

# SPRINGFIELD SCHOOLS: WHEN YOU NOURISH, THEY FLOURISH

How a School District Brought a Community Together to Elevate the School Meal Experience



Prepared in Partnership with National Dairy Council, Springfield Public Schools and New England Dairy & Food Council





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## Executive Summary

*As an example of how schools can improve student nutrition, enhance meal participation in a financially sustainable way, and serve a variety of community and social needs, the public schools in Springfield, Massachusetts, stand out.*

- ▶ Springfield is the second-largest school district in Massachusetts, with a diverse student body, nearly three-quarters of whom are considered economically disadvantaged.
- ▶ The district's food service program is managed by Sodexo. The milk vendor is Garelick Farms™, a Dean Foods company.
- ▶ District-wide, Springfield has increased lunch average daily participation (ADP) to 81 percent, and achieved rapid growth in breakfast ADP from 47 percent in 2014 to 69 percent in 2016. These rates compare favorably with national average ADP of 59.1 percent for lunch and 30.2 percent for breakfast.
- ▶ In some individual schools that have implemented Breakfast in the Classroom, breakfast ADP has grown even more rapidly. At Central High School, it increased from 25 percent in 2014 to 87 percent in 2016 – 2.9 times the national average breakfast ADP rate.

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- ▶ Meanwhile, school food program revenue has grown steadily from \$15.4 million in 2014 to \$22.1 million in 2017, an increase of 43.5 percent.
- ▶ And while multiple factors are likely involved, Springfield has seen steady and measurable improvements in behavioral metrics like absence, tardiness and discipline, as well as improvements in academic achievement. The GENYOUth Foundation’s Wellness Impact discusses the emerging research, particularly the link of breakfast and physical fitness, to improvements in academic performance in nutritionally at-risk children.



## Springfield has implemented a variety of initiatives and innovations in its school food programs:

- ▶ **Breakfast in the Classroom**, which the district will offer in every school by January 2018, and which has been jump-started through two significant grants that the school district obtained with the help of New England Dairy & Food Council (NEDFC) through the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts. Springfield has a decade-long relationship with NEDFC centered around Fuel Up to Play 60, an in-school nutrition and physical activity program;
- ▶ **The Community Eligibility Provision**, which removes stigma from school meals by offering meals at no cost to all students, and may lead to administrative savings for some school districts;
- ▶ **The Summer Food Service Program**, which helps address food insecurity when school is not in session;
- ▶ **Suppers** through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, a likely growth area in the years ahead;

Springfield has seen steady and measurable improvements in behavioral metrics like absence, tardiness and discipline.

- ▶ **Improvements to school milk**, notably the introduction of re-sealable plastic bottles in all secondary schools;
- ▶ **Backpacks** for food-insecure children, which send food home for the weekend;
- ▶ **Farm-to-School** partnerships that source food from farmers in the Pioneer Valley;
- ▶ **School gardens**, now in 24 schools but planned for many more, that connect students to the land and agriculture while supplying fresh produce for school meals;
- ▶ A full-time **sustainability manager**, in charge not only of the gardens but also of composting and recycling;
- ▶ A new **Culinary & Nutrition Center** that, when completed, will serve as a hub for culinary training, supplying fresh ingredients to schools, and providing services outside the district.



School and Sodexo officials identify a number of principles that have been keys to success for Springfield. They are described in more detail in the full report.

- Identify the key decision-makers and influencers
- Communicate with people and make them part of the process
- The entire school food service team has to be united
- Involve the community and work through partnerships
- Set specific goals and measure actions against them
- Involve vendors and suppliers
- Take advantage of existing federal program opportunities
- School administration support has to be visible
- It's not going to happen overnight
- It's not just starting a program, checking a box and moving on

Not all schools will be able to implement everything Springfield did, but each single component can have value in itself. The full report provides additional detail.





The students walk up and select their food and milk, and at least on the day one visitor watched them, almost everyone took the breakfast, which is offered at no cost.

## An Early Morning in June ...

Breakfast in the Classroom at Central High School in Springfield, Massachusetts, goes off with almost military precision. This is probably not a direct result of the school's large and active Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, though presumably that doesn't hurt. Employees of school nutrition contractor Sodexo, who work full-time at Central, chop fresh fruit and prepare other items (house-made muffins on some days, an egg dish on others). At the same time, their co-workers place the fruit and items like yogurt and milk into color-coded insulated carriers to keep everything cold or hot. The carriers are loaded onto carts, with each cart servicing a pre-determined list of numbered classrooms – all laid out on a chart outside the school's large walk-in coolers.

Once it's time to get the food to the classrooms, things move quickly. Students

eat breakfast during their homeroom period, at their desks, without the plastic trays that some adults will remember from their school cafeterias. The breakfast items are packaged for convenience and minimal waste. The students walk up and select their food and milk, and at least on the day one visitor watched them, almost everyone took the breakfast, which is offered at no cost.

Breakfast in the Classroom is only one way that Springfield Public Schools have ramped up meal programs in recent years. By focusing on food quality and student needs, and taking advantage of available resources – from federal programs to non-profit foundation grants – the school district has brought more students into its meal programs. Chief Financial and Operations Officer Patrick Roach and other officials in the school system and municipal government have actively encouraged and led the changes.

The benefits when more students participate in school nutrition programs can be multiple. Students eat nutritious meals that include fresh fruits and vegetables, milk and whole grains and may account for a significant amount of their calories and nutrients each school day. All are potentially better nourished, but for some in this relatively low-income school district, the meals make the difference between being well-nourished and food-insecure.



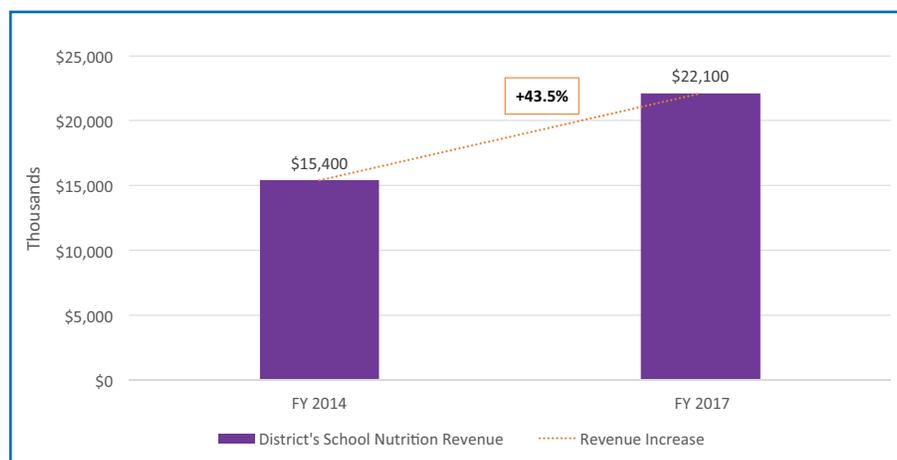
The school environment can benefit too. School officials have reported that student behavior improves, disciplinary problems are fewer and the school nurse has fewer sick children to see. Because students are not focused on grumbling stomachs, they can focus on learning

instead. And although officials are quick to say that multiple factors are involved, objective measures of academic performance are on the rise.

Interestingly, the district itself can benefit financially. Even though Springfield has invested significant resources in improving the school meal experience, its finances have not suffered. Because more children have participated in the programs, the district's school nutrition revenue has gone up 43.5 percent: from \$15.4 million in fiscal year (FY) 2014 to \$22.1 million in FY 2017 (18).

Springfield's experience is not unique, but it is encouraging and worth a look. That's the purpose of this paper.

## Springfield's School Nutrition Revenue



Source: Unpublished data provided by Sodexo and Springfield Public Schools

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# Springfield Public Schools

Springfield is the second-largest school district in Massachusetts; only Boston has more students. Enrollment is about 26,000 district-wide, with 4,000 employees and nearly 60 schools. In the 2016/17 school year, 64.8 percent of students were Hispanic, 19.5 percent African American, 12 percent white and the balance Asian or other ethnicities (1, 3). Nearly 75 percent of these students are considered economically disadvantaged (2), partly reflecting a citywide unemployment rate that is nearly twice that of Massachusetts as a whole (3). Because a high percentage of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals on the basis of family incomes, Springfield has implemented the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which provides lunch and breakfast to all students who want them, regardless of income, at no charge (4).



In a large urban school district, daily meal operations are a major undertaking. Springfield contracts with an outside company to operate its school nutrition programs under the supervision of school district employees. In this case, Sodexo's district manager, Mark Jeffrey, supervises local employees and has a close, collaborative relationship with

Timothy Gray, Springfield's school nutrition administrator. Jeffrey, discussing how his company has worked with Springfield to improve school nutrition, is quick to say that the same results can be obtained in a "self-operated" district, staffed by school employees. As noted earlier, support from CFO Roach has also been critical.

Among the relationships that have helped drive Springfield schools' positive changes, the district's partnership with New England Dairy & Food Council (NEDFC) stands out. The council, funded by dairy farmers, has worked with the district for more than 10 years, focusing on expanding school breakfasts.

Through Fuel Up to Play 60 (FUTP 60), a student-led nutrition and physical activity program created by National Dairy Council (NDC) and the National Football League which has enrolled more than 73,000 schools nationwide since its launch in 2009, NEDFC funded a Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) program in three elementary schools in 2011. The results were encouraging enough that in 2014, Springfield superintendent Daniel Warwick announced that the district would expand BIC to all schools within three years (5).

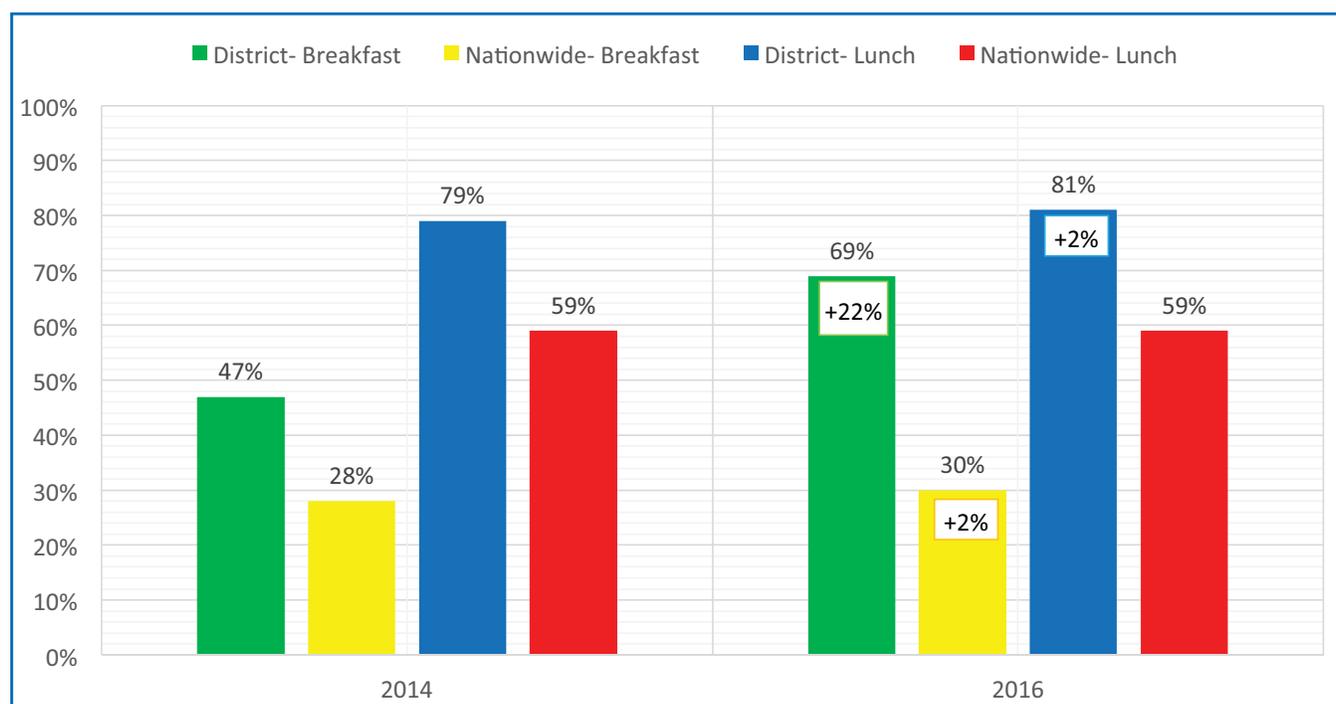
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## The Proof: Participation

Among the most important indicators of a school meal program's success is average daily participation (ADP). This number essentially measures the percent of all enrolled students who eat school lunch or school breakfast on a given day. ADP is typically reported separately for lunch and breakfast, since lunch ADP tends to be substantially higher than breakfast ADP when both meals are served in traditional settings (i.e., in the cafeteria and with breakfast offered only before the beginning of the school day). Nationwide, ADP in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was 59.1 percent of enrollment in fiscal year (FY) 2016, while ADP in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) was 30.2 percent the same year (6). In other words, in the average U.S. school district, more than half of all enrolled students eat a school lunch, but fewer than a third eat a school breakfast.

### District & Nationwide ADP as a % of Enrollment



District ADP pulled from Oct-14 & Oct-16 (7). Nationwide ADP pulled from FY 14&16 (6).

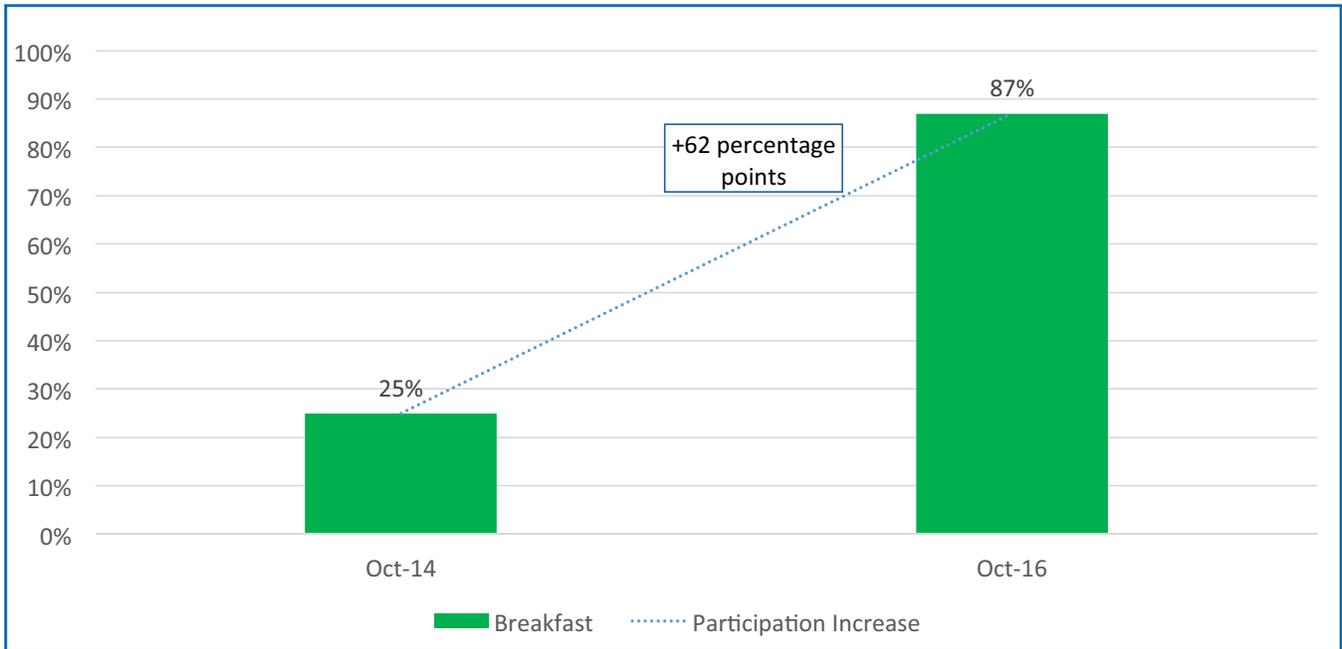
Springfield has achieved a significantly higher ADP than the national average, attributed by the child nutrition team to a variety of factors discussed later in this report. For October 2016, the lunch ADP was 81 percent, up from 79 percent two years earlier. A more dramatic change came in breakfast ADP: For the same October month, it was 69 percent district-wide in 2016, compared to 47 percent in 2014.

Those are district-wide numbers. But in some schools that have introduced Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC), ADP gains are greater. Take Central High School, which implemented BIC in the fall of 2016. In October 2014, its lunch ADP was relatively high at 73 percent, but breakfast ADP was only 25 percent, significantly below the national average. Then, in 2015 Central started serving milk in more appealing plastic

bottles, and in 2016 BIC was fully rolled out in the school. By October 2016, the number of breakfasts served more than tripled compared to the same month in 2014. Central's breakfast ADP in October 2016 was 87 percent. That is 3.5 times the percent ADP in the same school in 2014. It is also 18 percentage points higher than the district as a whole. And it is 2.9 times the national average breakfast ADP (7).



## Central High School: Breakfast ADP as a % of Enrollment



Source: Unpublished data provided by Sodexo and Springfield Public Schools

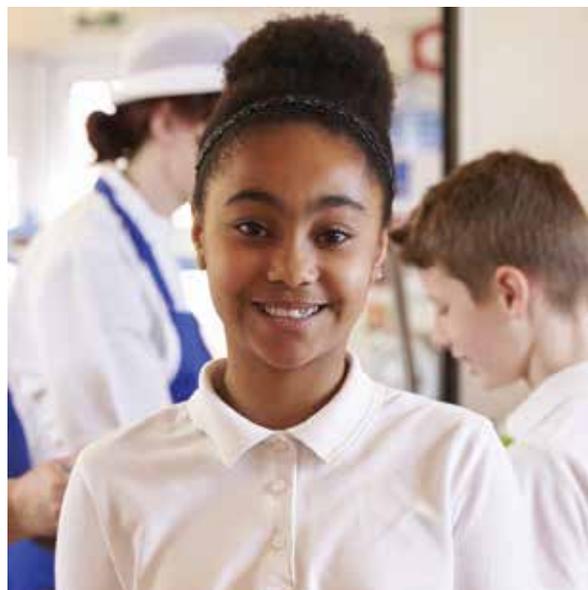


## Beyond Meals: The Learning Connection

In recent years, Springfield has seen improving results on several metrics of student behavior and well-being. School officials do not assert that the surge in school breakfasts is the only factor involved here, but based on their observations they believe it may have made a difference by helping to improve students' satiety and mood during the school day and making them more ready to learn. This is not an isolated finding. While more research is needed, data from inner city middle school students in Boston suggests that a universally free school breakfast program was associated with a lower parental report of food insufficiency and increased attendance (21).



In Springfield's case, for 2015/16 compared to 2011/12, truancy rates and the portion of students chronically absent fell by 1.8 and 1.5 percentage points, respectively. In the same period, the combined number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions fell by 45 percent, and student arrests and bullying incidents fell 53 percent (3). Visits to the school nurse due to children feeling hungry fell 23 percent, from 2,047 in 2015 to 1,577 in 2017. Where BIC has been introduced, it has also had a notably positive impact on students' on-time arrival. As Gray put it, on a system of three morning bells, "It used to take three bells to get students to the classroom, but now they're there before the first bell rings." (8, 14)



Students and administrators support the Springfield team's assessment. Interviewed for a video about BIC, one sophomore said that if he does not eat breakfast, "my stomach isn't full, and I just don't feel like concentrating in school." According to Central High School principal Tad Tokarz, BIC brought "a tremendous increase in attendance ... our attendance as a whole school has increased since we started the program."

And BIC gets an endorsement from the Springfield school superintendent, Daniel Warwick. "It's really important that kids get a nutritious breakfast every day, and in our community we've really worked awfully hard to make that possible for all our kids," he said. "Offering Breakfast in the Classroom, we've gone from a participation rate of about 20

percent to 80 percent in the schools that are able to do that." He adds: "All the research supports how important that is for the kids from a health standpoint; it's also very important for learning." (9)

The last point is significant in an era when schools, the states and the federal

government have placed heavy emphasis on academic testing. Undoubtedly many different factors are involved in Springfield's academic improvement, but it is real: In 2015/16, measures of academic performance were all improved from 2011/12, in some cases sharply. The graduation rate was up 10 percent, overall academic proficiency rose 8 percent and proficiency in specific subjects also rose, from a modest 1 percent for science to 11 percent in mathematics. And the district's dropout rate was nearly 5 percentage points less (3).



Interest in the connection between breakfast and learning has increased in recent years. In 2015, the GENYOUth Foundation, along with NDC, the American College of Sports Medicine and the American School Health Association, published *The Wellness Impact: Enhancing Academic Success through Healthy School Environments*. While this is still an emerging

area of research, the report illuminates the connections between nutrition, physical activity and learning; the report describes how neuroscience may suggest mechanisms for these connections and includes 71 citations of scientific literature, position statements from non-profit organizations and other sources (15).



## What Springfield Did

If the district's results are impressive, then exactly what did Springfield do? When the Springfield team talks enthusiastically about the work they have led for the past few years, the ongoing introduction of BIC stands out, but they make it clear that there wasn't just one thing. They tried lots of different approaches that filled different needs in this urban community, from removing stigma from school meals to addressing children feeling hungry on the days when there are no school meals, to connecting kids with farmers and the land.



## Breakfast in the Classroom

Springfield's BIC program has gotten attention not only in the school buildings, but also throughout the community. April 2017 saw an appearance at the High School of Commerce by New England Patriots safety Duron Harmon, presenting a \$22,000 grant to help fund the program. The grant, which was made by the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts in response to an application by NEDFC, is supporting equipment purchases and other administrative costs (10).

BIC gets high marks from Springfield administrators. "In every school we've implemented, we've seen our academic performance increase, we've seen tardiness go down, we've seen attendance go up, we've seen behavior issues improve and nurse visits go down," said Roach (11).

According to Gray, superintendent Warwick wants BIC implemented throughout the district by January 2018. Seventeen schools continued to serve breakfast in the cafeteria as of June 2017 (8).

Although BIC has operational and logistical advantages, Jeffrey emphasizes something different — the loss of stigma. In too many school districts, the school breakfast — more so than the lunch — is seen as "just for lower-income kids." It is easy to criticize this attitude as an irrational and counterproductive stereotype, but harder to do something about it. By being offered to every student, with no charge to any student, in the place where all the students are together, BIC seems to break the stigma mold. It is no longer a mark of embarrassment to eat school breakfast. Maybe it's even cool (though that's a hard thing for an adult to judge).



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## Community Eligibility Provision

Beginning with the 2015/16 school year, Springfield schools implemented the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Since it was legislated in 2010 and gradually expanded to all states, CEP has allowed schools with sufficiently high rates of free and reduced-price meal eligibility to provide meals to all students at no charge. Schools receive federal meal reimbursements on a formula rather than on the basis of how many free, reduced-price and paid meals they serve (4). Some schools have experienced reduced administrative costs through CEP, but for Springfield that has not been as prominent as another benefit — the program encourages greater participation in school meals because the programs lose their stigma, and as Gray put it, “no money changes hands.” He believes that one reason the district is serving more meals is because CEP “removes the barrier” of stigma (8).

## Summer Food Service Program

Springfield schools participate in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and in 2017 26 sites are offering meals under the program. The school district sees the program as “a resource available to help families cope with the skyrocketing costs of food and gas. The goal is to make sure children and teenagers have access to free meals when school is out.” (12)

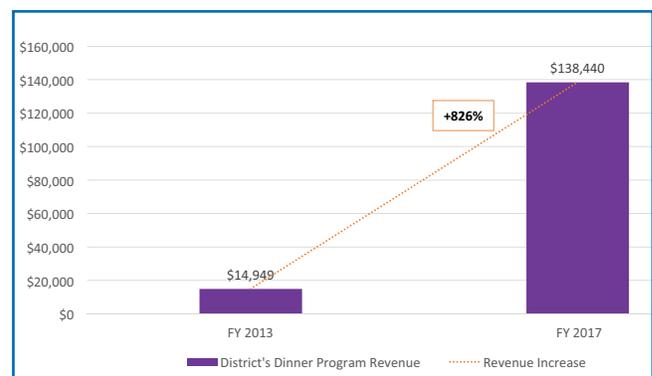
The SFSP, as many school districts have discovered, can improve the financial

performance of school nutrition programs. The federal reimbursements enhance the revenues available to contribute to fixed costs such as labor, building upkeep and so on. After-school suppers can have a similar impact.

## Supper Program

Since 2013, Springfield has also offered on-campus evening meals for students through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Although the CACFP is best known for reimbursing nutritious meals in early childcare centers, the program also allows suppers to be provided, and schools are among the sites that can offer these meals. Although it is now offered in 14 schools, the Springfield team feels that the supper program has major growth potential. Indeed, from 2013 to 2017 revenue from the program grew from less than \$15,000 to nearly \$140,000, with more than 40,000 meals served in the latter year. (19)

### Springfield's Dinner Program Revenue



Source: Unpublished data provided by Sodexo and Springfield Public Schools

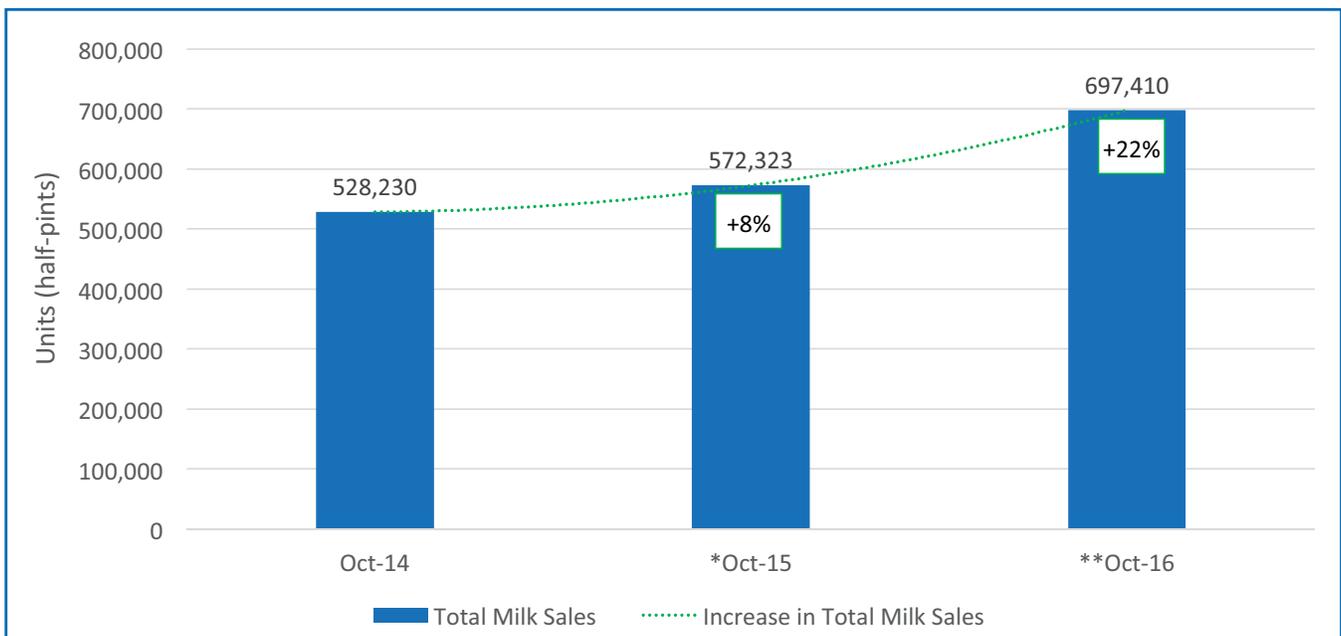
## Milk Improvements

The consumption of milk, the Springfield team observed, is quite high in elementary grades, but falls off in secondary grades. Wanting to improve students' milk experience, the district began serving milk in re-sealable plastic bottles in 2015, primarily at the secondary level where the need for a more appealing package seemed greatest (8). Earlier pilot tests by NDC had shown that students tended to consume more milk in school when it was offered in containers that were more like what they saw in retail outlets; the milk may be perceived as colder and fresher, and consumption increased in schools that made the container switch as well as adding flavors and better merchandising (16). The district's milk supplier, Garelick Farms™, was in a position to supply the re-sealable bottles, with attractive labeling

that made milk more like a fun, cool retail product. Now milk comes in plastic bottles in all Springfield secondary schools.

Total milk sales in October 2015 were eight percent above the same month in 2014, and in October 2016 they increased an additional 22 percent. In both years, the increase in milk sales substantially exceeded what would have been expected from the marginal increases in total student enrollment. Of course, more factors than just plastic bottles were at work. Breakfast participation was rapidly increasing, reflecting BIC and other factors, and milk is offered with each school breakfast. For instance, in Central High School, with BIC, the percent of all meals where the student actually selected a milk increased from 80 percent in October 2014 to 90 percent in October 2016 (7).

### District's Total Milk Sales in Units (half-pints)



Source: Unpublished data provided by Sodexo and Springfield Public Schools



## Farm to School

Sodexo has implemented an “adopt-a-farm” program, in cooperation with five farms in Massachusetts’ Pioneer Valley. The company sets annual purchasing goals, meets with the farmers and advises them on the best crops to plant from the standpoint of school needs. Fresh produce, bread and milk are included in the initiative. Since Springfield schools along with local campuses of the University of Massachusetts are the largest institutional food purchasers in the region, Springfield is developing a partnership with UMass to expand the adopt-a-farm program (8).

## Backpack Program

A few years ago, Sodexo employees noticed that some students were in need of food at the end of the school day to take home for their families. Realizing that there was both a need and an opportunity to address food insecurity in the community, the schools began partnering with the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts and filling backpacks that students can take home for weekends. School administrations identify eligible students and seek out sponsors (many employees of both Sodexo and the school district have participated). Confidentiality is a key factor in

the program, and students pick up backpacks in the guidance counselor's office (8). The program has expanded from 2,000 to 8,000 students annually. The program distributes about 96,000 pounds of food annually (18).

## School Gardens

Like many school districts around the country, Springfield is conscious that students increasingly are interested in where their food comes from and in local sourcing. Nothing is more local than a vegetable garden right on school property, where students can learn where their food comes from and eat healthy foods that they helped grow. School district leadership has challenged every individual school to install a garden. So far, there are 24 school gardens across the district, and more than 13,000 students attend a school with a garden. These gardens are not just for practice — the vegetables are harvested and served in the building's cafeteria (e.g., at salad stations). Online menus identify which foods incorporate the school's own harvest. The output of these gardens will also be channeled to the upcoming Culinary Center (see below), which will have a dedicated preparation room for root vegetables like potatoes, carrots and onions (8, 18).

## Sustainable Nutrition

One of the points the Springfield team insists on is that you cannot simply "check a box" in implementing a change, and then move on. Change is hard work and the work does not stop once the change has been made. A

good example is the district's dedication to sustainability. Moving beyond lip service, the district hired a full-time director of sustainability who manages the farm-to-school, composting, recycling and other initiatives. Sodexo also established its own, company-centered goals for sustainability within the district. Whether it's composting or installing the next school garden, the focus on sustainable nutrition within the district is a serious one (5).



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The school district sees the Center as a prime indicator of support for child nutrition from the city’s mayor, city council and business and non-profit communities.

## Culinary & Nutrition Center

Among Springfield’s most ambitious plans for continuous improvement is a district-wide Culinary & Nutrition Center that is expected to break ground in the fall of 2017 and open in early 2019. The school district sees the Center as a prime indicator of support for child nutrition from the city’s mayor, city council and business and non-profit communities. The Center will produce and package food components to support school meals, including individual BIC components, which have proven challenging in the existing procurement process, as well as facilitating catering services, the farm-to-school-program, local purchasing and sustainability, and implementing a culinary arts training program for students and employees.

The 62,000-square-foot facility will include multiple kitchens, including a test and training kitchen, storage and preparation areas and other facilities. In a sign of the

district’s ambitions, the Center is being designed for 2.5 times the current number of students participating in meal programs to accommodate projected growth. It will not replace cooking in the individual schools, but instead supports scratch cooking in schools as well as providing menu components that are transported to school nutrition facilities where they receive the “finishing touch” of final preparation. The aim is a fresher and more appealing menu for students. As an example, Jeffrey cites plans for a pasta sauce produced at the Center from local farm produce, then distributed to schools as a topping for pasta or lasagna. The fresher ingredients, whether sauces or meat, may help reduce sodium and sugar levels in meals.

Springfield and Sodexo officials are not ignoring financial considerations. They have developed a business plan that foresees a program surplus of \$1.1 million from the Center by 2021; those funds can be reinvested into improving meal quality (13).

## Keys to Success

The Springfield team spent time with visitors in mid-June 2017, just as the school year was winding down. They agreed school districts across the country can realistically attract more kids to eat school breakfast, lunch and other meals — and many have already done so. The ability to offer a top-quality meal program is hardly limited to affluent districts. As noted earlier, Springfield’s student body is disproportionately low-income.

Together, the team listed several keys to making school meal programs better. Some are obvious but not always practiced, others might not immediately occur to most people, but make sense when you think about them. In many cases, they end up being more about attitudes and mindsets than step-by-step instructions, as the following examples demonstrate.

- ✔ **Identify the key decision-makers and thought leaders.** According to Jeffrey, that may involve finding one school principal, among many in a district, who is especially interested in the learning connection (“There’s always one,” he said). But it isn’t just administrators. Springfield mobilized students, not only through conventional means like the student newspaper but also by hiring students to help Sodexo employees after instructional hours. Jeffrey advised not to neglect custodians, since waste is sometimes a worry about BIC — but it’s easily avoidable, he added.
- ✔ **Communicate with people and make them part of the process.** Solicit various groups’ ideas about what might work and implement their advice where it’s appropriate. In Springfield’s case, the progress of the last few years involved talking with administrators who make management decisions in individual school buildings; teachers who operate home-room settings where breakfast is served; custodians who are responsible for keeping the school environment clean; and students and parents, who ultimately determine whether meal programs are successful or not.
- ✔ **The entire school nutrition team has to be united.** In Springfield’s case, that has meant that Gray, an employee of the district’s Business and Financial Services department, has been aligned with Sodexo’s Jeffrey on both goals and implementation. In a self-operated school district, the principle would still apply. The entire school nutrition department needs to buy into ambitious goals and strategies for achieving them.

- ✔ **Involve the community and work through partnerships.** Springfield has many partners, including a decades-long relationship with NEDFC that was especially important for BIC. Beginning in 2011, the council not only provided direct funding for BIC pilots, but helped garner two separate grants from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts to support BIC expansion. In all, dairy farmers helped fund 20 expanded breakfast programs of various types in the school system (5). FUTP 60 is an example of how schools can make a positive contribution to the broader community by promoting child health through nutrition and physical activity. Additional support came from the private philanthropic Eos Foundation (20).
- ✔ **Set specific goals and measure actions against them.** Springfield has a very specific target for lunch and breakfast ADP — it wants both to be at least 90 percent. This goal is ambitious enough to inspire additional work; it would represent major success (in both helping students meet nutrient intake recommendations and district financial sustainability) if achieved; and it is realistic given the current state of affairs. This goal strongly informs plans for the Culinary & Nutrition Center. Better-quality, fresher food from the Center will help move the needle toward 90 percent as more students enjoy the food they are served. Offering Center services to other school districts once the 90 percent target is achieved will supplement district income and enhance the financial sustainability of the Center.



✔ **Involve vendors and suppliers.** Companies selling food and beverages to the schools have a clear motivation to help schools build better meal programs. They can contribute to better nutrition as well as sell more products. In Springfield, the district and Sodexo continue to work closely with suppliers like Garelick Farms, which supplies the district's fluid milk. Garelick helped assess the potential for boosting milk consumption and the results of offering milk in re-sealable plastic bottles rather than traditional "gable-top" cardboard cartons has been higher sales.

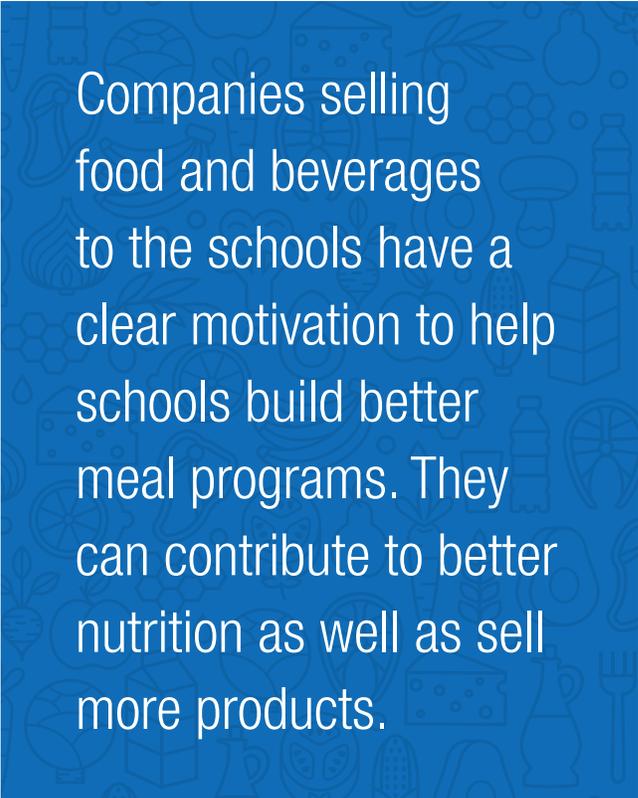
✔ **Take advantage of existing federal program opportunities.** The Culinary & Nutrition Center has a business plan that contemplates preparing foods not only for lunches and breakfasts, but also for dinner for students and seniors through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and summer meals through the Summer Food Service Program. If school districts have facilities and labor in place, it makes good sense to use all federal nutrition programs available.

✔ **School administration support has to be visible.** If school staff see that the administration is fully supporting a breakfast program or any other innovation, that goes a long way. And

support even beyond the school system is needed. According to the Springfield team, the city's mayor and city council are strongly supportive of what they are doing to better nourish kids in the community.

✔ **It's not going to happen overnight.** Time and patience are necessary. BIC and other innovations can make a big difference, but a school district must be prepared to stay the course and not get discouraged if the needle doesn't immediately move as much as initially hoped.

✔ **It's not just checking a box.** It isn't enough to say you have implemented an innovation and then move on to something else. Whether it's a sustainable nutrition program or new menu items, a continual effort is essential (8).



Companies selling food and beverages to the schools have a clear motivation to help schools build better meal programs. They can contribute to better nutrition as well as sell more products.



## Anticipate Challenges

Things can go right, but things can also go wrong. Reflecting on Springfield's success and its challenges, the Springfield team said school nutrition programs should be careful not to make certain mistakes.

- ▶ **Changing programs without considering student views is risky.** Whether it's taste tests, internship programs or simply talking to kids, it's always best to listen to what students want and pay attention to what excites them. Students decide for themselves whether they want to eat school meals or not.
- ▶ **Buy-in within the building is essential, and without it, improvements may sputter.** Support from superintendents, principals and faculty is indispensable. As much as school nutrition professionals are dedicated to good nutrition, it may take more than that to appeal to these audiences. The link between a better school meal experience and good behavior or academic performance is an emerging area of research that should be explored further by school districts, as Springfield has done.

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- ▶ **Changes have to make financial sense in addition to providing nutritious and appealing food.** School nutrition professionals have to make a compelling business case for the changes, especially those that might involve initially spending more money.
- ▶ **You may not be able to do everything at once, and that's okay.** Springfield implemented a significant number of individual changes. Not all school districts will be in a position to do that, but they can still move the needle in their districts. Every one of Springfield's interventions, considered alone, could have had some benefit. Together, they are impressive, but each one alone has value (8).





## Conclusion

School meals in the 21st century are quite different from what many adults may remember from their own childhoods. Meals provide balance and fit into healthy dietary patterns. Many schools have upgraded equipment, lengthened lunch periods, redesigned cafeterias and otherwise upgraded the experience (17). And these nutritious meals reach a majority of the nation's students, at least at lunch – while breakfast participation is less, it has been growing consistently and rapidly (6). The significant number of students who still do not participate in the programs can be seen as either a problem or an opportunity. Viewed as an opportunity, it means there are millions of students with the ability to improve their nutrition intake if they can be reached.

Springfield Public Schools' experience suggests it's quite possible to reach those students, as the district's ADP numbers show. And Springfield's link to improvements in academic performance, behavior and other metrics help show a possible wider connection.

If eating breakfast contributes nourishment to kids and fuels them, helping make them more ready to learn, that can show up – even modestly – in academic achievement, attendance, graduation rates and beyond.

If more kids eat school lunch now, the balanced nutrition may help lead to better bone growth, muscle development, healthy eating habits and a reduced chronic disease burden for society years from now. Like many important things, more research would be needed to prove it absolutely, but to people who have dedicated years to the effort, the connection is there.

Turning school meals into a shared community experience has obvious benefits for low-

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income children, but may help their more-advantaged peers too, in ways difficult to measure. A greater sense of shared social goods; an enhanced understanding of how fundamental needs like nutrition tie us all together; a few minutes sharing a meal with someone from a different neighborhood, ethnicity or life history -- it seems like a benefit for an entire community.

It seems like a worthy mission for communities all across the country.

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# SELECTED RESOURCES

*Listed Alphabetically*

Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts

New England Dairy & Food Council

FRAC 2015-2016 School Breakfast Scorecard

Fuel Up to Play 60

Garelick Farms

National Dairy Council

NDC School Milk Report

School Nutrition Association

Sodexo Education Quality of Life Services

Springfield School District

The Wellness Impact Report: Enhancing Academic Success through  
Healthy School Environments

USDA Keydata

USDA Team Nutrition Materials

Prepared in Partnership with National Dairy Council, Springfield  
Public Schools and New England Dairy & Food Council

