



# LEADERS MATTER

Superintendent Leadership  
for School Breakfast



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Dear Colleagues,

At AASA, The School Superintendents Association, my staff and I are committed to supporting school system leaders' efforts to improve the lives of students. We recently launched our Leaders Matter Campaign to showcase districts where the leadership of the superintendent has resulted in meaningful, measurable outcomes for students, schools and the communities they serve. Certainly the four superintendents featured here meet and exceed these criteria.

Since AASA began working on relieving hunger, especially among the most vulnerable students, we have fed more than 400,000 students across 30 school districts. As part of this initiative, these four outstanding superintendents have helped relieve hunger and improve health and associated academic outcomes for students. Thank you to the Walmart Foundation for supporting this important and vital work.

I hope their stories will motivate you to take on such efforts in your districts to ensure your students are ready to learn as soon as the day begins.

Daniel Domenech  
Executive Director

## School Breakfast Definitions

When we talk about "alternative school breakfast" what do we mean? "Traditional breakfast" is consumed in the cafeteria, either at the same time for all students or in shifts. Use this as a primer for the other ways breakfast can be served at school.

### BREAKFAST IN THE CLASSROOM

Breakfast delivered to and consumed in the classroom before school starts. Most often served in elementary and middle school classrooms.

### GRAB 'N' GO BREAKFAST

Breakfast packaged in bags with all components of the meal available at sites throughout the school for pick up on the go. Most often served in middle and high schools.

### SECOND CHANCE BREAKFAST

Also known as "Breakfast After First Period" and "Breakfast After the Bell"

A type of Grab 'n' Go breakfast served later than the usual breakfast times. Most often served in middle and high schools.

SOURCE: USDA 2012

“It is the role of the superintendent to engage the larger community in all district initiatives, including our successful school breakfast program.”

MARK BENIGNI, SUPERINTENDENT,  
MERIDEN (CONN.) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## School Leaders Matter...

AASA has always seen healthy eating in schools as a leadership issue. Meals were served in the cafeteria, vending machines dotted the hallways of schools, and sales of cookies, chips, candies, and other fundraisers took place all over the district. While many different people were “in charge” of these various forms of food sales/distribution, the superintendent, as the leader of the district, is ultimately responsible for what and how students are fed.

It is from this perspective that AASA first approached our work on alternative methods of serving school breakfast so that more children are fed healthier foods. The success of our breakfast efforts has hinged on the support and engagement of superintendents and the generosity of the Walmart Foundation.

AASA has been funded by the Walmart Foundation since 2011 to provide funding and technical assistance to increase school breakfast participation. We’ve worked with 30 districts over four cohorts, feeding more than 400,000 students. Many have asked “Why AASA? What do superintendents have to do with breakfast?,” but we see school breakfast as a leadership issue for our members. Superintendents have many and varied reasons for supporting school breakfast, but the results are the same:

- ▶ fewer hungry students in schools;
- ▶ improved attendance;
- ▶ less tardiness;
- ▶ fewer visits to the nurse’s office;
- ▶ fewer suspensions; and
- ▶ better academic outcomes.

We feature four superintendents here, a representative from each of the cohorts, sharing their thoughts on the importance of school breakfast to student success.



## Sharon Contreras

SUPERINTENDENT, GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS,  
NORTH CAROLINA

Dr. Contreras was formerly superintendent of schools in Syracuse City School District. Syracuse is part of the first cohort of breakfast districts that AASA worked with as part of the Alternative School Breakfast program funded by the Walmart Foundation.

“We (superintendents) can never communicate enough, and we can never have too many community partners. I would make the case for doing everything in our power to alleviate childhood hunger.”

### Syracuse City School District

The Syracuse City School District educates more than 20,000 students each day, from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. As a district with the Community Eligibility Provision, all students in Syracuse City schools receive free breakfast and lunch each day. Students are diverse with more than 70 languages spoken

and students come from more than 60 countries:

- ▶ 49% – Black
- ▶ 23% – White
- ▶ 13% – Hispanic
- ▶ 8% – Asian
- ▶ 5% – Two or more races
- ▶ 1% – American Indian

### When Dr. Contreras first rolled out Breakfast in the Classroom in the Syracuse City School District, there was a lot of pushback ...

Teachers said, “OK first you want me to teach, next it's something else, now you want me to feed them breakfast in the classroom?” But what they learned is that students are much more settled now. The cafeteria was very chaotic. Students would come in, they would be wild in the cafeteria, be wild from being outside on the playgrounds. But now they come in and it's a more family atmosphere in the classroom, so they're sitting down, eating together. They're even starting their classroom work earlier so they get more instructional time for starting this program.

I was hesitant at first, starting with six elementary schools only. SCSD's mission was to make sure all students are college and career ready and that they are ready to participate in democracy and able to compete in a global democracy. And they can't do that if they can't learn. So we make sure that they receive healthy food every day. And some people say that is going too far, the school district is going too far. In my mind, it's not. The six-school alternative breakfast program was extremely successful. And it makes me happy to know that every student is coming to school and they have a healthy breakfast. And we now have universal breakfast and lunch for every single student. No one pays for breakfast or lunch anymore in the Syracuse City School District.

### Guilford County Schools

Guilford County Schools is the third-largest district in North Carolina, serving nearly 72,000 students across 126 schools in urban, suburban and rural areas. The district is divided into four regions, each with its own regional superintendent, office and support staff to provide personal attention to our schools.

As a larger district, we are able to offer opportunities that smaller districts and charter and private schools just can't. There are 45 magnet and choice schools with 54 programs, from Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) to performing or visual arts, advanced academics, Spanish immersion, Montessori, health sciences and aviation.

The district is very diverse. For the 2018-19 school year, student ethnic composition was as follows:

- ▶ 40.85% – Black
- ▶ 31.24% – White
- ▶ 16.40% – Hispanic
- ▶ 6.68% – Asian
- ▶ 4.30% – Multi-Racial
- ▶ 0.39% – American Indian
- ▶ 0.14% – Pacific Islander

## Poverty, Hunger and Health

### POVERTY

GCS students need to apply for free or reduce-priced meals: the Southeastern University Consortium on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition says 21.7 percent of Guilford County children live in food insecure homes, but only 71 percent of those eligible children receive free or reduced-price meals at school; 42 percent receive breakfast at school and 21 percent receive summer meals.

A survey conducted by Gallup for the Food and Research Action Center also ranked the Greensboro/High Point community ninth in the nation for the amount of people who say they don't have enough money for food.

### HUNGER

If students are eating nutritious meals, it helps in brain development and, ultimately, students will come to school better prepared. Feeding children is not our core business, but it will help us meet our ultimate goal of ensuring students are college- and career-ready.

According to a report from Food Hardship in America, the Greensboro/High Point region ranked as a top five metropolitan area in the nation in terms of a high percentage of citizens experiencing food shortages, while 81 percent of households in North Carolina who receive food assistance do not know where their next meal will come from.

### HEALTH

In Guilford County, some of the biggest health issues for children are asthma, allergies, seizure conditions and diabetes. Obviously, diabetes is related to diet, but what nurses tell us is that many times the families with children diagnosed with these conditions are also struggling with poverty. In fact, 67 percent of all children in our district are considered low income. That means many times families are forced to make difficult choices when it comes to buying food for their families or paying for needed medications or treatments.

### Breakfast as a Leadership Issue

Providing breakfast in the classrooms removes hunger as a barrier to learning. It takes away a needless distraction. Certainly, many parents are providing great meals at home, but there are far too many families who can't. This is a relatively simple initiative that superintendents can put into place for children and families.

We (superintendents) can never communicate enough, and we can never have too many community partners. I would make the case for doing everything in our power to alleviate childhood hunger.

### Impact of Breakfast

We don't have a specific measure on the impact breakfast has on our students, but we do know that when a child is hungry it is more difficult for him or her to learn. Research shows us that even mild under-nutrition in young children can lead to a lifetime of learning and developmental challenges, including lower academic performance, emotional problems and poor health. We have seen that as poverty increases in the school district, we have struggled to produce positive student outcomes. Ensuring students eat a healthy breakfast obviously is one way to address improving learning outcomes.



“Breakfast in the Classroom is a different way of doing business — it is really cheap and reaps huge benefits. For me, that is the role of leadership. That is the difference between someone who is managing a food program and someone who is leading for the welfare of children.”

## Larry Spring

SUPERINTENDENT,  
SCHENECTADY CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

Schenectady is part of the second cohort of breakfast districts that AASA worked with as part of the Alternative School Breakfast program funded by the Walmart Foundation

### Schenectady City School District

The Schenectady City School District, with a population of nearly 10,000 students, is one of the largest districts near Albany, N.Y. The district includes eleven elementary schools, three middle schools, one high school and an adult and continuing education center.

All schools reflect the rich culture and diversity with students who speak more than 30 different languages. We are committed to providing an environment in which all children feel valued, are safe and will learn. Students learn to value and respect people of all races, backgrounds and cultures; our focus is to help them appreciate the differences and prepare them to be citizens in a multicultural world. The district has a 96 percent graduation rate for students who remain in the district from elementary through high school.

### Breakfast as a Leadership Issue

If I am not leading the breakfast program, it will still get done — students will still get fed and breakfast will come. But because I talk about it and link it to a greater importance, people think about and work on the program differently. It is not just breakfast, food delivery, getting calories into children's bodies, and it's not just nutrition. That is the difference leadership makes.

Forming a relationship does not cost anything. Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) is a different way of doing business — it is really cheap, and has huge benefits. For me, that is the role of leadership. That is the difference between someone who is managing a food program and someone who is leading for the welfare of children. As a superintendent, that is the sign and symbol you demonstrate. There is symbolic leadership when you speak to groups of people, when you communicate, this (breakfast) comes up and that tells people it is really important. That is where that role for me lies.

### Impact of Breakfast

When we first implemented BIC and universal free breakfast, we saw a pretty healthy jump in attendance. At that moment it was reasonable to assume that breakfast was a significant factor in improving attendance and on time school arrival. However, it did not fix everything. We still had a number of students who were chronically absent, but it definitely got us some momentum on tackling some test issues. This was an unexpected benefit.

Our district implemented BIC in concert with other initiatives to support our students. So, it is hard for us to parse out which things were effective and which piece owns which part of the effectiveness. All these things in



## Poverty, Hunger and Health

Our district is committed to ensuring that race, economics and disability are never predictors of student achievement. **Everybody counts. Everybody learns.** The district is very diverse with:

- ▶ 35% - Black or African American;
- ▶ 25% - White/Caucasian;
- ▶ 20% - Hispanic/Latino;
- ▶ 13% - other; and
- ▶ 7% - two or more races

### POVERTY

A very high percentage of students — about 85% — qualify for free or reduced lunch. We identify which students are food insecure and that group is probably skewed a bit toward our black families being more food insecure. But, when 85 percent (of students) are qualifying, there's a really high percent of white students in that group.

### HUNGER

Out of 5,000 elementary school students, we estimate that about 2,000 of them are living with food insecurity. So, we partner with local agencies and community groups to send a backpack of food to about 1,000 families every Friday.

We identify hungry students using a behavioral check list. The first week of school, staff observe which students snatch food off other students' plates at lunch, and which students walk up to the lunch ladies and ask what happened to the left-over food. That is not just curiosity; that is not just bad behavior; that is data. Six-year-olds don't get curious about composting — they are asking about the left-over food for another reason. Staff gather names and continue to observe. Then staff check with families to see if they want to participate in the backpack program.

### HEALTH

Breakfast is really important in the district — not just because young people are hungry — but because it is a way to enhance the environment. Across the country, a growing crisis of mental health and mental illness is threatening the well-being of children and youth. There is no way the school district can provide every student with a one-on-one clinician or social worker. But we do examine the environment in which children are living and learning and determine how to make the environment feel more therapeutic to them (e.g. thinking about the role food insecurity plays, and thinking about ways in which we can create relationships with students so they have a sense of belonging).

Children and young teens in Schenectady have a lot of social emotional learning (SEL) needs; a lot of health issues, mental health issues, and some significant mental illness. We started with the breakfast program and then started laying on some therapeutic alternatives to discipline — a trauma-sensitive schools' approach and restorative practices were folded in to how issues and problems are addressed.

combination, over the last few years, have reduced the number of students who go to superintendent hearings — cut by 50 percent.

We look at the feeding program as a communal and relationship building part of breakfast. There is a purposefulness to the teacher and this classroom's group of students forming community when eating together. This is another aspect around this event of eating which is separate from the notion of nutrition delivery. This is the notion on which our school district focused.

We have seen significant decreases in the number of students who:

- ▶ get suspended,
- ▶ have significant behavioral offenses,
- ▶ have recidivism offenses, and
- ▶ require psychiatric hospitalization.

All this has occurred since we started breakfast in the classroom, but that is not the only thing we changed.

Anecdotally we believe that relationships matter and that children who feel like they have significant relationships with the adults around them:

- ▶ regulate themselves better,
- ▶ regulate their emotions, and
- ▶ deal with really difficult situations when being retraumatized.

BIC is a critical way to build those relationships with adults who build those relationships with children. When you sit down at a meal with someone, it is hard not to build a relationship. Yes, the therapeutic response

to an event is important, but with our model, it started with BIC — that was our starting point and our rationale around it.



“The superintendent can’t do it alone and should not think they can.”

## Roberto Padilla

SUPERINTENDENT, NEWBURGH ENLARGED CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

Newburgh Enlarged City School District is part of the third cohort of breakfast districts that AASA worked with as part of the Alternative School Breakfast program funded by the Walmart Foundation.

### **Newburgh Enlarged City School District**

The Newburgh Enlarged City School District is located at “The Crossroads of the Northeast,” an area on the west bank of the Hudson River 60 miles north of New York City and 80 miles south of Albany. The school district serves students from four neighboring municipalities: the city of Newburgh, the town of Newburgh, New Windsor, and a small portion of Cornwall. Six elementary schools (including a Pre-K center in one building), one K-8 school, one middle school, and the high school are in the city of Newburgh. The remaining schools are spread throughout the other municipalities.

The district has a total enrollment of 10,850 students in grades K-12. The ethnic breakdown of our students is as follows:

- ▶ 24.9% – Black or African American
- ▶ 48.7% – Hispanic or Latino
- ▶ 21% – White
- ▶ 2.7% – Multiracial
- ▶ 2.4% – Asian or Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander

### **Breakfast as a Leadership Issue**

As it pertains to leadership, the superintendent must drive the vision and outline the outcomes to strive for,

but also have to elicit the people with social capital whether it is the food program or a technology program. Part of what we did was sit down with people in our district who have social capital — they are the influencers and we got them on board.

The superintendent can’t do it alone and should not think they can. I am blessed to have a co-leader in this work who really gets how this is a real value, can talk about this work just as passionately as I can, and is committed to it as well — that is Caitlin Lazarski, the district’s food service director. She has probably more certifications around nutrition as a dietitian and as a nutritionist than we have in our entire district.

Whether or not a superintendent has someone with those qualification, what they do need is someone who can lift this work and that is what she has been able to do. So, I would say build that leadership team that will help you explain to the community why this is important and continue to communicate about it. We did not just launch BIC and never talk about it again. We talk about it several times throughout the year, we present on the topic at state conferences, and we collaborate with other school districts as a way of paying it forward.

We did not make BIC an isolated initiative. Strategically, we tied it to



## Poverty, Hunger and Health

### POVERTY

- ▶ Children don't know where their next meal is coming from,
- ▶ Children don't know if the roof over their head will be the same one tomorrow,
- ▶ Parents may not have had a lot of success in their own educational career, and
- ▶ Parents may not make the best nutrition decisions because they don't have the means.

What staff noticed, not by coincidence, is students' diets were filled with sugar and high fructose corn syrup — highly processed foods. There are real (food) deserts littered with bodegas and makeshift supermarkets that are not selling the most nutritious foods. Parents are doing what they can for their families. They certainly put food on the table and are doing their best to have a safe place for their children to rest.

We have taken this issue on, and feel it is essential to our equity initiative, because you can't bloom until you have strong roots — you have to take care of that foundation. Part of that foundation means that the children are cared for and loved and have access to nutritious meals, so they can be their very best in the classroom.

### HUNGER

The district has food pantries. In Orange County, N.Y., there are farmers markets, but not as many as needed, and not easily accessible for families without means of transportation.

### HEALTH

The most common health condition we see is asthma. We measure based on:

- ▶ the number of visits to the nurse's office,
- ▶ the number of students not participating in physical education,
- ▶ results of state fitness tests, and
- ▶ impact on attendance — how often students are going to the doctor because they are not the healthiest.

something bigger than all of us: If we really want to help close the achievement gap and give kids the best chance to be successful, then this is an essential part of it.

Reading and writing and getting kids to read by 3rd grade is important. But if ...

- ▶ They are sitting in a classroom hungry,
- ▶ They are agitated,

- ▶ They have so much sugar in them, they can't sit still, and
- ▶ They are drinking caffeinated beverages for breakfast.

... then that is a reason for schools to intervene as these things are the antithesis of the kinds of conditions necessary for academic success. Tying these things together and not leaving the breakfast program out there as

a separate initiative is critical. This is dangerous for anyone who does that. You need to tie this to your strategic plan and district priorities.

### Impact of Breakfast

We are seeing disciplinary infractions go down at various points of day and our referrals and suspensions are on the decline. We see a correlation between whether a child is sitting actively, or struggling because they have not eaten the right meals.

Tracking attendance is a federal requirement and now part of the state's accountability measures: Schools must track attendance. That is certainly something that we review to see if there is a correlation with breakfast.

We sit down with students and hear from them, and we think that is essential. We could do surveys, but holding focus groups with students and asking them what their thoughts are and how we can improve the menu is something we value.



“I BELIEVE our students BELIEVE we genuinely care about their well-being, because it’s important to us that their bodies are fed before we try to ‘feed’ their minds.”

## Angi Williams

SUPERINTENDENT, GALENA PARK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

Galena Park is a part of the fourth cohort of breakfast districts that AASA worked with as part of the Alternative School Breakfast program funded by the Walmart Foundation.

### Galena Park Independent School District

The Galena Park Independent School District serves more than 22,500 students at 25 schools located in the northeast corner of the Houston Metro Region. The district serves what is considered to be one of the most densely populated older sections of the city, spanning only five square miles. In this area, the percentage of families living below the poverty level reaches beyond 29 percent, nearly three times the national average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Poverty levels are much higher among GPISD students; 80 percent of our student body is considered “economically disadvantaged,” as they qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Demographically, our student body consists of:

- ▶ 76% – Hispanic
- ▶ 17% – African American
- ▶ 5% – White
- ▶ 1% – Asian
- ▶ 0.6% – multiracial
- ▶ 0.4 % – American Indian

Thirty-two percent of our student body is considered Limited English Proficient.

Our district was hit hard by Hurricane Harvey. The hurricane not

only had a major impact on plans to implement an alternative breakfast program, it devastated many parts of our school community. The one “positive” in the aftermath of the hurricane was this: Its effects intensified our desire to not only see our school community made whole, but to get our breakfast program underway as expeditiously as possible. Something many of us take for granted — hot meals each day — had become a luxury for many.

### Breakfast as a Leadership Issue

“As goes the superintendent, so goes the district,” was a saying of one of my former superintendents and mentor. As superintendent, what you believe, what you hold dear, what you emphasize and what you fight for resonates with your colleagues and community. I BELIEVE every child that walks through the doors of Galena Park ISD schools, every day, should receive breakfast and be given a chance to eat it as we begin the school day. I BELIEVE every child should be fed free of charge, no matter one’s economic status. I BELIEVE our students BELIEVE we genuinely care about their well-being, because it’s important to us that their bodies are fed before we try to “feed” their minds.

I would suggest to any

## Poverty, Hunger and Health

### POVERTY

We know that because we have a high number of economically disadvantaged students, they find themselves in homes where eating healthy food may be more expensive, which results in them not always having healthy choices at home.

### HUNGER

Sadly, we know, because our parents work late hours, many students fend for themselves and resort to fast food. They don't always understand how to make healthy choices, which is why our breakfast and lunch programs at school are critical to the development of healthy, successful students.

### HEALTH

As with most school districts in the nation, we often see instances of obesity, which can lead to an increased risk of early onset of Type 2 diabetes. We also deal with students having self-esteem issues.

superintendent considering an alternative breakfast program to get with your student nutrition department first to review data on current student participation. Meet with the leaders of that department to find out their beliefs about alternative breakfast programs and explain the desire to begin such a program in the district. Along with a member from student nutrition, I would co-present to my cabinet-level leaders the information regarding current student participation in the school breakfast program and information on the benefits of alternative breakfast programs.

You must convince principals, teachers and curriculum and instruction leaders that incorporating Breakfast in the Classroom is not missing instruction; it's actually part of instruction as there are many ways to learn as you eat (i.e., literacy, review/reteach, build students' social skills).

You must help campus leaders understand that by ensuring students are fed, we reap dividends in student learning as they are more focused.

Superintendents need to ensure the number of students participating in the program are monitored and

a weekly report (at the beginning) is shared with principals and central office leaders.

### Impact of Breakfast

We have almost doubled the number of students eating breakfast at school. When we submitted our grant to AASA in 2017, only 34 percent of our students were eating breakfast even though it was free of charge. We ended the 2017-18 school with 55.2 percent of our students eating breakfast and 71.9 percent eating lunch, both served free of charge. As of April 30, 2019, 64.52 percent of students were eating breakfast and 76.7 percent were eating lunch, free of charge. We've also observed the following:

- ▶ Students are better prepared to receive instruction.
- ▶ Attendance rate is up (monitored daily in our student management software system). Principals believe the rate of tardies has decreased and that our breakfast program contributes positively to this.
- ▶ Principals have indicated discipline referrals were down last year. At the end of this year, we plan to conduct a three-year comparison of this data.

