.8%
Maple Grove Elementary	6.6%
Liberty Elementary	6.4%
Adams Elementary	6.3%
Trail Wind Elementary	5.9%
Dallas Harris Elementary	5.8%
Highlands Elementary	5.4%
Washington Elementary	4.7%
Riverside Elementary	4.7%
Roosevelt Elementary	4.3%
Collister Elementary	2.5%
Hawthorne Elementary	1.9%
Hillcrest Elementary	1.5%

School	Percent Change
Frank Church High	1.5%
Cynthia Mann Elementary	0.5%
Jefferson Elementary	0.4%
Hidden Springs Elementary	0.1%
Garfield Elementary	0.0%
Koelsch Elementary	-0.4%
Whitney Elementary	-1.7%
Whittier Elementary	-5.8%

* Data from Boise School District

This report was prepared by
IDAHO POLICY INSTITUTE & SYRINGA STATE COMMUNITY RESEARCH LAB
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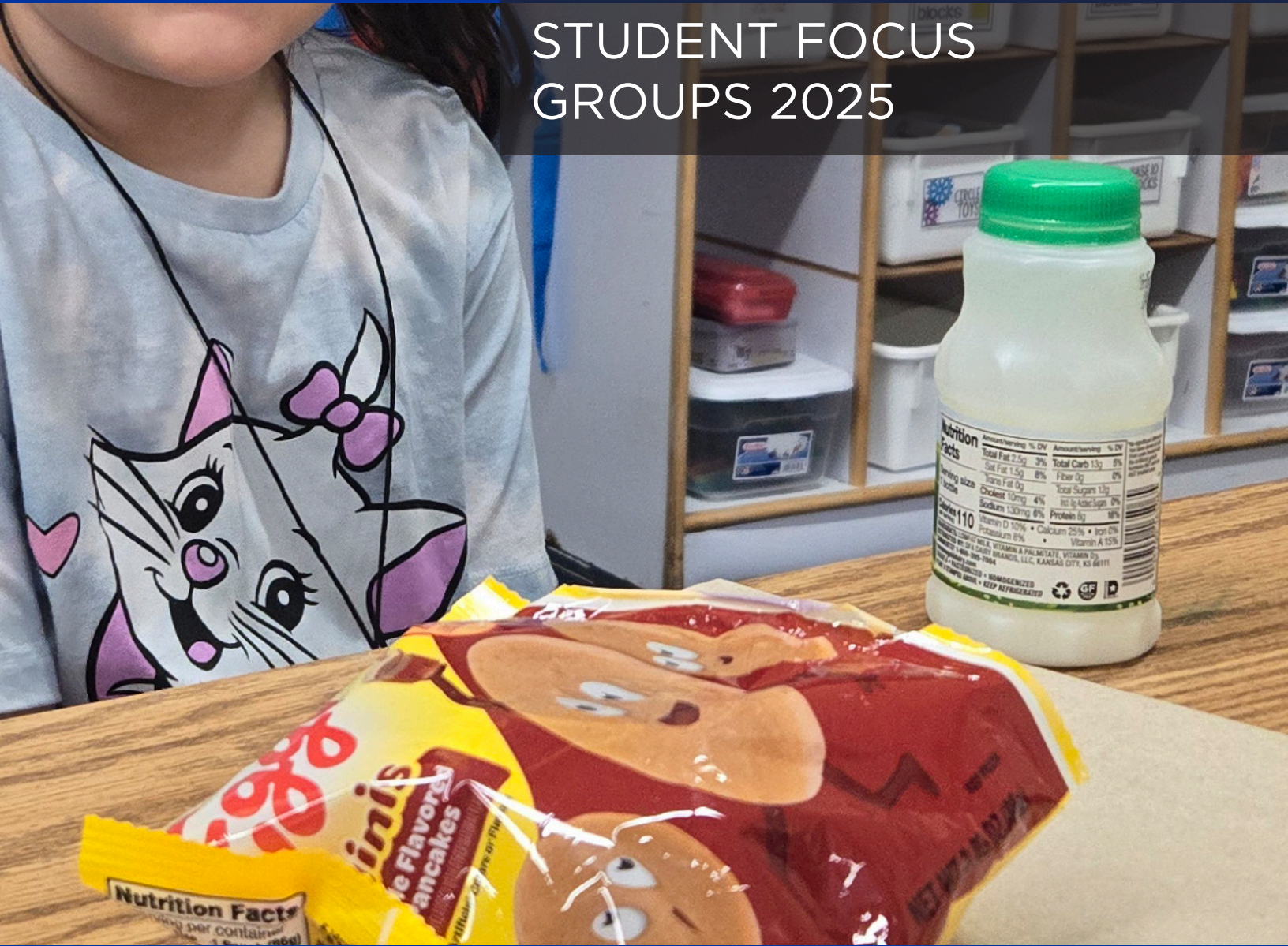
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IMPACT OF FREE BREAKFAST FOR ALL STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS 2025



IDAHO POLICY INSTITUTE &
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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

IMPACT OF FREE BREAKFAST FOR ALL STUDENT FOCUS GROUP ADDENDUM

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Student focus groups about the Boise School District's free breakfast program were conducted at 3 junior high schools and 3 high schools during the fall 2025 semester.

FINDINGS

FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Overall, students found it easy to access the free breakfast options at their schools. Students frequently praised the kiosks and multiple locations around the school and appreciated the option to receive breakfast before school or during break. Despite the generally positive experiences with free breakfast logistics, students at several schools mentioned some ways the program could be improved.

At one school, students mentioned that the lines were so long at break that they would sometimes be tardy to their next classes. However, these students also said they would rather be tardy to class than not be able to focus and participate because of hunger. At this school, students are required to enter their student ID number into a keypad before they were allowed to take their breakfast. Simple changes, such as allowing students to swipe or scan their ID cards or adding more pin pads, could alleviate this issue. Students at other schools mentioned occasional bottlenecks due to the layout of the school and the placement of the kiosks, especially on days when more popular food items were being served.

While most teachers demonstrate flexibility with students finishing breakfast items during class, some maintain strict no-food policies. As a result, some students expressed anxiety around having to eat breakfast quickly before going to their next class. Students felt like a couple extra minutes during break or more relaxed classroom eating policies could help address this issue.

SOCIAL IMPACT AND STIGMA

Students across schools reported a significant reduction in stigma associated with school breakfast participation since the introduction of the free breakfast program. At one school where stigma was previously high, students expressed that eating school breakfast is now part of the "school culture." This cultural shift has made the program an integral part of school life, rather than a marker of economic status.

Students also mentioned that the program facilitates social interaction, with breakfast lines serving as informal gathering spaces where students can connect with friends between classes. Students appreciate the flexibility to eat in hallways or outdoor areas, promoting social engagement during morning breaks.

ACADEMIC IMPACT

Students felt that eating school breakfast, especially at break, helped them manage their hunger effectively until lunch. This reduces classroom distractions and improves focus during academic periods. Students consistently report improved focus and concentration throughout the school day when they participate in the breakfast program. One student, who said they frequently skip breakfast at home, expressed that having reliable access to school breakfast helped them focus and stay engaged throughout the day.

BREAKFAST TASTE AND NUTRITION

While students generally appreciated the taste of the school breakfast and lunch, participants from across schools mentioned inconsistency between different days and menu offerings. Some food items, such as breakfast burritos, varied in popularity between schools, and some food items were frequently described as healthier or tastier than others.

Although parents and teachers expressed concern that students would become reliant on overly sweet foods, students across the board expressed desire for healthier and more nutritious food options and an increase in fruits and vegetables. Students at most schools suggested adding salad bars and increasing easy-to eat fruit and vegetable offerings such as cutie oranges. Others called for more protein options, such as yogurt.

While cinnamon rolls were a popular food item across schools, students primarily appreciated having a warm breakfast option, rather than having one that was sweet. Students at several schools shared that many of the food offerings were cold; having a warm food like a cinnamon roll in the morning was appreciated by many.

While some students desired warm food options, others preferred convenience. This was particularly true for students who were eating breakfast at break and needed to finish their meal before heading to class. Students at several schools mentioned the popularity of the breakfast bars, which were discontinued this year.

Finally, students recognized the diversity of the Boise school district and expressed a desire for more allergy-friendly, religious-friendly, and culturally-diverse foods. Across the board, students saw the strength of the free breakfast program as increasing accessibility to food options at school and wanted to make sure that all students felt included.

FREE SCHOOL LUNCH

Like parents and teachers, students saw free school lunch as a natural next step for the school district. Students felt that a free lunch program would further decrease stigma, improve attendance and focus, and increase opportunities for student connection and community building. Several felt that the larger portions of lunch, longer eating times, higher usage, and more variety would make the free lunch program even more beneficial and successful than the breakfast program.

Importantly, students did not want the quality or taste of the school lunches to go down to make the program free. Students recognized the academic, social, and emotional benefits of the free lunch program, particularly for students with lower socioeconomic status, and felt that a reduction in food quality would undermine these important benefits.

CONCLUSION

Overall, students saw Boise School District's free breakfast program in a very positive light. They saw the program as critical to addressing student nutrition needs and saw measurable academic and social benefits when using the program. Although some logistical, taste, and nutritional improvements were mentioned, students were overall very satisfied with the program and supported the expansion of the free lunch program.

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