

## The Houston County Story: Customizing and Marketing Breakfast After the Bell

The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom (Partners for BIC) came together in 2010 in response to their shared passion for childhood nutrition and the benefits of its potential to improve educational outcomes and child health. Partners for BIC has worked with school districts across the country to increase school breakfast participation through the implementation of free breakfast after the bell models (breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” and second chance) that are offered to all students. This case study tells the story of one funded district that ultimately made a healthy breakfast more accessible to students.

### Meet Houston County School District (Georgia)

Located in central Georgia, Houston County Schools serves almost 30,000 K-12 students at 37 school sites, 16 of which operate under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Participation in school breakfast and lunch is significantly higher at CEP schools than in non-CEP schools.

The district worked with the Partners for BIC to expand its school breakfast program in the 16 CEP schools. Houston County Schools staff assessed each individual campus to determine what types of equipment would be required, identify potential changes in labor, secure stakeholder buy-in, and decide on delivery models to offer breakfast after the bell. Eventually, Houston County Schools also piloted a paid breakfast after the bell program. In order to make breakfast after the bell a success, Houston County Schools has focused on effective communication and marketing with students and parents throughout the life of the program, from planning through implementation.

### Breakfast After the Bell From the Top

The first step in bringing breakfast after the bell to Houston County’s 16 CEP campuses was communicating with stakeholders, a process that began at the top – with the





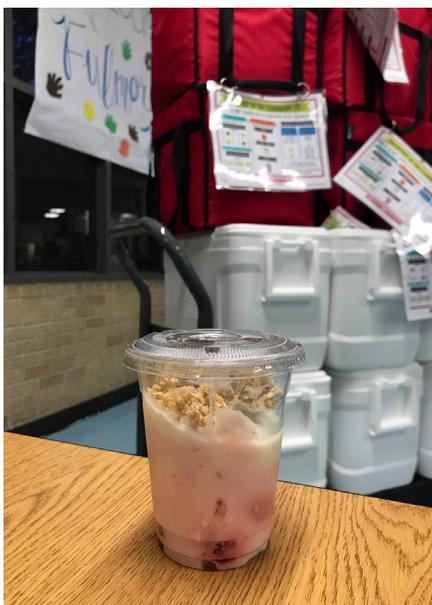
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superintendent – and went all the way to students and their parents.

The first step was meeting with the superintendent and executive cabinet to explain what breakfast after the bell might look like in Houston County Schools. Next, the superintendent met with principals to explain the benefits of this alternative breakfast service model, paying special attention to how the school could offer breakfast to students at no cost. Houston County Schools' food services staff instituted quarterly follow-up meetings with breakfast after the bell principals to assess what works, what does not, and how to make improvements to the program. The quarterly meetings operate as a kind of support group where stakeholders can exchange strategies for ensuring breakfast after the bell is successful.

### Making Breakfast After the Bell "Exclusive"

One of the first things Houston County Schools' nutrition staff did to make their breakfast after the bell program feel "special" was to create exclusive language and limited time offers to increase student interest.



"We wanted to get kids excited, so we capitalized on things happening in mainstream culture and popular food trends in restaurants," said District Dietitian Lauren Koff. "For example, we did a breakfast-for-lunch

promotion during National School Breakfast Week. We used an online meme-generator to make memes. We learned how to do word clouds, and we worked with manufacturers to produce large-scale signage to promote [school meals]. Anything the students feel is 'special' or 'different.'"

In Houston County, getting students excited about a menu is as simple as putting an expiration date on its availability. Offering menu items for a limited time only creates a sense of urgency and keeps kids interested.

### New Branding Attracts New Customers

As the district developed their breakfast after the bell program, the food service department realized fresh branding could help attract new customers. Food service developed two distinct brands for breakfast after the bell programs – the SIPS smoothie cart for high school students and the REVVED brand which promotes their paid breakfast after the bell program.

### SIPS Smoothie Carts

In an effort to target hard-to-reach high school students for school breakfast, Houston County Schools nutrition services developed a separate menu and brand. SIPS is a smoothie cart offered exclusively to high school students only on Friday; the brand's tagline – "Fresh, Fast, Fun" – quickly and effectively communicates the brand's core appeal for students.

"Kids look forward to it," explained Koff. "They know it's special and so they don't get tired of it. The online reaction to the brand let us know we were on to something. Parents got really excited over the unique branding and logo."

Immersion blenders allow cafeteria staff to create fresh smoothies on-site, which are served from special SIPS-branded carts. The SIPS menu is limited – smoothies, a grain,



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whole fruit, and milk – but because it’s offered on a limited basis, it remains a “fresh, fast, and fun” concept for Houston County high school students.

The SIPS brand goes beyond the logo, which Koff describes as “a little more rustic” than some of their other branding. To that end, the SIPS carts are designed to go along with the brand and logo: Carts are covered in wood, logos are superimposed over “distressed” backgrounds, straws are displayed in a little metal bucket, and product signage is presented in small picture frames.

### ***REVVED: Marketing a Paid Breakfast After the Bell Program***

In an effort to create special branding around their paid breakfast after the bell program, Houston County Schools developed the REVVED brand and logo after working with an outside consultancy group. The consultant used student surveys and focus groups to dial in to their preferences, asking students a broader set of questions to determine

- preferred social media apps and methods of communication (e.g., students prefer Snapchat over Facebook);
- what food students prefer to eat at breakfast; and
- brand loyalty and recognition.

Students’ responses in the consultant’s focus groups and surveys helped Houston County Schools’ nutrition staff refine menus. For example, middle school students expressed a strong desire for more beverage options, which led to more streamlined service overall. The focus group’s responses also prompted Houston County Schools to begin using a text

messaging system to reach students who opt in to receive updates on promotions, new menu items, and more.

Presentation and packaging also got an upgrade when students expressed a preference for food packaging with recognizable visual appeal (e.g., bakery boxes for baked goods). Student feedback on brand recognition and loyalty helped Houston County Schools develop signs and posters to help students recognize the brands they love to eat at home that also appear on the school breakfast and lunch menus.

To create the REVVED logo, Houston County Schools went online and out of the office. Using a website that invites graphic designers to submit designs based on a stated concept, Houston County Schools worked with a designer to create REVVED, a name that conveys “cool, fast, exciting.” The district made sure to have versions that could be used online and offline, in large and small formats. In addition to posters and signage, the REVVED logo appears on staff uniforms worn only during breakfast service; when it’s time to serve lunch, employees change into different uniforms to keep the REVVED brand exclusive and exciting for students.

### **Impact**

After implementing breakfast after the bell at 16 CEP school sites, Houston County Schools saw an increase in school breakfast participation – from 49.5 percent to 84.5 percent – as well as a slight increase in lunch participation; for comparison, countywide school breakfast participation is approximately 41 percent.



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### Conclusion

Houston County Schools Nutrition Director Meredith Potter credits planning and preparation for the program's success.

"We met with stakeholders, gave them all the information, and followed up with them," said Potter. "We were clear on our plans for each school, and we ensured everyone – from the superintendent to the cashiers to the line servers and paraprofessionals – understood the rules, roles, and procedures."

### Words of Wisdom on BIC Marketing

*"Every school has unique challenges and factors to consider, and require different equipment needs."*

*"Engage students, invest time, do detail-oriented planning, and have great follow-through – get to the "why" behind students' food preferences."*

*"We talk to our managers about everything from labor to equipment, thinking through all the way to the end – like whether increased production will require new sheet pans. You have to think about all the little, tiny details."*

*"We do send the principals at each school their breakfast and lunch participation at the end of each month, and it is ranked highest to lowest. That has been a very helpful, motivational tool."*

*"Making breakfast in the classroom recognizable meant making it sort of 'separate' – making things feel special and exclusive grabs the students' interest and keeps things fresh."*

*"We asked our principal if we could use testimonials from the students. Their testimonials expressed how they felt about breakfast in the classroom, and it was amazing how detailed some of them were. It confirmed that kids want to have breakfast, and they are appreciative of what we do to bring it to them."*

*"Creating and controlling your brand will grab the attention of new families and generate excitement about your program, but don't forget about the practical considerations of marketing and graphics – only use up to four colors, look for commercial-use fonts, and don't forget your design has to work in color and in black-and-white, as well as online and offline."*

### About Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom

The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom (Partners for BIC) is a consortium of national education and nutrition organizations, including the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), the School Nutrition Foundation (SNF), the NEA Foundation, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Foundation.

With the generous support of the Walmart Foundation, Partners for BIC has provided technical assistance and over \$11 million in funding to support the implementation of breakfast after the bell models in more than 500 schools in 70 districts, leading to over 100,000 additional children eating a healthy school breakfast since 2010.

More information on Partners for BIC, as well as information on how to increase participation in your school breakfast program, can be found at [breakfastintheclassroom.org](http://breakfastintheclassroom.org).