



**Report**  
Spring 2015

**Parent school  
breakfast survey:  
Report of findings**

*Natoshia M. Askelson, MPH, Ph.D.*  
Associate Research Scientist

*Elizabeth H. Golembiewski, MPH*  
Research Assistant

*Ann M. DePriest, MPH*  
Research Assistant

*Steven C. Williams*  
Research Assistant

**Spring 2015**

## **Parent school breakfast survey: Report of findings**

*Natoshia M. Askelson, MPH, Ph.D.*  
*Associate Research Scientist*

*Elizabeth H. Golembiewski, MPH*  
*Research Assistant*

*Ann M. DePriest, MPH*  
*Research Assistant*

*Steven C. Williams*  
*Research Assistant*

# Contents

<b>I. Respondent characteristics . . . . .</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Grade level . . . . .</i>	4
<i>School district . . . . .</i>	5
<b>II. Information about school breakfast . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>School breakfast availability . . . . .</i>	7
<i>Cost of school breakfast . . . . .</i>	7
<b>III. Breakfast consumption patterns . . . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Frequency of breakfast consumption . . . . .</i>	8
<i>Place of breakfast consumption . . . . .</i>	9
<b>IV. Attitudes and beliefs around breakfast . . . . .</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Responsibility for providing breakfast . . . . .</i>	11
<i>Importance of breakfast . . . . .</i>	12
<b>V. Perceptions of school breakfast . . . . .</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Reasons why child eats school breakfast . . . . .</i>	13
<i>Reasons why child does NOT eat school breakfast . . . . .</i>	14
<i>Possible benefits of school breakfast . . . . .</i>	17
<i>Support for child eating school breakfast . . . . .</i>	18
<i>Proposed changes to school breakfast . . . . .</i>	18
<i>Reasonable cost for school breakfast . . . . .</i>	21
<i>Reasons for low school breakfast participation in Iowa . . . . .</i>	22
<i>Purpose of school breakfast program . . . . .</i>	25
<i>Health value of school breakfast . . . . .</i>	25
<b>IV. Discussion . . . . .</b>	<b>27</b>

## Purpose

The following report presents selected findings from an online survey of parents of children in grades pre-kindergarten through 12 in the state of Iowa (n=8,982). The purpose of the survey was to 1) evaluate parents' knowledge of the school breakfast program at their child's school, 2) determine parents' perceptions the school breakfast program in general, and 3) identify general breakfast consumption behaviors of school-aged children. The results of the survey will be used to better understand why school breakfast participation in Iowa is low compared to rates of school lunch participation, and inform ways in which the Iowa Department of Education can work to increase school breakfast participation in the state. This survey represents one component of a larger body of recent research related to school breakfast in the state of Iowa.

## Methods

The electronic survey instrument was developed jointly by researchers at the University of Iowa Public Policy Center and Team Nutrition program staff at the Iowa Department of Education. The University of Iowa Institutional Review Board reviewed the project. The survey was developed using Qualtrics® survey software and was fielded from December 2014 to February 1, 2015.

The survey instrument was designed to identify parental perceptions of school breakfast and specifically asked parents to report on topics related to the importance of breakfast compared with other meals, the party responsible for ensuring that a child received breakfast (i.e., parents/ the school versus/child), and the perceived health value of school breakfast. Parents were also asked to identify reasons why their child *does* or *does not* eat school breakfast and possible benefits to school breakfast.

Respondents were also asked to supply responses for open-ended questions related to what changes to school breakfast would make it more attractive to their child, what parents believe is a reasonable cost for school breakfast, and why school breakfast participation is so low in the state of Iowa. In addition, parents reported on how often and where their child ate breakfast in the previous week and listed items that their child ate for breakfast on an average school morning.

The survey link and an email introducing the survey were distributed through the Iowa Department of Education to school district administrators and food service directors. School districts and schools disseminated the link through their regular communication with parents (e.g., newsletters, website, emails).

## Results

### I. Respondent characteristics

#### *Grade level*

Respondents were asked to report on information related to their *oldest* school-aged child's grade level during the 2014-2015 school year. The majority of the respondents' children were in grades K-5 (n=3,089 or 38.9%), followed closely by high school or grades 9-12 (2,815 or 35.5%).

**Table 1. Grade level of oldest child**

Grade	Frequency	Percent
Pre-kindergarten	257	3.23
Kindergarten	498	6.25
1st grade	451	5.66
2nd grade	557	6.99
3rd grade	548	6.88
4th grade	553	6.94
5th grade	488	6.13
6th grade	557	6.99
7th grade	548	7.14
8th grade	657	8.25
9th grade	658	8.26
10th grade	760	9.54
11th grade	730	9.17
12th grade	681	8.55
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,964</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*School district*

Parents also reported their child’s school district. Out of 338 public school districts in Iowa, 241 were represented in this survey in addition to a number of private schools. The 15 districts with the largest representation are listed below.

**Table 2. Districts with highest number of responses**

School district	Frequency
Dubuque	440
Ames	403
College Community SD	310
Muscatine	251
Western Dubuque	245
Cedar Falls	203
Clear Creek Amana	178
Spencer	175
Gilbert	151
Bondurant-Farrar	148
Glenwood	145
Adel DeSoto Minburn	135
Winterset	132
Allamakee	108
Newton	106

The distribution of school districts represented in this survey by rural-urban classification is detailed in the table below. Categorizations are based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale codes which are assigned to each school district in the U.S. Iowa data are from the 2012-2013 school year, the most recent year for which data is available.

**Table 3. Distribution of school districts by NCES urban-centric locale codes**

<b>Urban classification</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>City, Large</b> Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.	0	0.00%
<b>City, Mid-size</b> Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.	344	4.50%
<b>City, Small</b> Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.	1150	15.0%
<b>Suburb, Large</b> Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.	110	1.40%
<b>Suburb, Midsize</b> Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.	1	<0.01%
<b>Suburb, Small</b> Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.	0	0.00%
<b>Town, Fringe</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area.	296	3.90%
<b>Town, Distant</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.	782	10.2%
<b>Town, Remote</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.	750	9.80%
<b>Rural, Fringe</b> Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.	840	11.0%
<b>Rural, Distant</b> Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.	1723	22.5%
<b>Rural, Remote</b> Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.	1666	21.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,662</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 4. Distribution of school districts by urban-rural classification**

Type of district	Frequency	Percent
<b>Urban</b> Includes NCES-designated cities, suburbs, and towns	3433	44.8%
<b>Rural</b> Includes areas designated rural by NCES	4229	55.2%

**Table 5. Distribution of school districts by size of district (small, mid-sized, or large)**

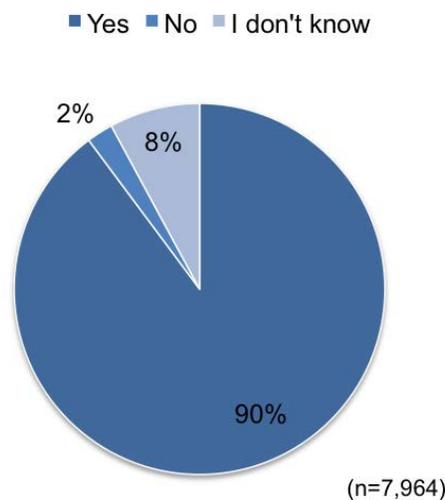
Size of district	Frequency	Percent
<b>Large</b> District enrollment of 2,500 students or more	2253	29.6%
<b>Mid-size</b> District enrollment of 1,000-2,499 students	2395	31.4%
<b>Small</b> District enrollment of fewer than 1,000 students	2969	39.0%

## II. Information about school breakfast

### *School breakfast availability*

Parents were asked if their oldest child’s school served breakfast. The majority of parents (n=7,152) reported that their child’s school did serve breakfast. Eight-percent of parents (n=629) reported that they did not know if their child’s school offered breakfast or not, while a small number of parents (n=183) reported that their child’s school did not have a breakfast program.

**Figure 1. Availability of school breakfast at child’s school**



### *Cost of school breakfast*

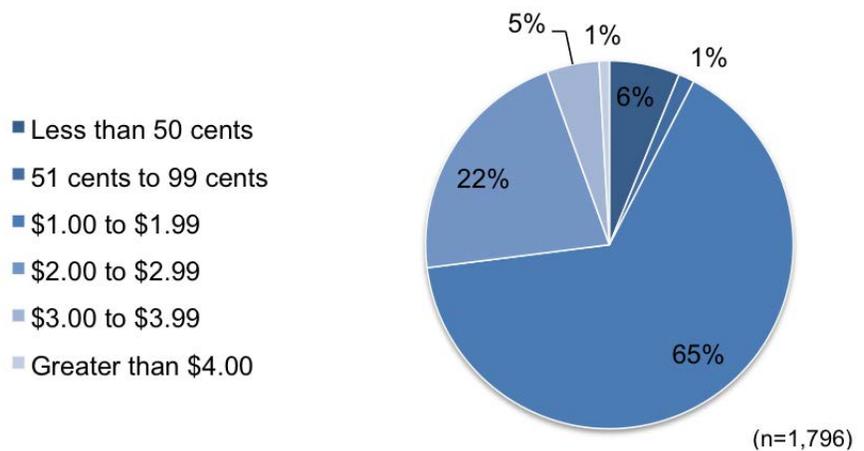
Parents who reported that their child’s school *does* serve breakfast were then asked how much it costs. Parents were asked in a free-response box to identify a value between \$0.00 and \$10.00 or respond that they did not know the cost.

The majority of parents (57.7%) reported that they did not know the cost of breakfast at their child’s school. Most parents (65.4%) thought breakfast at their child’s school costs between \$1.00 and \$1.99. The mean cost reported for school breakfast was \$1.63 (standard deviation = \$0.769). The distribution of responses for those who entered a specific dollar amount is listed below.

**Table 6. Cost of school breakfast at child’s school**

Amount	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50 cents	111	6.20%
51 cents to 99 cents	25	1.40%
\$1.00 to \$1.99	1174	65.4%
\$2.00 to \$2.99	387	21.5%
\$3.00 to \$3.99	83	4.60%
Greater than \$4.00	16	0.90%

**Figure 2. Cost of school breakfast at child’s school**

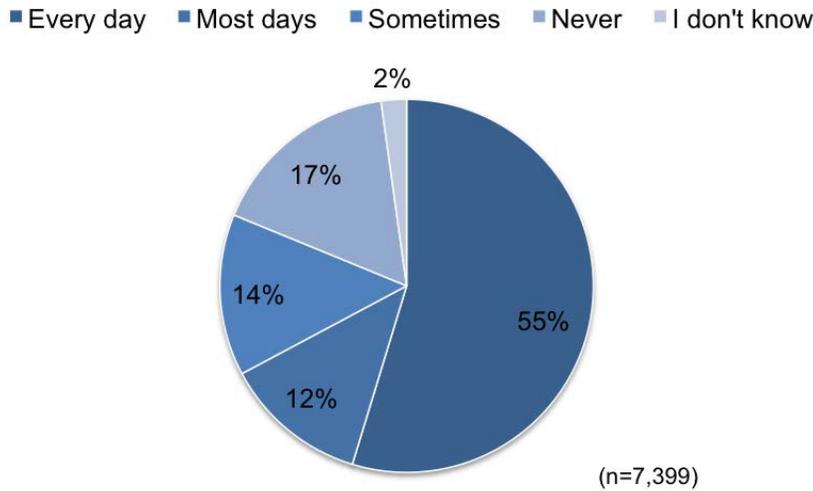


### III. Breakfast consumption patterns

#### *Frequency of breakfast consumption*

Parents were asked how often their child ate breakfast in any setting in the past week. The majority of parents (55%, n=4,050) reported that their child ate breakfast ‘every day’ in the past week. However, nearly 20% (n=1,230) reported that their child ate breakfast ‘never’ in the past week.

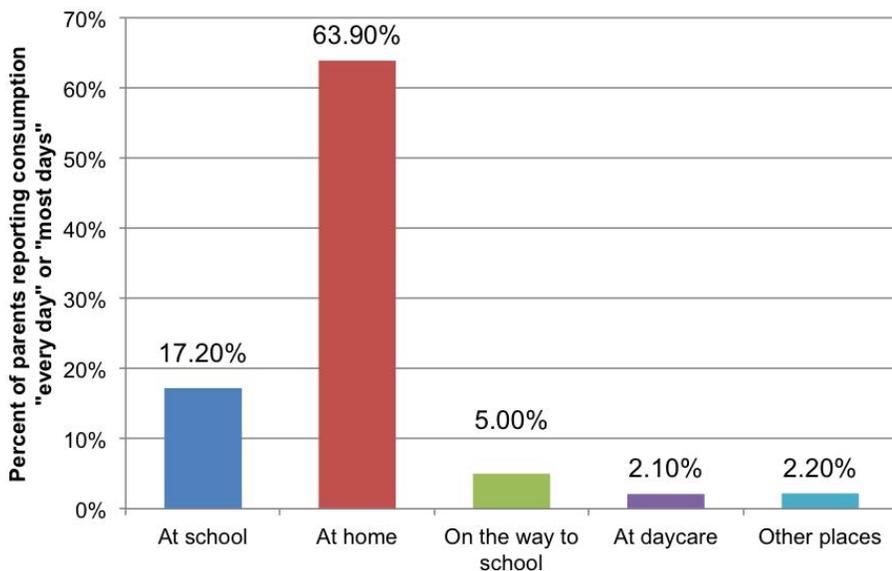
**Figure 3. In the past week, how often did your child eat breakfast?**



*Place of breakfast consumption*

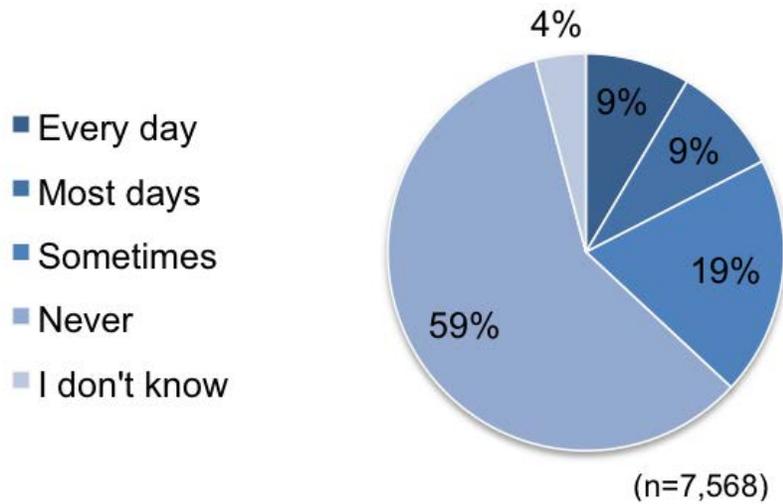
Parents were also asked to identify how often their child ate breakfast in specific settings in the past week: at school, at home, on the way to school, or at daycare (if applicable). The majority of parents responded that their child ate breakfast at home in the past week ‘every day’ (46.9%) or ‘most days’ (17.0%). Almost 80% of parents responded that their child ate breakfast at school ‘never’ or ‘sometimes.’

**Figure 4. Locations where child ate breakfast in the past school week\***

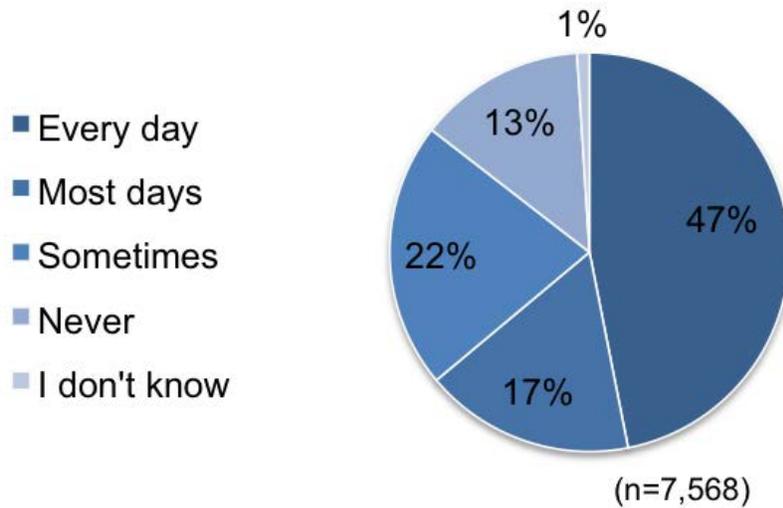


\*Figures include parents who responded ‘every day’ or ‘most days’ for a given location

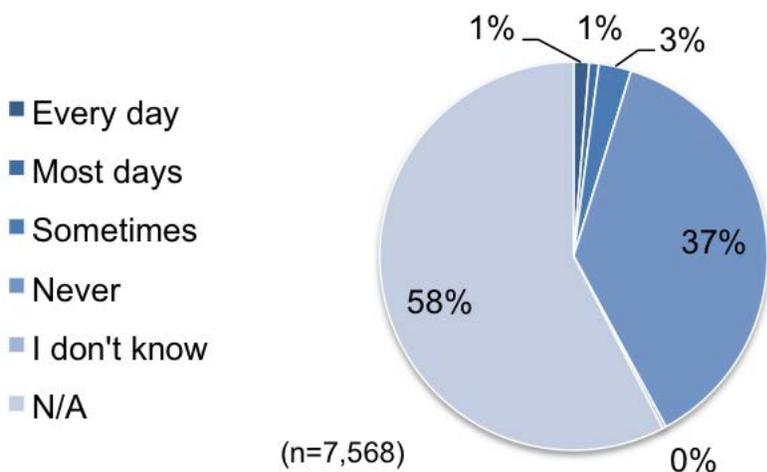
**Figure 5. Frequency of breakfast consumption in the past school week at school**



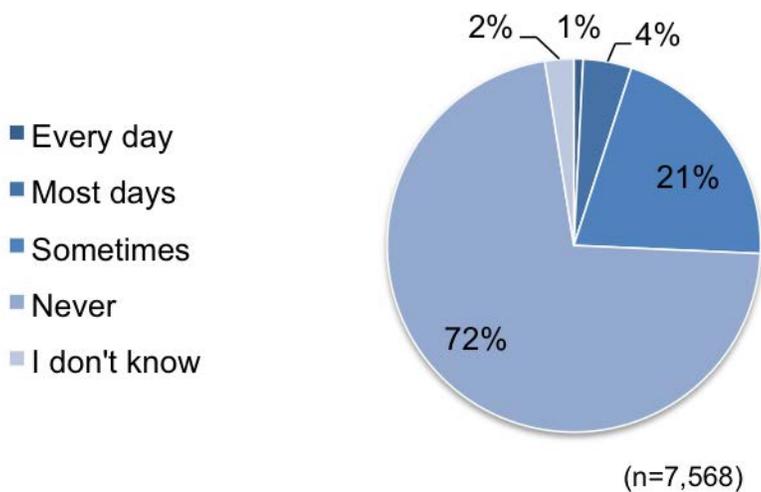
**Figure 6. Frequency of breakfast consumption in the past school week at home**



**Figure 7. Frequency of breakfast consumption in the past school week at daycare**



**Figure 8. Frequency of breakfast consumption in the past school week on the way to school**



Parents were also asked if there were other places that their child ate breakfast in the past school week. Parents were not asked to identify how often in the past week their child had eaten at an ‘other’ place.

Some parents indicated that their child had gone to a gas station or convenience store to get breakfast in the morning. Many reported that their child got fast food (some common places listed included Starbucks®, Panera Bread®, Hardee’s®, and Bruegger’s Bagels®) along with food at sit-down restaurants such as diners or cafes. Many parents said their child had eaten breakfast before school at a relative’s house—most commonly, a grandparent’s, aunt’s, or a non-custodial parent’s house.

**Table 7. In the past school week, is there any other place where your child ate breakfast?**

Other place	Frequency
Gas station or convenience store	81
Other family member’s home	42
Fast food restaurant	40
Restaurant (not fast food)	24
Brings items from home to eat at school	21
Friend or neighbor’s home	9
At sports practice or school event	8
Other	5

## IV. Attitudes and beliefs around breakfast

### *Responsibility for providing breakfast*

Parents were asked who they felt is responsible for their child eating breakfast—themselves or another parent, babysitter or daycare provider, their child, their child’s school, or another party.

**Table 8. Who is responsible for your child eating breakfast?**

Response	Frequency	Percent
<b>Myself or another parent</b>	4294	58.7%
<b>My child</b>	2338	32.0%
<b>My child's school</b>	387	5.30%
<b>Babysitter or daycare provider</b>	107	1.50%
<b>Other</b>	191	2.60%

Parents who selected 'other' were prompted to further describe other persons responsible for providing breakfast to their child. Since the original question only allowed respondents to choose one answer out of the 5 provided, many of the 'other' responses involved a combination of the above options—e.g., "myself/ another parent AND my child."

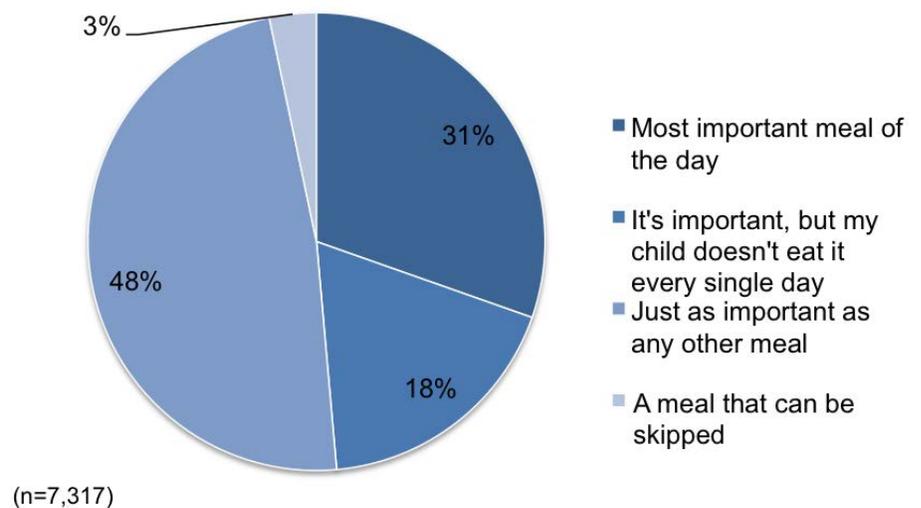
**Table 9. Who is responsible for your child eating breakfast? 'Other' responses**

Response	Frequency
<b>Myself or another parent AND my child</b>	100
<b>Myself or another parent AND my child's school</b>	28
<b>Other</b>	28
<b>Grandparent</b>	19
<b>Myself or another parent AND my child AND my child's school</b>	7
<b>Sibling</b>	3

### *Importance of breakfast*

Parents were also asked how important breakfast is for their child compared with other meals during the day. The most frequently selected response (n=3,495) was that breakfast was 'just as important as any other meal.' Many parents (n=2,208) responded that breakfast is the 'most important meal of the day.' A minority of parents (n=293) described breakfast as 'a meal that can be skipped.'

**Figure 9. Importance of breakfast relative to other meals**



## V. Perceptions of school breakfast

### *Reasons why child eats school breakfast*

Parents were asked to select from a list of potential reasons behind why their child eats school breakfast. Respondents who selected 'never' in response to the previous question 'In the past week how often did your child eat breakfast at school?' did not receive this question.

The most common reason was related to a lack of time available in the morning for their child to eat breakfast at home (13.4%). Other reasons were the fact that their child likes school breakfast (11.7%) and that their child's friends eat breakfast at school (7.8%).

**Table 10. Why does your child eat school breakfast?**

<b>Why does your child eat school breakfast? (Please select all that apply)+</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>There isn't time for my child to eat breakfast at home in the morning</b>	1201	13.4%
<b>My child likes school breakfast</b>	1050	11.7%
<b>My child's friends eat school breakfast</b>	703	7.90%
<b>My child receives free or reduced cost breakfast</b>	591	6.60%
<b>School breakfast is a good value for my money</b>	333	3.70%
<b>School breakfast is a healthy meal</b>	302	3.40%
<b>School breakfast is better for my child than what I could make at home</b>	144	1.60%
<b>I don't have money for my child to eat breakfast at home in the morning</b>	114	1.30%
<b>Other</b>	610	6.80%

+Parents who responded "never" to the question "In the past school week, how often did your child eat breakfast at school?" were excluded from this question

Parents who selected 'other' were prompted to further describe other reasons why their child eats school breakfast. Those statements were coded into broader categories and are described below. The most common 'other' reasons for a child eating school breakfast were: their child is already at school in the morning for practice or extra-curricular activities, their child eats something at home but is hungry again by the time he or she arrives at school, and their child likes a specific item or meal that is being served that day at school breakfast.

**Table 11. Emergent themes from 'Other' responses to 'Why does your child eat school breakfast?'**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Example(s)</b>
<b>Early morning practice/extracurricular activities</b>	232	"Usually he is at school early for extracurricular activities, so he eats between those activities and the start of class"
<b>My child is hungry again after eating breakfast at home</b>	85	"Sometimes she is hungry again after eating at home, it's a long drive to school after she eats at home and before school actually starts."
<b>My child eats school breakfast when they are serving an item he/she likes that day</b>	60	"They like "Cinnamon Roll Wednesdays"" "They like to eat breakfast pizza once a week"

<b>My child isn't hungry before he/she gets to school</b>	49	"Too early to eat at home - he's not hungry yet"
<b>School breakfast fits with the family schedule</b>	34	"We would need to adjust our schedule to have breakfast at home" "I have my children eat breakfast at school so i can drop them off and get to work by 8am"
<b>School breakfast is a back-up option for when we are running late or have run out of some food items</b>	32	"They only eat breakfast at school if we're running late in the morning."
<b>My child's school offers universal breakfast</b>	26	"He gets free breakfast with his before school program" "Breakfast is offered to every child for free so we utilize the service. It helps with saving time in the morning and it is the first thing she does at school."
<b>School breakfast is convenient</b>	21	"My child rides the bus and it's very convenient and healthy for her to eat at the school"
<b>Medical issues or medication scheduling</b>	6	"My son's medications for epilepsy mess up his sleep patterns. He wakes up really early, so he eats a breakfast at home and then eats again 2 1/2 hours later at school because he's hungry again."
<b>Other</b>	26	"It is a special treat for my child once in a while to eat breakfast with her friends at school."

### *Reasons why child does NOT eat school breakfast*

Parents were also asked to select from a list of potential reasons why their child does *not* eat school breakfast. Respondents who selected 'every day' in response to the previous question 'In the past week how often did your child eat breakfast at school?' did not receive this question.

The most commonly selected reason was simply that their child would prefer to eat breakfast at home (28.5%). Related to this, 15.1% of parents reported that their child does not like the food at school breakfast. Almost one-fifth of parents (17.9%) said that feeding their child breakfast is their job and responsibility. Other barriers to breakfast participation included scheduling issues and the cost of school breakfast.

**Table 12. Why does your child NOT eat school breakfast?**

<b>Why does your child NOT eat school breakfast? (Please select all that apply)+</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>My child would prefer to eat breakfast at home.</b>	2543	28.5%
<b>Feeding my child breakfast is my job and my responsibility.</b>	1605	18.0%
<b>My child does not like the food at school breakfast.</b>	1416	15.9%

<b>Breakfast at school does not fit into my family's schedule.</b>	1069	12.0%
<b>It is too hard to get my child or children to school early enough for breakfast.</b>	1000	11.2%
<b>The cost of school breakfast is too high.</b>	994	11.1%
<b>My child is responsible for getting breakfast him/herself.</b>	952	10.7%
<b>We eat breakfast as a family.</b>	696	7.80%
<b>My child gets him/herself to school.</b>	662	7.40%
<b>I don't want the government feeding my child.</b>	306	3.40%
<b>I would be embarrassed to have my child eat breakfast at school.</b>	57	0.60%
<b>I am afraid of what other parents might think of me for having my child eat breakfast at school.</b>	49	0.50%
<b>Other</b>	1353	15.1%

+Parents who responded "Every day" to the question "In the past school week, how often did your child eat breakfast at school?" were excluded from answering this question

Parents who selected 'other' were prompted to further describe other reasons why their child does not eat school breakfast. Those statements were coded into broader categories and are described below. The most common 'other' reasons for a child not eating school breakfast was the perception that school breakfast is not healthy, barriers presented by the bus or class schedules, and reasons related to child hunger preferences (e.g., child is hungry first thing in the morning and does not want to wait for school breakfast).

**Table 13. Emergent themes from 'other' open-ended responses to why child does NOT eat school breakfast**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>School breakfast is not healthy</b>	230	"What is served at school for breakfast is not healthy!"  "breakfast at school serves pop tarts and other unhealthy sugar items that our family avoids"
<b>Bus or school schedule</b>	222	"Buses don't get the kids to school in time to eat breakfast--this is an issue for my younger children as well"  "Child gets to school on the bus about 5-10 minutes before class starts. Feels too rushed."
<b>Reasons related to child hunger</b>	92	"Child has to wait too long between getting up and eating if he eats at school. He's hungry when he wakes up."  "Generally, my child does not eat breakfast. But when she does, she prefers to choose what she eats and so eats at home."
<b>Not enough food served at school breakfast</b>	73	"She does not get enough to fill her up."

<b>Allergies, dietary, or medical/special needs reasons</b>	71	<p>"My child is a type one diabetic. She needs to eat and get her numbers in range before starting her day to school."</p> <p>"Because of medication he takes, I need to make sure he is eating a lot of healthy calories for breakfast."</p> <p>"his food allergies makes it hard for him to eat breakfast foods"</p>
<b>It is easier to eat breakfast at home</b>	66	<p>"We take our kids to school so we just feed them at home before we leave."</p> <p>"We have time to eat at home and we have the food to give them, so it's easy. We don't want to spend money on school breakfast when we can feed them at home."</p>
<b>It is cheaper to eat breakfast at home</b>	53	<p>"Why pay to eat breakfast at school when they can eat at home?"</p> <p>"I can buy 60 waffles, milk, butter, syrup and cereal at Sam's Club, spending \$24 and this would last my daughter 20 days. I know she is eating it and it doesn't go to waste."</p>
<b>I like to have control over what my child is eating</b>	42	<p>"We prefer to have control of what our children eat and how much they eat."</p> <p>"I know that he gets a solid, healthy meal at home and I don't trust that he would get that at school"</p>
<b>Lack of knowledge about school breakfast</b>	42	<p>"don't know much about the program details at my child's school"</p> <p>"I assumed breakfast is for low income families."</p>
<b>Breakfast is not offered at my child's school</b>	35	-----
<b>Other</b>	35	"I want to thoroughly brush his teeth after eating breakfast."
<b>Conflict with sports or before-school activities</b>	31	"Breakfast at school conflicts with sports practices in the morning and the amount of food provided is too small for any student who is involved in sports where they are burning more calories than they can consumed in a day."

<b>My child only eats school breakfast if he/she is still hungry after breakfast at home</b>	27	"Even on days he must be at school early he eats at home as he gets up early enough for that, but if he needs more food on those days he can eat at school as we don't have any problems with him doing so"
<b>Breakfast already provided at daycare or other morning programs</b>	25	"While the cost of breakfast is affordable, we prefer to not pay for two meals per day when the cost of breakfast is included in our daycare fee."
<b>My child would rather do other things in the morning</b>	23	"He would rather do outdoor recess before school than eat breakfast. They have a snack before lunch."
<b>School breakfast is not worth the cost</b>	23	"As for the cost...it is too high for the quality. My kids are thin and they leave hungry (this included lunch). School food in general is lousy. Most goes in the garbage. I pay for stuff they don't eat."
<b>Not enough variety of foods available at school breakfast</b>	14	"Lots of carbs not enough protein"  "My child does not like the school food because they have served nothing new every week it's the same thing."
<b>My child's friends do not eat school breakfast.</b>	13	"Won't eat if her friends aren't. Would rather socialize than eat breakfast."

### *Possible benefits of school breakfast*

Parents were given a list of possible benefits to eating school breakfast (see table below). All parents received this question, regardless of whether they reported that their child ate school breakfast or not. Respondents could check all statements that applied. The most selected benefit was 'school breakfast would be convenient' (40.7%). Related to convenience, many parents also agreed that 'school breakfast would make my mornings less stressful' (20.9%) and 'school breakfast would give me more time in the morning' (20.8%). However, one-fifth or parents responded that 'there are no benefits to our family' of eating school breakfast.

**Table 14. Perceived benefits of eating school benefits**

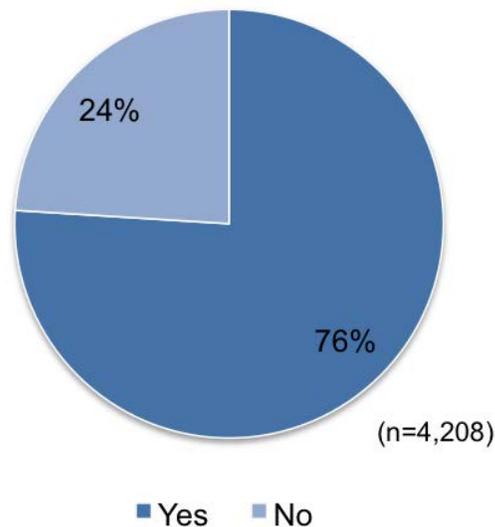
<b>The following are possible benefits of eating school breakfast. Please indicate which benefits would be true for you and your family. (Select all that apply)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>School breakfast would be convenient.</b>	3637	40.7%
<b>There are no benefits for our family.*</b>	1945	21.8%
<b>School breakfast would make my mornings less stressful.</b>	1876	21.0%

<b>School breakfast would give me more time in the morning.</b>	1868	20.9%
<b>School breakfast would mean my child isn't hungry in the morning.</b>	1541	17.2%
<b>School breakfast serves food my child likes.</b>	1408	15.7%
<b>School breakfast would give my child a more nutritious meal.</b>	1389	15.5%
<b>If my child had school breakfast, he/she would do better in school.</b>	982	11.0%
<b>If my child had school breakfast, he/she would not eat unhealthy food for breakfast.</b>	745	8.30%
<b>School breakfast would save my family money.</b>	675	7.60%
<b>If my child had school breakfast, he/she would eat less at lunch because he/she would not be starving.</b>	387	4.30%
<b>If my child had school breakfast, it would be easier for him/her to control his/her weight.</b>	232	2.60%
*Option item not added until mid-way through the survey fielding period due to feedback from several parents		

### *Support for child eating school breakfast*

Parents were asked if they would support their child if he/she wanted to eat school breakfast. About three-quarters of parents who answered this question (n=3,202) stated that they would support their child in eating school breakfast, while one-quarter of parents (n=1,006) would not.

**Figure 10. Support for child wanting to eat school breakfast**



### *Proposed changes to school breakfast*

Parents were asked to respond to the open-ended question 'What changes would attract your student to choose to eat at school?' These responses were analyzed qualitatively and emergent themes are presented below:

#### **Administrative changes**

Many responses centered on the logistical roadblocks to school breakfast.

Parents from rural districts described the lengthy bus rides their children faced in order to get to school—meaning their child is too hungry to wait until getting to school to eat, or that their child often arrives at school too late to make it to school breakfast. Other parents responded that breakfast starts too early in the day and that it is not convenient for their child to wake up and leave the house earlier to eat breakfast at school. Another group of responses focused on the cost of school breakfast, especially among parents who do not quite meet the qualifying income for free or reduced-cost breakfast or who have multiple children enrolled in the school.

### *Bus schedule*

*It would actually have to be a change to the school districts handling of their bus scheduling to allow ALL children to be at school on time to eat school breakfast.*

*We live in the country and the kids are on the bus for a long time in the morning so they have to eat at home or they are starving by the time they get to school...We always have time for breakfast at home in the morning.*

### *School schedule*

*School would need to start later. She is not going to get up so much earlier to be at school longer in the day.*

*Have breakfast available during 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> periods, rather than just before school.*

*If you could eat it during the first class, then maybe.*

### *Perception of cost*

*I would allow my student to eat occasionally, but the daily cost times three kids is too high for our family. So breakfast would have to be a nominal amount of no more than \$1.*

*Nothing. My kids eat at home. I can hardly afford 4 kids to go to school and eat lunch. Let alone add breakfast to the bill. My children will never eat breakfast at school.*

### **Changes to food served at school breakfast**

A large number of parent comments and suggestions were related to the quality and quantity of food served at school breakfast.

### *Variety of food*

*More choices per day so that the same items are not just available on what day of the week it is. (i.e. Wednesday's is the only day for WG Cinnamon Roll).*

*My child is a picky eater, so more variety.*

*Having more choices to choose from. Often times my child would want only 1 item like the donut but nothing else.*

### *Fresh items*

*Fresher, homemade choices. I don't want my child eating frozen, warmed up food. I don't know why the school lunch and breakfast program can't be made from scratch - I have read and seen where some schools do that, and the cost isn't that much different. Also, I don't know why we serve chocolate and strawberry milk to our children at school. Often, the choices offered are not as healthy as what I would like my daughter to have.*

### *More food*

*Serving size of school meals is too small for my son who is an athlete and needs a higher caloric intake. Less processed and heat and serve foods would be good, I can provide healthier options at home.*

*Larger portion sizes. When my son eats at school he is very hungry when he gets home.*

*School breakfast and lunches are not adequate for an 18 year old boy who is active.*

### *A la carte choices*

*If it was something he could grab and go he would eat.*

*Offer breakfast items easy to grab and go and through a later time in the mornings.*

*More a la carte selection like yogurt*

### *Overall better food*

*Something that tastes good. School breakfast and lunches are too worried about nutritional values and skip on the taste. I have observed a lot of lunches and children are simply throwing things away.*

*My child wants to eat school breakfast but currently it is sugar cereals and at least one ingredient has high fructose corn sugar and / or food colorings. Not appropriate for ideal brain food.*

*Better quality of food. My child does not eat breakfast or lunch at the school. I have to pack a lunch every day because the quality of food is poor and my child will not eat it. I wouldn't eat it either.*

### **Changes to the experience of eating breakfast at school**

Other suggestions revolved around modifications to the actual experience of eating at school. Some of these were related to social factors—children would prefer to eat breakfast at school if his or her friends were there as well and the time could be used for socializing. Others remarked on the limited time provided for school breakfast, a factor tied back to restrictions caused by bussing and school schedules. Still others commented on the need for improvements to the physical space offered to students for breakfast.

### *Social aspects*

*Probably only if her friends were there to hang out with. The food itself is zero motivation for her.*

### *More time allotted for school breakfast*

*No changes to what is served, just more time to eat. Most kids need more than 5-8 minutes to eat.*

### *Better space*

*A quieter atmosphere with more supervision from adults.*

*Ensuring that students are well monitored with lots of adult supervision as well as seating with their friends/family to promote conversation & appropriate social interactions.*

### **Other responses**

*No changes would work/I don't want my kid eating school breakfast I don't know. Probably only if they offered unhealthy options we don't at*

home, like doughnuts. Or if we stopped feeding them breakfast. Our kids have no desire to get to school early to eat breakfast.

My child prefers to eat at home. My husband and I prefer him to eat at home. It's nice that schools offer breakfast for those that need that, but that doesn't fit our needs.

**Information on breakfast sent to parents**

More information about what is available, and an explicit statement that breakfast is for everyone and kids can pay for it.

More published information about the menu. Pictures of the breakfast along with nutritional information for each meal published on the school website. If I'm not going to control what my child eats for breakfast at home, I want to be well aware of what they are eating for breakfast at school.

**Reasonable cost for school breakfast**

The survey included an open-ended item asking parents to provide their thought on what a reasonable cost for school breakfast should be. Many parents responded with an actual dollar amount, while others gave more qualitative descriptions. These responses were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively as presented below.

Parents who gave a dollar amount entered a range between less than \$1.00 to greater than \$5.00. The majority of parents responded that a reasonable cost for school breakfast is between \$1.00 and \$2.00 (60.10% of responses where a specific dollar amount was entered).

**Table 15. Reasonable cost for school breakfast, specific numeric parent responses**

Amount	Frequency	Percent*
<b>Less than \$1.00</b>	154	5.3%
<b>\$1.00</b>	435	14.8%
<b>\$1.25</b>	198	6.8%
<b>\$1.50</b>	667	22.7%
<b>\$1.75</b>	68	2.3%
<b>Less than \$2.00</b>	212	7.2%
<b>\$2.00</b>	662	22.6%
<b>\$2.25</b>	29	1.0%
<b>\$2.50</b>	163	5.6%
<b>\$3.00</b>	259	8.8%
<b>Less than \$3.50</b>	13	0.4%
<b>\$4.00</b>	31	1.1%
<b>\$5.00</b>	37	1.3%
<b>Greater than \$5.00</b>	4	0.1%

\*Percentage of those respondents who specified a dollar amount (n=2,932)

Other parents declined to respond with a specific dollar amount and offered responses that were more qualitative in nature. These responses were analyzed qualitatively and categorized into larger groups of like responses. The majority of parents (56.7%) said they didn't know what a reasonable cost for school breakfast would be. Other parents said it doesn't matter (13.5%), it should be free to all students (11.2%), or that the cost is fine as it is now (10.5%).



**Table 16. Reasonable cost for school breakfast, qualitative parent responses**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent*</b>
<b>I don't know</b>	621	58.6%
<b>Doesn't matter</b>	145	13.5%
<b>Free</b>	121	11.2%
<b>The cost is fine now</b>	113	10.5%
<b>Price items a la carte</b>	68	6.3%

\*Percentage of those respondents who gave a qualitative response (n=1,078)

*Parent open-ended responses:*

*Why does it matter? Either way it's my tax dollars paying for most of it*

*There is no reasonable cost when it is not a need for our family.*

*The price is likely reasonable, I just can't see spending the extra money when I can buy cereal for \$2 and it last for several days for all 3 kids. It's a matter of saving money, not convenience.*

*Reasons for low school breakfast participation in Iowa*

Parents were given space to respond to the statement: "Compared to other states, Iowa schools have some of the lowest participation rates for school breakfast in the country. We rank 47<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states. Why do you think this is the case?" These responses were analyzed qualitatively and emergent themes are presented below:

**Characteristics of school breakfast**

*Food*

*Because our school serves the same thing week after week and it doesn't seem to improve. Everything is a heat and eat item served on "cardboard" crust.*

*Kids and parents don't like the food that is served. The food needs to be nutritious and tasty. My daughter will not eat school breakfast because it's "gross" and "unhealthy."*

*I do not care for the school breakfast. It is processed and full of sugar. My kids always gain more weight during the school year.*

*Cost*

*Lunch and breakfast cost so much. It is a hardship to pay for school lunch more less eating breakfast on top of that.*

*Children eat breakfast at home and it's cheaper. Spending almost \$80 a month for school lunches, we don't have the extra money for school breakfast as well. It would be over \$100 a month.*

*If we paid regular price for breakfast meal at school, it would be cheaper for my 4 children to eat a bowl of cereal at home than to eat at school. If we paid regular price for breakfast none of my children would ever eat at school.*

**Perceptions of regional values**

*We are Midwest/Iowa*

*I think Iowa is also ranked as one of the states with the most "wealth." I*

would imagine, most families just take care of this themselves.

Some Iowa families still take time to eat breakfast at home. They make this a priority.

Iowans take care of their own family.

#### **We are rural**

I think the concept of school breakfast [sic] is a fairly new concept to a lot of rural areas and those families grew up eating at home so there kids do as well.

We are a rural area that typically has hard working families with strong family beliefs. Many of us grew up this way and what [sic] our families to have the same values. Family time is important and we getl [sic] up and work, eat and play together as much as we can. We aren't "city folk" that are always in a rush for the next big thing.

#### **Family-centered values**

Based on our rural communities and family-centered beliefs so you start the day out together.

#### **Logistics**

##### **Rural bussing**

I honestly don't know - but if I had to assume it may be that we have more rural communities and parents are able to take their children to school on time and they don't have to arrive as early as they may have to in more metropolitan [sic] areas where the breakfast is more used

##### **Timing**

Kids eat when they first wake up, and parents don't want to pay for 2 breakfasts per day

Most kids ride buses to school and there isn't time to eat at school when the bus is delivering you.

My children feel rushed. They get a small amount of time especially if the bus should be late. They are always afraid that they won't be able to eat and will have to be hungry until lunch. Breakfast is also opposite outside play time from what I gather and my son would rather play than eat.

#### **Political attitudes**

##### **Government interference**

I think the government regulations on what a 'healthy' lunch is are ridiculous. The 600 calorie lunch is a joke (again my kids are thin) and you can't regulate weight at school. You can serve healthy food that is both nutritious and filling. School food is a 'tasteless joke' and the only reason they eat the food is the time it takes to pack a lunch and the limits to a daily cold lunch on variety.

##### **Dislike for government support**

Because we don't expect the government to take care of our kids....that the parent's job!!!!

Families can provide for their kids and do not need a school intrusion or hand out.

The school shouldn't take the place of 2 of the 3 meals a day. Parents should

*take care of their family's needs not the school and maybe a lot of other Iowans believe that too.*

### **No need for school breakfast in the first place**

#### *Children are getting breakfast some other way*

*Kids that go to daycare before school as supplied with a breakfast and the older kids are able to provide themselves with breakfast at home or stop on the way to school and pick up something.*

#### *Importance of eating at home*

*Families eat at home in the morning. Not hard to feed your kids at the same time you are eating.*

*I assume the majority of parents feed their children breakfast, though maybe my assumption is wrong. My thought is that it's my responsibility to feed my child breakfast.*

#### *Farmers and stay-at-home mothers*

*Smaller schools, less \$ to work with. Farming families eat breakfast to get chores done before school so smaller participation, the cost to some families is not fesiabile [sic].*

*Mom's able to cook at home for them.*

### **Parental factors**

#### *Parents do not know about school breakfast*

*Families do not know about it. Stigma of it being provided. Families cannot afford it.*

*I think the concept of school breakfast is a fairly new concept to a lot of rural areas and those families grew up eating at home so there kids do as well*

#### *Parents do not understand how important breakfast is*

*Because most people think it is a meal it is okay to skip. Kids and parents tend to over sleep and get rushing in the mornings.*

#### *Lazy parents*

*Some parents are lazy and don't care for themselves or their kids.*

*All those receiving government assistance and very much abused in our area - I'm shocked by this! But then again, most receiving assistance do not have a job so why would they wake up early enough to get their child to school in a timely fashion so that they can eat breakfast at school...*

### **Other reasons**

#### *Fear of stigma*

*Personally, around my town, I think usually only the "poorer" kids still eat it in middle/high school so I think it is a status symbol. They don't want to look like they "have" to eat it.*

*People may look at school breakfasts as laziness on the parent's part.*

#### *Too few children qualify for free or reduced-price school breakfast*

*With a largely rural population, I would suspect that we also have fewer students on free/reduced meals than many other states. If my family was on the free/reduced program we would eat more school breakfasts and lunches without a doubt.*

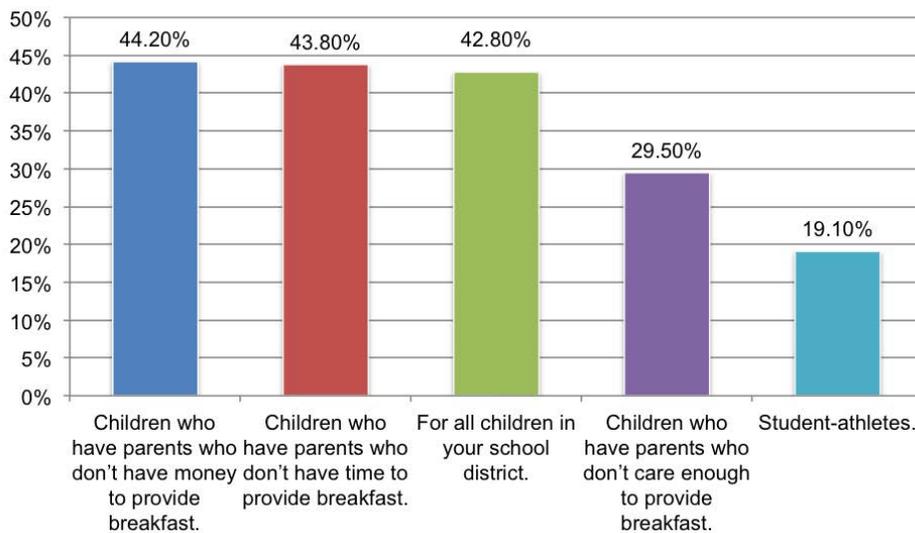
### Don't know

Don't know. Never thought about it. Maybe Iowa families are more interested in feeding their children as a family or take on the responsibility?

### Purpose of school breakfast program

Respondents were asked to check all that apply for which groups school breakfast was intended to help. Slightly under half of parents agree that the school breakfast program was meant to help children whose parents don't have money to provide breakfast at home (44.2%), children whose parents don't have time to provide breakfast at home (43.8%), and for all children in the district (42.8%). Almost one-third (29.5%) of respondents agreed that school breakfast is intended to help children whose parents don't care enough to provide breakfast. Only one-fifth (19.1%) responded that school breakfast is meant to help student-athletes.

Figure 11. Perceived purpose of the school breakfast program\*

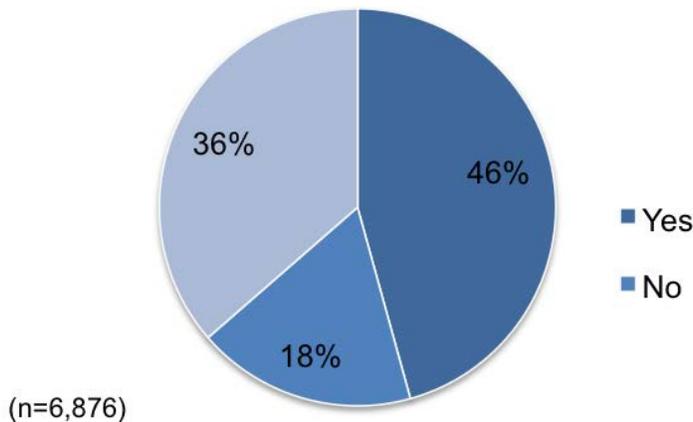


\*Parents were instructed to check all that apply

### Health value of school breakfast

Parents were asked if they think school breakfast is 'healthy.' Respondents to this question were split—almost half (45.7%) responded 'yes' while 36.4% responded 'no' and 17.9% responded 'I don't know.'

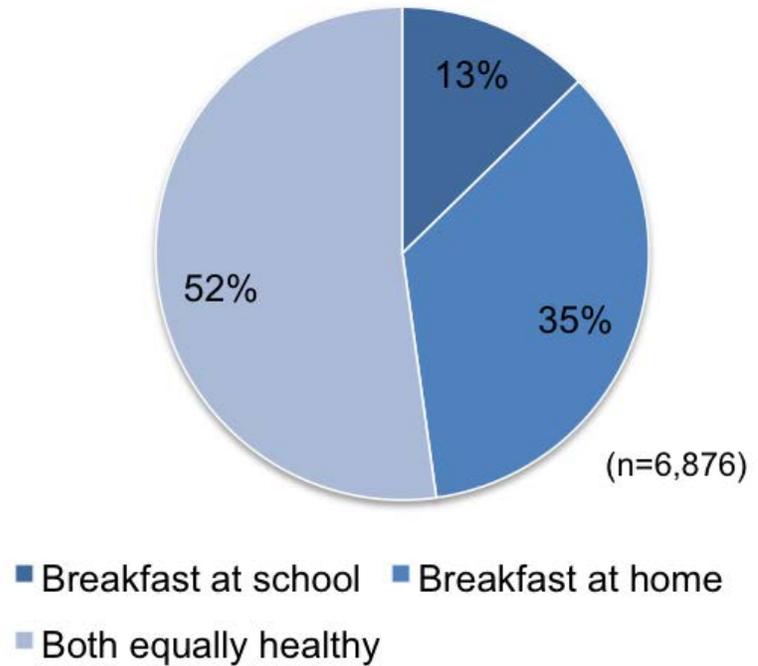
Figure 12. Perceived health value of school breakfast



Respondents were also asked which option they think is healthier—breakfast at home or breakfast at school. Parents could also choose to respond that both options are equally healthy.

Most respondents (52.2%) responded that breakfast at home and breakfast at school are equally healthy. Over one-third of parents (35.1%) responded that breakfast at home is healthier. Only 12.7% of parents responded that breakfast at school is the healthier option.

**Figure 13. Relative health value of school breakfast compared to breakfast at home**



## **IV. Discussion**

### ***Administrative barriers and policies***

*Districts must consider the role of bus and classroom scheduling in expectations for school breakfast participation.*

Convenience is a huge factor in determining where students choose to eat breakfast—especially for those dependent on the bus to get them there. Many parents described how bussing timelines make it difficult to choose school breakfast—either the child takes the bus and only arrives with a few minutes to eat before the first period of the day starts, or the parent must drive his or her child to school earlier than the bus comes. Given these obstacles, many parents find eating at home to be the easiest choice.

Several parents from rural districts described the various reasons why breakfast at home is often the only feasible choice for their child. Students who face lengthy bus rides from their home to the school may be too hungry in the morning to wait for breakfast at school. In rural areas, the bus schedule may be more fluid and prone to delays—meaning that some days, school breakfast is already over by the time students make it to the school.

### ***Parent expectations for school breakfast***

*Parents may not understand the nutritional value of school meals.*

Many parents expressed concerns over the nutritional value of school breakfast, citing an abundance of sugary, processed options available at school in the morning.

Some parents may not be aware that school breakfast must adhere to federally mandated guidelines for nutritional content, and automatically view certain items included in the school breakfast menu (for instance, breakfast pizza or breakfast burritos) as unhealthy. However, in reality these items may be composed of healthy ingredients (e.g., whole wheat flour, low-fat dairy items) masquerading as unhealthful breakfast treats that children enjoy. School districts should work to employ transparency when describing menu items and disseminating information about school breakfast to help negotiate such misunderstandings.

### ***Importance of traditional values***

*Some parents may view school breakfast as a government intrusion or at odds with 'Iowa' values*

Efforts to include parents in school breakfast may work to both address these attitudes and also mitigate barriers related to the logistics of getting kids to school for breakfast in the morning. Schools can encourage parents to eat with their children at breakfast, allowing them to spend time with their child and see what they are eating. Parents may be less likely to view school breakfast as government interference if school nutrition policies are explained clearly and regular opportunities for feedback and involvement are provided by the school.

### ***Parental awareness of school breakfast***

*Parents needs more information to feel good about their child eating school breakfast*

Most parents are aware that schools serve breakfast, but are unsure on the details. Many parents do not know what breakfast costs, have preconceived ideas about what kinds of families school breakfast is meant for, and are not aware of the nutritional value of school breakfast.

Nearly two-thirds of parents in this survey reported that they did not know the cost of breakfast at their child's school. The majority of parents thought a reasonable cost for school breakfast would be between \$1.00 and \$2.00—reflecting the true cost of a full-price school breakfast in Iowa, which ranges from \$1.60 for elementary school students to \$1.75 for high school students. Parents simply may not be aware of the cost of breakfast and may therefore assume that it is similar to school lunch costs (which are about \$1 higher than breakfast costs per meal for full-price meals).

Schools can also address parent perceptions around the target group for school breakfast. Many parents think it is for low income families, for parents who are not being responsible, or do not care what their child is eating. Such misperceptions can be reframed by emphasizing that school breakfast is ideal for hard-working parents with limited time in the morning, or for children who are not hungry first thing in the morning. These parents are being caring and responsible by making sure their child gets a nutritionally balanced breakfast at school.

## **Importance of breakfast consumption**

*Many children in Iowa are not getting any breakfast at all during the week—school breakfast can help to fill this gap*

A significant number of parents (17% or 1,230 respondents) reported that their child did not eat breakfast at all during the past school week. Additionally, another 14% of parents reported that their child ate breakfast 'sometimes' during the past school week.

Regular consumption of a healthful breakfast is especially important for children and adolescents, who are still developing both physically and mentally. A body of research points to a correlation between breakfast consumption and success in the classroom, lower rates of obesity, and higher rates of physical activity. High rates of breakfast skipping among Iowa students may point to a major public health and education issue.

Many parents do recognize that breakfast is important and want their child to be eating a healthy meal in the morning. Parents need to understand the role that school breakfast can play in mitigating this problem. School breakfast is a healthy option, meeting evidence-based nutrition standards that are determined at the federal level. School breakfast is also inexpensive, especially for families who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Many parents already acknowledge the convenience of school breakfast, and emphasizing the health and financial benefits—especially when compared to their child eating no breakfast at all—may help to increase participation and support from parents.

## **Building on existing strengths**

*Many parents do recognize the benefits of their child eating breakfast at school*

Although overall attitudes toward school breakfast in this survey tended towards the negative or critical, many parents did acknowledge that school breakfast can have important benefits to their family. These perceived benefits most frequently centered on convenience. For families whose schedule allowed for it, school breakfast was an easy way to make sure their child got fed in the morning. Alternatively, much of the feedback about changes that would attract families to participate in school breakfast was related to making breakfast the more convenient option—for instance, by taking bus schedules into account or exploring alternative serving models.

## Role of child preference

*To successfully promote breakfast, schools need to appeal to both parents and children*

A child liking what is served for school breakfast was a top reason in this survey why parents reported that their child did eat school breakfast—and a child disliking the food at school breakfast was the third most commonly selected reason why a child does *not* eat school breakfast. These results point to the importance of the child’s preference in the decision to participate in school breakfast.

Even when a child liked the food served at school breakfast, many parents were wary to send their child to eat breakfast at school regularly. Parents assume that food served at school is processed and sugary. Schools need to strike a balance between serving food that has obvious nutritional value and makes parents feel good about their decision to utilize school breakfast-- but is also appealing to children. For instance, it should be communicated to parents that, when items like breakfast pizza or donuts are offered at school breakfast, these meals are made with healthier ingredients than used for similar items at a convenience store.

## Stigma

*For many families, school breakfast is seen as intended for low-income children and/or for parents not able or willing to feed their children at home*

Many parents viewed school breakfast as a marker of low-income status and believed breakfast at school was intended only for families who could not afford to put food on the table at home. Other parents thought school breakfast was indicative of lazy or irresponsible parenting. These beliefs often tied back to the perception of Iowans as self-sufficient and family-centered with no need for government assistance.

In order to encourage participation, these misperceptions about school breakfast need to be addressed and reversed by placing the emphasis on the benefits of breakfast at school. Parents need to see school breakfast as a symbol of children receiving a nutritious meal to start their day of learning—not as a sign of laziness or poverty. Many parents believe it is the parent’s job to provide breakfast, but by showing that the choice to send one’s child to school breakfast represents a healthy and responsible decision, these misperceptions may be turned around.