

# Hunger in the Classroom: Share Our Strength Teacher Report 2012

Survey of K-8 public school teachers nationally



June 2012





## Methodology

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Audience:	K-8 public school teachers in the U.S.	
Sample Design:	Listed sample provided by MDR	
Eligibility:	Teach in a public school (charters included) Teach in grades K-8	
Sample Size:	Random national sample	1,095
	Oversamples:	
	Arkansas	114
	Colorado	193
	Maryland	190
	Los Angeles metro area	129
Sampling error:	National	±3.1 percentage points
	Arkansas	±9.2
	Colorado	±7.0
	Maryland	±7.1
	Los Angeles metro area	±8.6
Confidence Interval:	Attain margin of error	95%
Data Collection:	Online survey conducted with Harris Interactive	
Field Dates:	May 10-20, 2012	



## Summary

## Hunger in the classroom: Magnitude of the problem

- Childhood hunger remains a serious issue for public schools.
  - Six in ten K-8 public school teachers say that students *regularly* come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home.
  - More specifically, among those teachers, 80% say that these children are coming to school hungry one or more times each week.
  - A majority of teachers say that most or a lot of their students rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition.
  - A majority of teachers who see hunger as a problem believe that the problem is growing.
  - While funding cuts and discipline are teachers' top concerns, hunger in the classroom is also concerning for many. Four in ten K-8 teachers call it a serious problem (6-10 on a ten-point scale).
  - Concern about student hunger is more severe among teachers serving low-income areas, those with a large proportion of minority students, and those in the South (particularly Arkansas).
  - Female, younger, less experienced teachers, and those teaching elementary school are more likely than their counterparts to express concern for students struggling with hunger.
  - On most measures, there has been little change in attitudes toward the size of the problem of hunger in the classroom over the last several years.

## Hunger in the classroom: Causes and effects

- Teachers identify a host of consequences of hunger in the classroom and worry about the causes.
  - When asked generally to write about the issues they see with hunger in the classroom, most teachers focus on the impact on the individual student.
  - Teachers are most likely to mention an inability to concentrate, poor academic performance, behavior problems, and health problems like head and stomachaches.
  - Teachers identify instability at home as the primary cause of children coming to school hungry, but also consider a variety of other factors as key contributors such as breakfast not being a priority, no one being home to prepare breakfast, and not being able to afford enough food for the family.

## Addressing hunger: Solutions

- Many public school teachers take steps to address hunger on their own and believe that schools can do a lot to contribute to a solution.
  - More than three-quarters of K-8 teachers say that nationally it should be a top or high priority to address hunger in our schools. Two-thirds say the same for their local area.
  - Teachers report taking actions such as helping students and parents sign up for programs and providing food in the classroom themselves.
  - At the school level, teachers suggest providing breakfast for all students, offering healthy meals, and providing afternoon snacks to combat hunger.

## Addressing hunger: Breakfast programs

- School breakfast programs are viewed as an essential tool for addressing hunger and are widespread across the country.
  - Nine in ten teachers agree that breakfast is extremely or very important for academic achievement.
  - More than eight in ten say that breakfast helps students concentrate, contributes to better academic performance, and leads to healthier students with fewer headaches and stomachaches.
  - Nine in ten teachers report that there is some kind of breakfast program in place at their school, a majority of which are available to all students and are served in a cafeteria.
- While breakfast programs are present in most schools, teachers identify significant barriers to many students taking advantage and support most ideas for improving participation.
  - Large majorities identify students not liking the food served, students not getting to school early enough, and students preferring to spend the time before school socializing or playing with friends rather than eating. Most consider these minor obstacles rather than major ones.
  - Majorities support increasing communication with parents about programs, reducing the red tape to be part of programs, making breakfast available to all free of charge, and encouraging all students to eat breakfast at school.

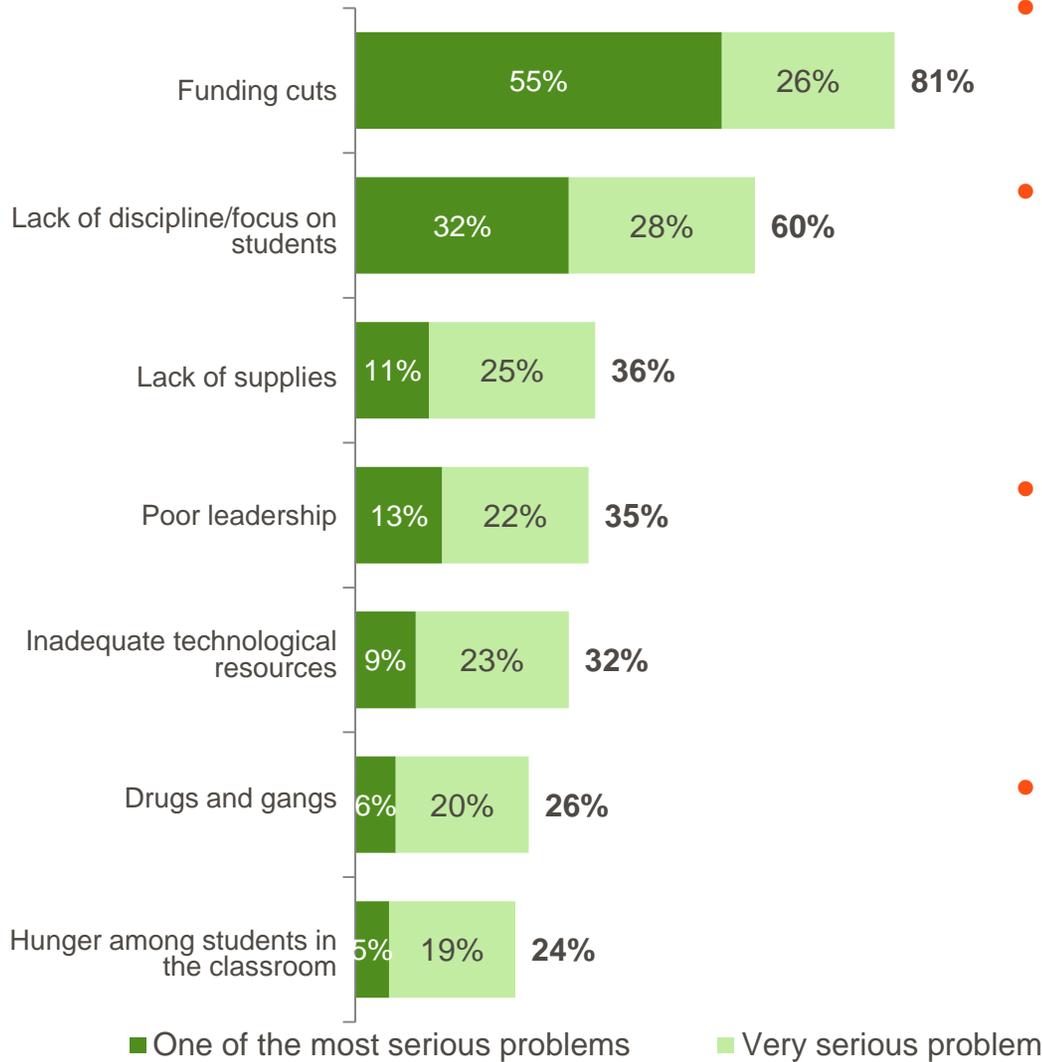
## Addressing hunger: Other meal programs

- School lunch and breakfast programs are nearly universal at public schools in most of the country. Other wrap-around programs are less common, though most teachers believe they are another important tool to keep their students healthy.
  - Two in ten teachers report that their schools participate in each of the following:
    - Summer food programs
    - Afterschool snack programs
    - Weekend backpack programs
    - Fresh fruit and vegetable programs
  - Seven in ten teachers believe that their schools should participate in programs to provide meals during the summer and snacks after school.
  - A large majority of teachers (72%) is at least somewhat concerned about their students getting enough to eat during the summer months, and more than three-quarters believe that a summer meals program would be helpful in addressing this problem.
- Majorities of K-8 teachers are at least somewhat likely to get involved in promoting meal programs in their schools.
  - Eight in ten teachers are likely to communicate with parents about the programs offered.
  - Majorities are at least somewhat likely to lobby their elected officials and school districts about improving access to programs.



# Hunger in the Classroom: Magnitude of the problem

# Problems Facing Public Schools



- Funding cuts are by far the biggest issue facing public school teachers (81% serious problem).
- While other issues are more widespread, one quarter (24%) of K-8 educators considers *hunger in the classroom* a very serious problem.
- Teachers in Arkansas and those who work with higher proportions of minority and low-income students are the most likely to identify hunger as a serious issue.
- Elementary teachers, women, and younger, less experienced teachers are more likely than their counterparts to see hunger as a problem.

Q3. How big of a problem is each of the following in schools today?

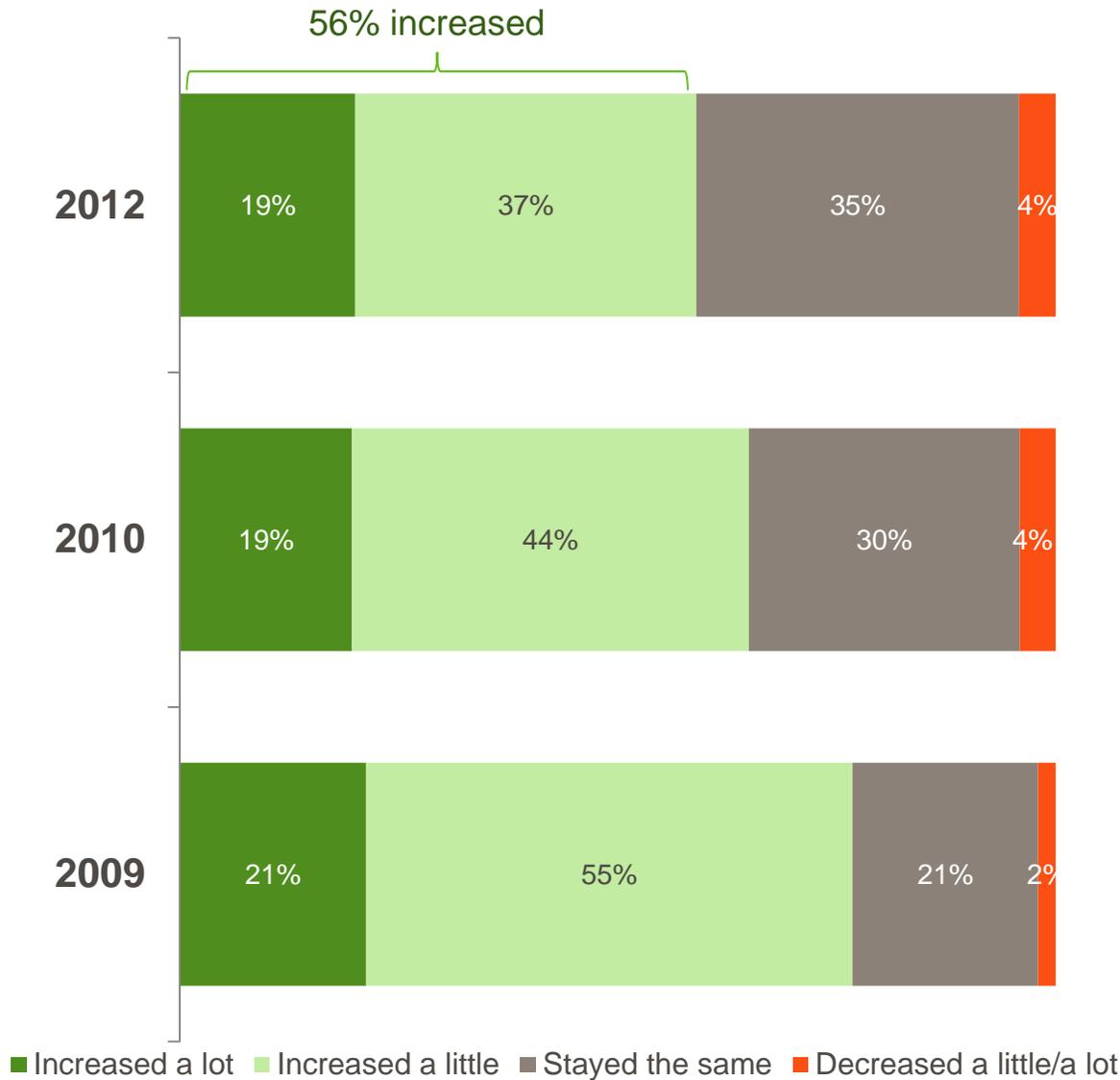
# Seriousness of the hunger problem



- Four in ten teachers (40%) consider hunger a serious problem (6-10 on a ten point scale).
- There has been little change in attitudes over the last several years.

Q4. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means it is not a problem at all and 10 means it is a very serious problem, how serious of a problem would you say children coming to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home is at your school?

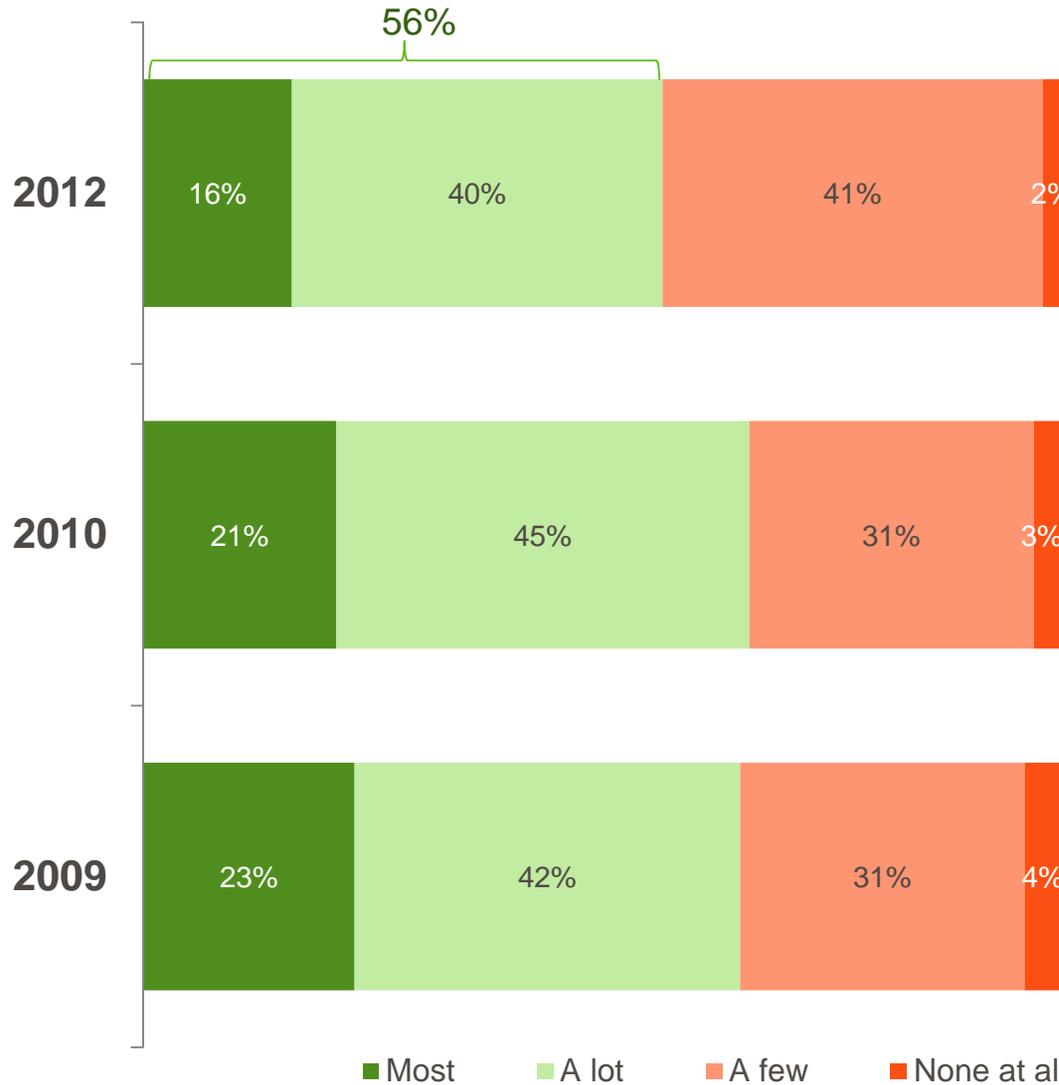
# Hunger seen as a growing problem



- A majority (56%) of teachers who see hunger as a problem say that it is a growing concern.
- The following teachers are the most likely to have seen an increase:
  - Older, more experienced teachers
  - Those in rural areas
  - Those in the Northeast or the Midwest
  - Those in higher income areas
- A growing number of teachers say that the level of hunger in their schools has remained consistent over the last year.

Q5. (IF HUNGER IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM IN SCHOOL; Q4=6-10) Thinking about the past year, would you say that this problem has increased at your school, decreased or stayed the same?

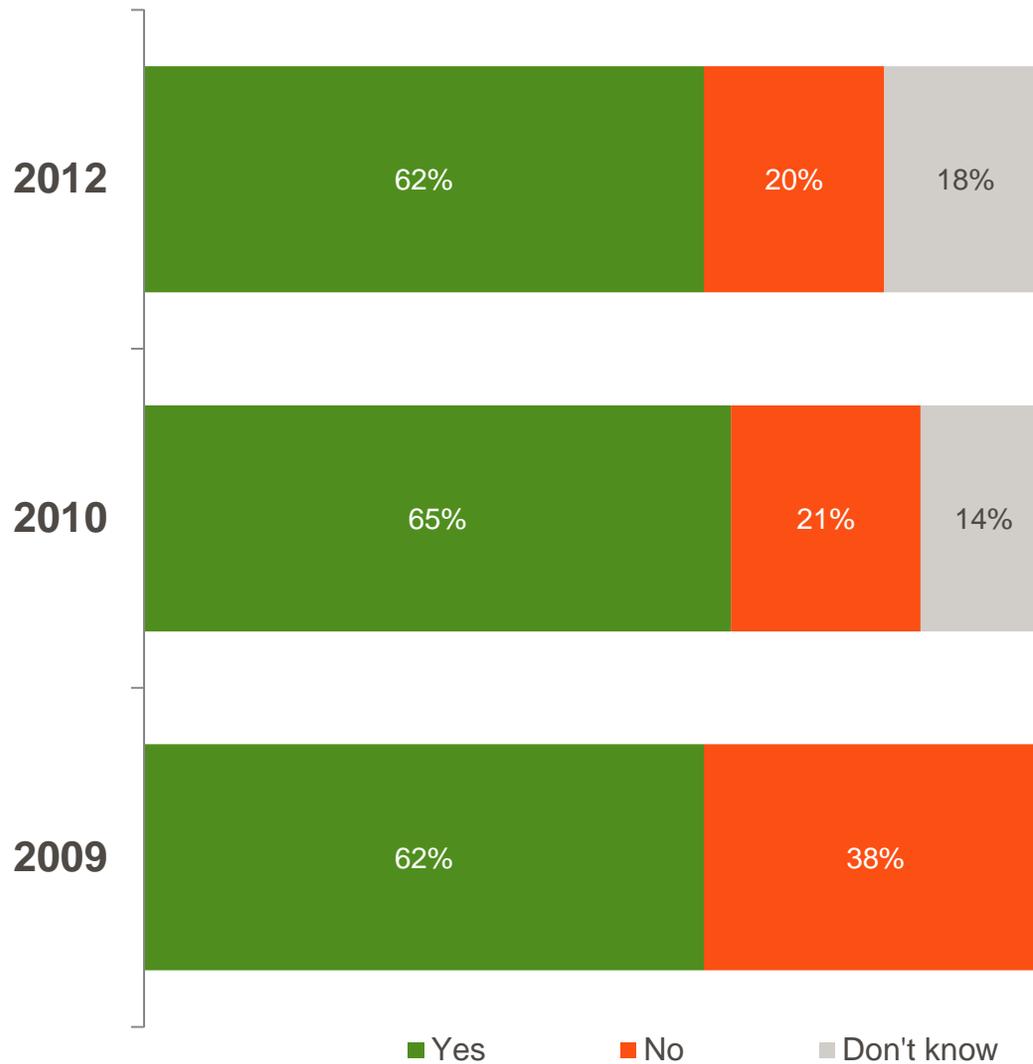
# Reliance on school meals as primary nutrition



- A majority (56%) of K-8 teachers say that *a lot* or *most* of their students depend on school meals as their primary source of nutrition.
- The following teachers are the most likely to have a lot of students who rely on school meals for nutrition:
  - Younger, less experienced teachers
  - Those living in the South and Arkansas
  - Those working in urban schools and schools in low-income areas
  - Teachers in grades K-3

Q6. Would you say most children in your school rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition, a lot of children rely on school meals, a few, or no children in your school rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition?

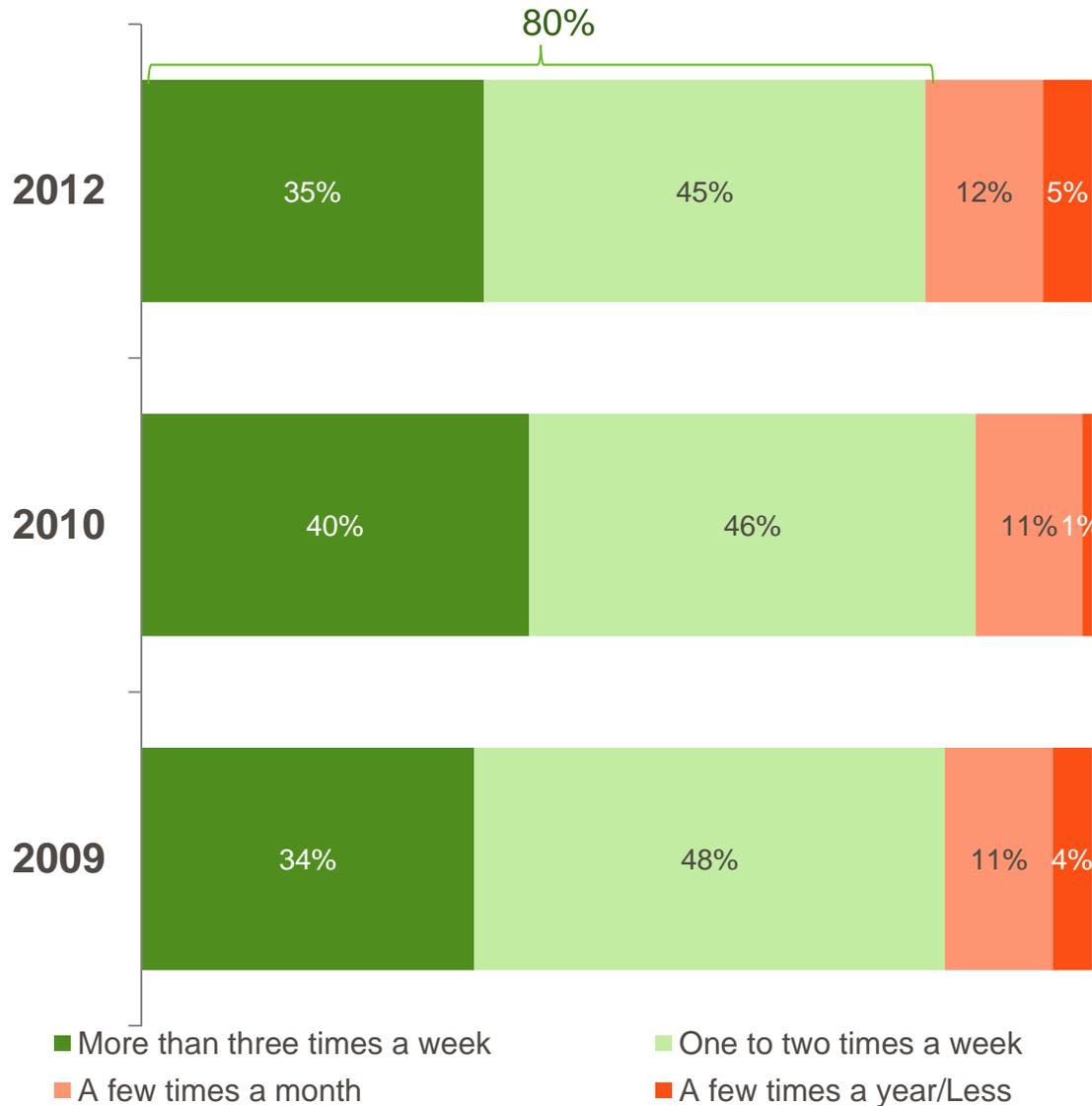
# Children regularly coming to school hungry



- Six in ten teachers (62%) report students *regularly coming to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home*.
- Teachers most likely to report hungry students include:
  - Those in the Midwest, the South, and Arkansas
  - Those teaching elementary school
  - Those working in schools with high proportions of minority and low-income students
- There has been little change in reports of hungry students in the last several years.

Q7. Based on your classroom experience, are there children who regularly come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home?

# Frequency of coming to school hungry



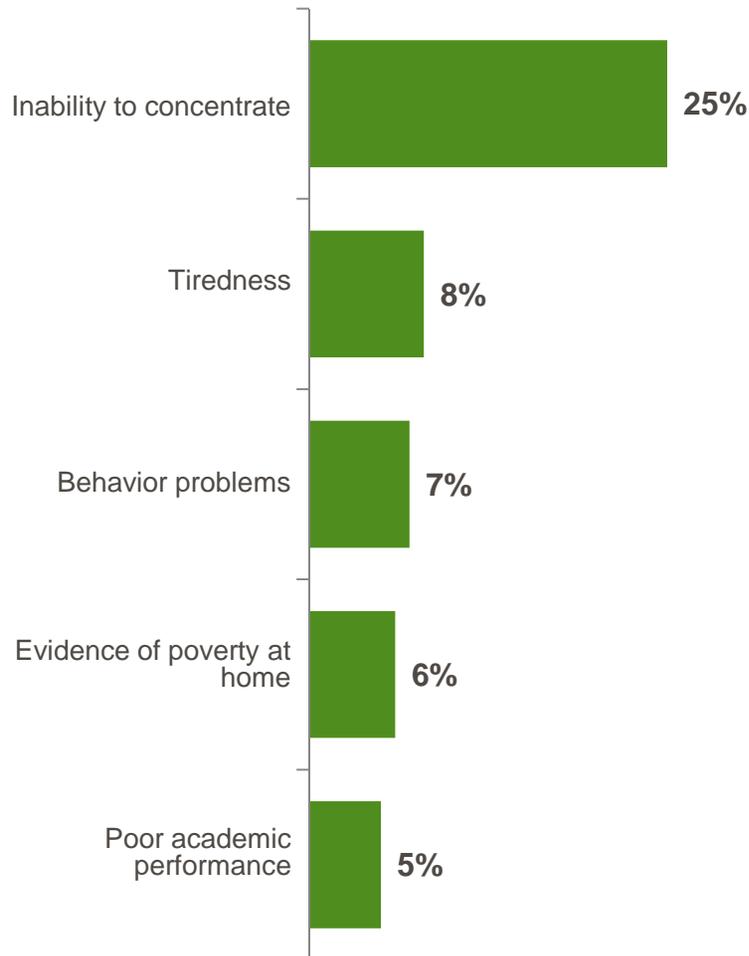
- Among those who notice children coming to school hungry, eight in ten (80%) report that this occurs on a weekly basis or more frequently.
- This finding has remained largely consistent over the last several years.

Q9. (IF Q7=YES) How often do you see children in your classroom coming to school hungry – more than three times a week, one to two times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or less than that?



## Hunger in the classroom: Causes and effects

# Issues with students coming to school hungry



- In an open-ended question we find that most teachers mention negative consequences for students who do not have enough to eat.
- By far the most common problem mentioned is the inability to concentrate.
- Smaller numbers of teachers mention the causes of hunger such as poverty, the loss of employment, or a lack of parental guidance.

Q10. What are the primary issues you see as a result of children coming to school hungry?

# In their own words: Effects of hunger



I think that they are unable to concentrate on their work because they are hungry. With the Kindergarten children I see some who do not bring in a snack. It is stigmatizing for these children. They live in poverty and may not speak English and they do not have snacks. It separates them from their peers.

Parents have lost jobs or are not making enough money to buy enough food. Often these families are in a service gap; that is they make too much for government help and too little to afford food.

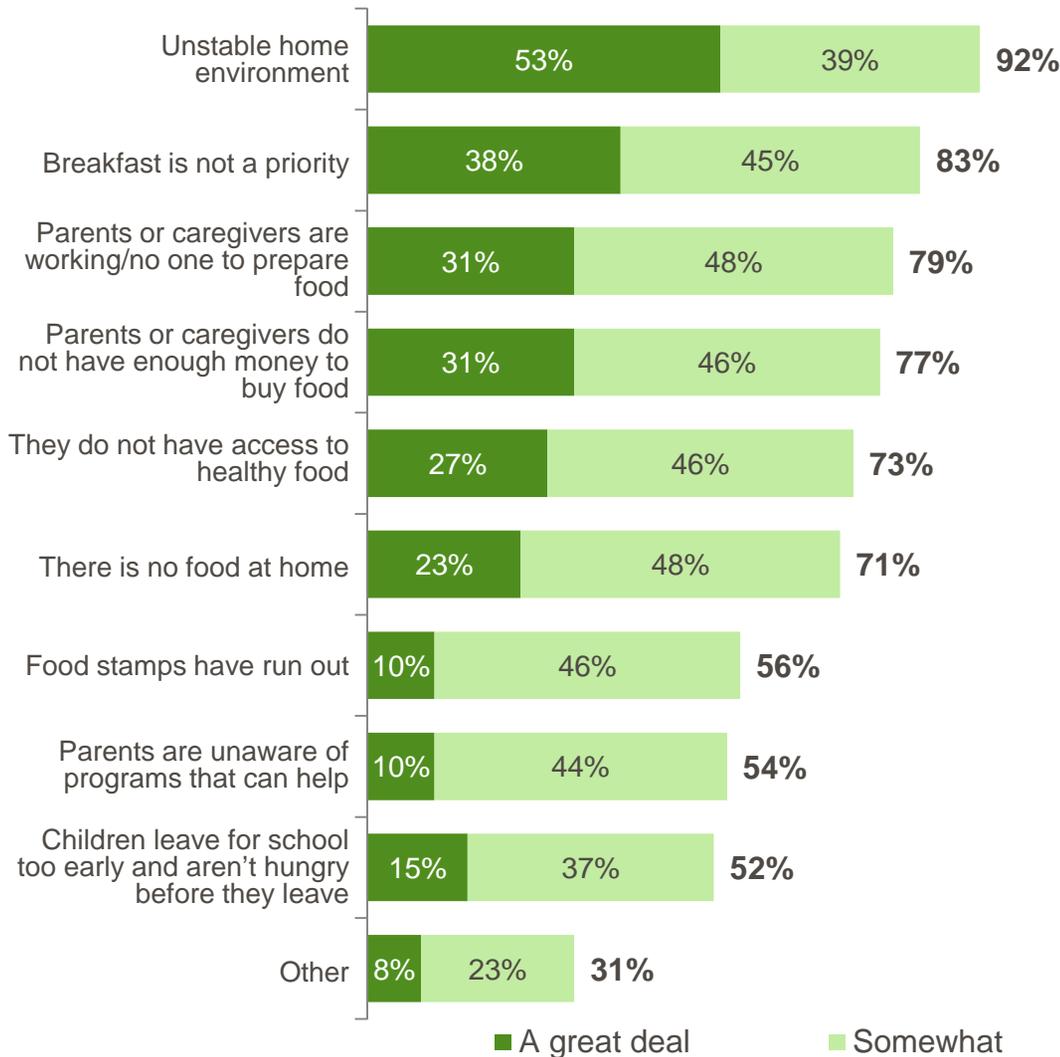
They usually complain first of a headache or stomachache. I'll ask if they ate breakfast. They often reply yes. Then I ask what they ate, which is when they usually answer truthfully that they did not eat anything. So I send them to the school nurse to get crackers.

Lack of ability to ignore those hunger pangs -- concentrating on how soon until lunch rather than on learning to read. Misbehaving because they can't focus. Asking me if I have anything they can eat because they missed breakfast because no one woke them up in time to get breakfast at school.

Parents rely on school to feed them. It is a poverty issue. Some students do not eat much on the weekends.

Q10. What are the primary issues you see as a result of children coming to school hungry?

# Causes of hunger



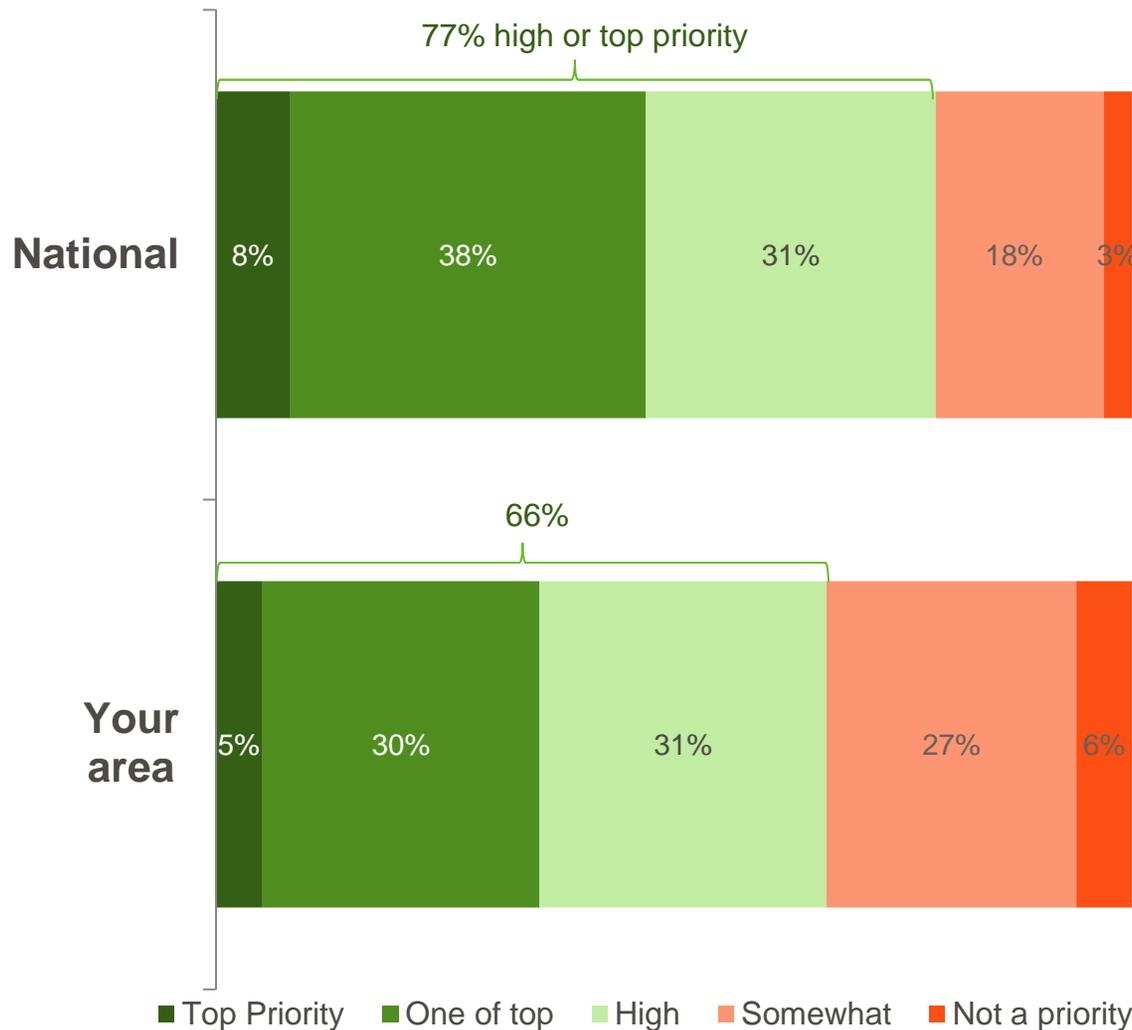
- The two main categories of reasons for hunger include a lack of consistency at home and access/money for healthy foods.
- Low awareness of programs and early school start times are seen as lesser contributors to the problem.
- Teachers also mention some other related reasons for hunger, including:
  - Homelessness
  - Drug addiction
  - Picky eaters

Q14. How much do you think each of the following factors contributes to children consistently coming to school hungry?



# Addressing Hunger: Solutions

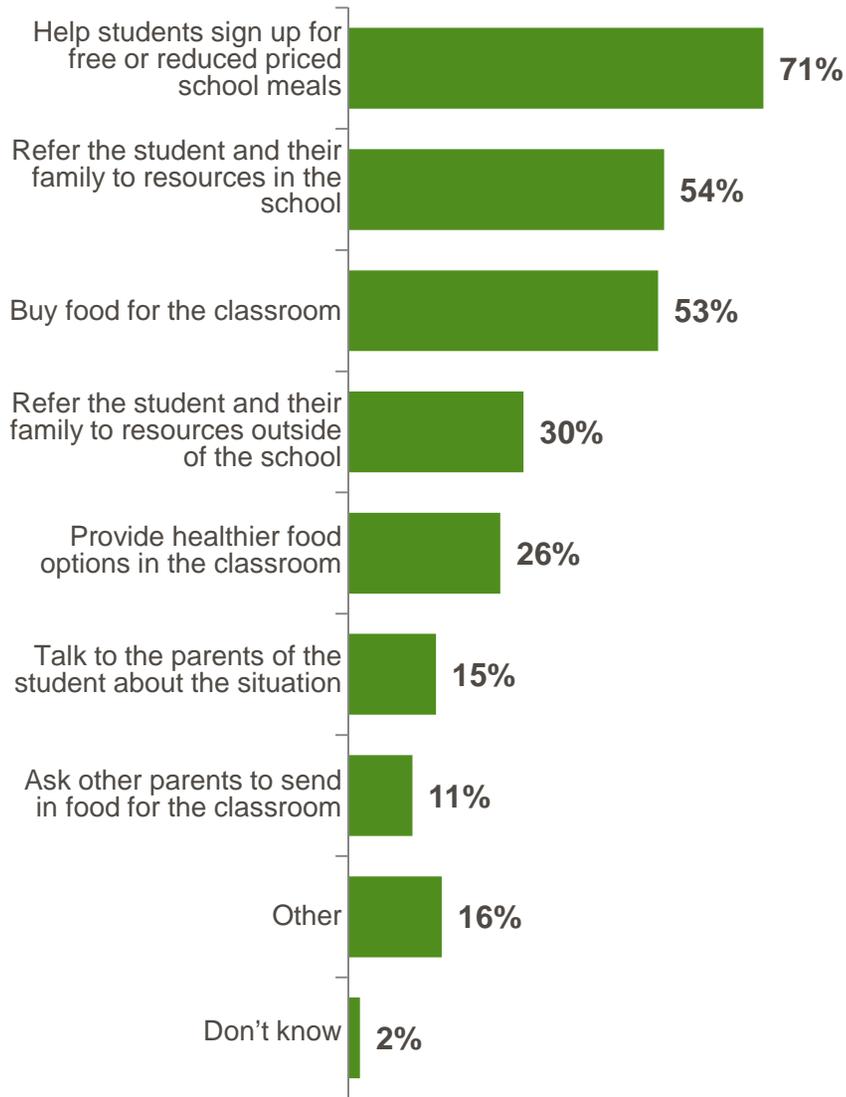
# Addressing child hunger a high priority



- More than three-quarters of K-8 teachers agree that addressing child hunger should be a *top* or *high priority* for schools nationally.
- Teachers who are most likely to consider this a top priority are:
  - Those living in Arkansas or the South
  - Those teaching K-3
  - Those teaching in high-poverty areas
  - Younger teachers
- Two-thirds would also make it a *top* or *high priority* for their local schools.

Q15. What priority should addressing child hunger be for school systems in your area – the top priority, one of the top priorities, a high priority, somewhat of a priority, or not a priority at all?  
 Q16. What priority should addressing child hunger be for school systems nationwide – the top priority, one of the top priorities, a high priority, somewhat of a priority, or not a priority at all?

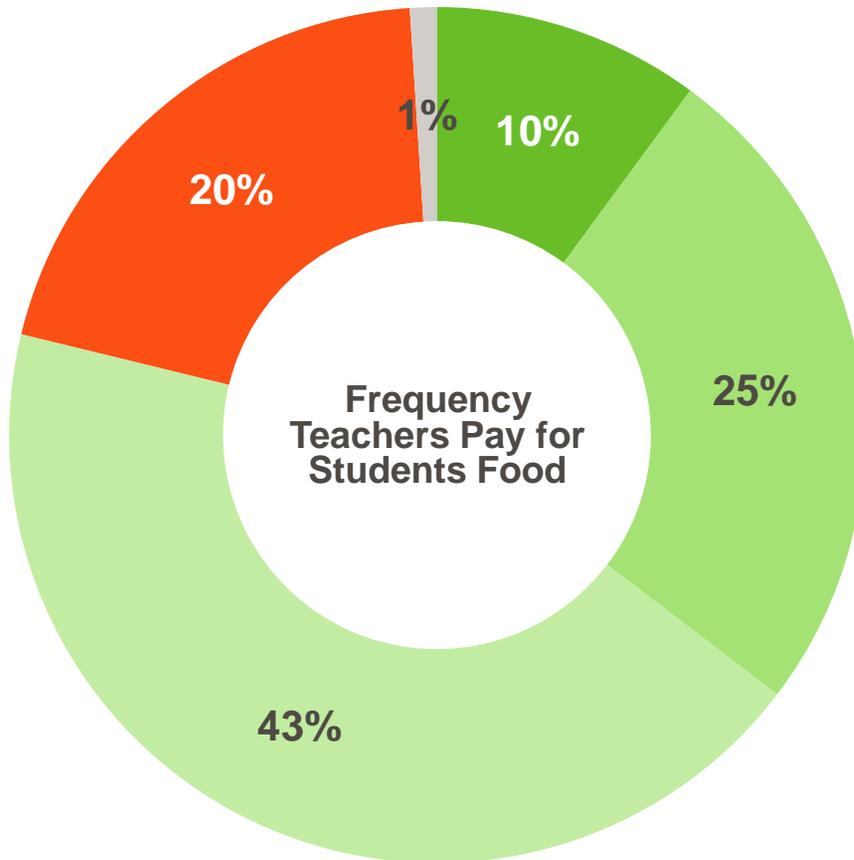
# Teachers' actions to address the problem



- Among teachers who have students coming to school hungry, the most common response is to help the student and family take advantage of existing programs.
- Many teachers also buy food for the classroom themselves.
- Teachers are less likely to discuss the problem with parents or ask others to send food.

Q11. (IF Q7=YES) In your classroom, what are some ways you have tried to address the problem of students coming to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home? [MULTIPLE RESPONSE]

# Buying food for the classroom

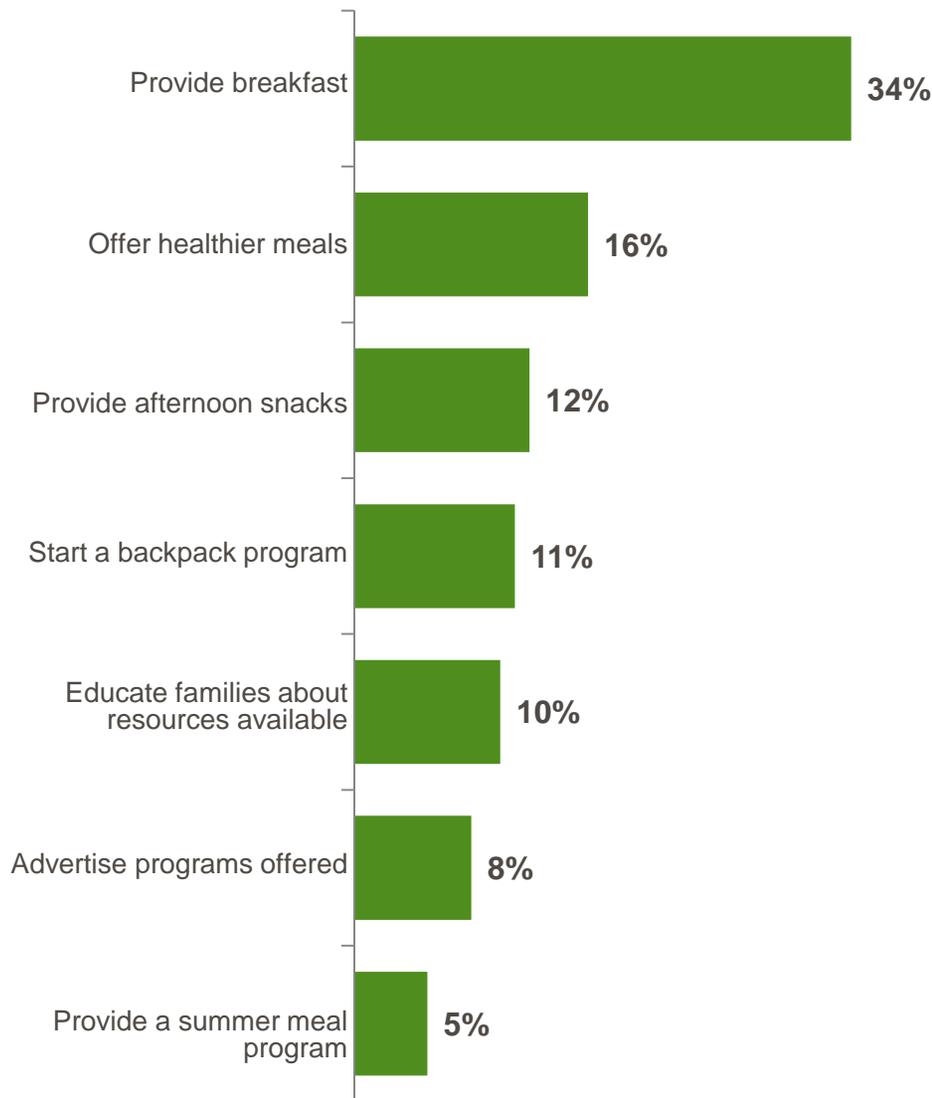


■ Every week ■ A few times a month ■ Once in a while ■ Never ■ Don't know

- Looking more specifically at teachers providing food themselves, we see that most teachers who have students experiencing hunger provide food at least once in a while (78%).
- A third of these teachers provide food at least a few times a month, including one in ten who buy food each week.
- On average, teachers who buy food spend approximately \$26 per month on food for the classroom.

Q12. (IF Q7=YES) How frequently would you say you have been buying food on your own for your students who are not getting enough to eat at home – every week, a few times a month, once a while, never?  
Q13. (IF Q12=EVERY WEEK, FEW TIMES A MONTH, ONCE IN A WHILE) Approximately how much would you say you spend each month buying food for these students?

# Solutions at the school and district level



- In an open-ended question, teachers offered a variety of actions that schools could take to address hunger.
- Most of them are related to various programs to provide students and families with food.
- Significant numbers also mention improving the nutrition of meals offered at the school and educating families about programs.
- Other actions that are mentioned less frequently include:
  - Suggesting food banks
  - Identifying students who need help
  - Plant gardens
  - Give larger portions at school

Q17. Besides what you do personally to help students who come to class hungry, what one or two things do you think your school or school system could do to help? [OPEN END-CODED]

# In their own words: Solutions



Provide a healthy breakfast at a reduced cost for all, not just those that qualify. Some students miss the requirements by just a little bit. Have classes for parents on how to help themselves and others on how to get help or what they can do to help ease any issues they have at home.

Students do not have access to food at school before lunch. We have no breakfast program that I am aware of. Parents need to be fully informed that they may qualify for free or reduced lunch and help should be provided to complete the forms needed. A breakfast program should be started.

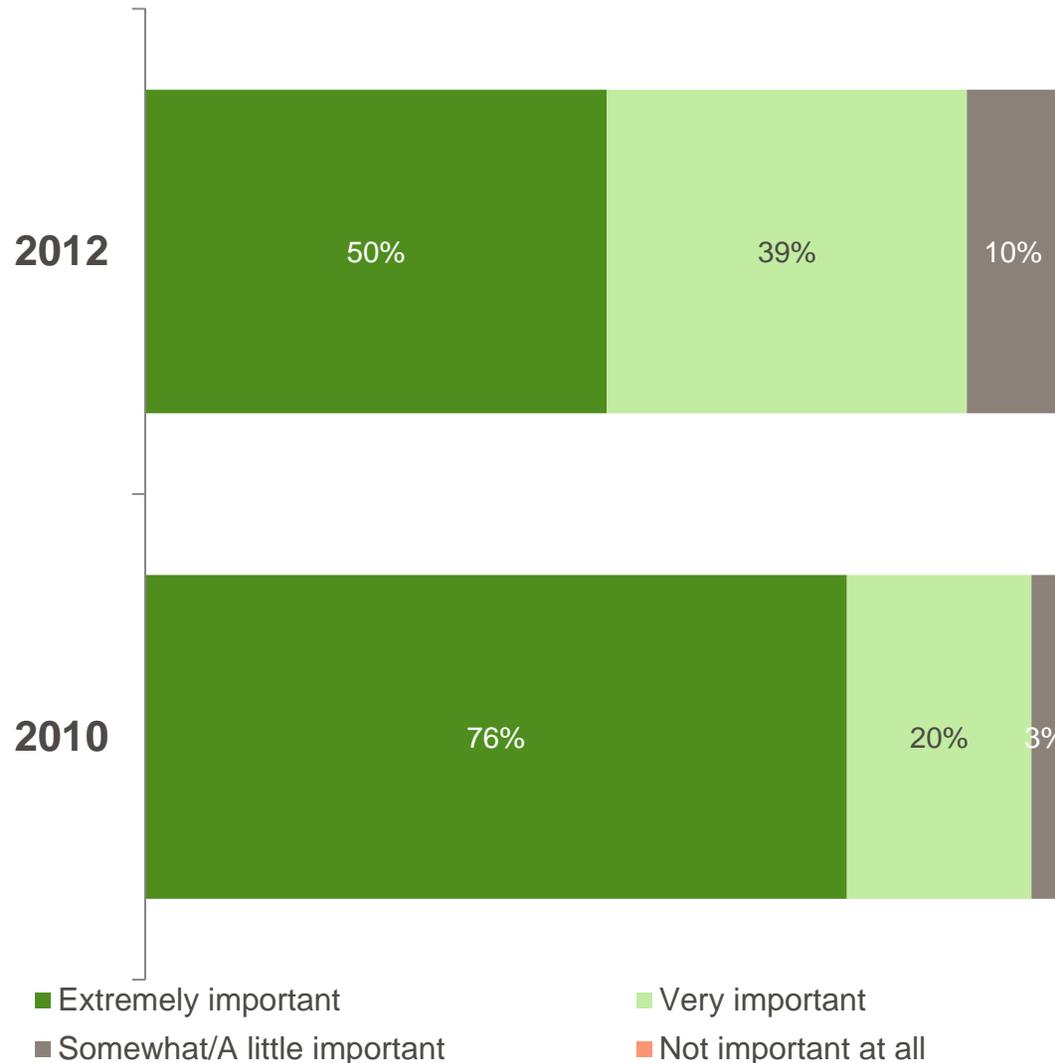
We can provide resources for parents and students when they are not in school. We have more of a problem with the students when they are not in our care. If we can get the resources to the families in their homes/community/neighborhoods, I think we can make the most impact for our families.

Our school does a lot. We partner with a food bank and send home food. We are proactive in identifying students. We provide free breakfast and any hungry child is sent to the kitchen and is given something to eat. We are about 90% free and reduced lunch. We are also part of a program that provide produce as a snack 3 times a week. We need to make sure families are aware of the programs available to help.



## Addressing Hunger: Breakfast programs

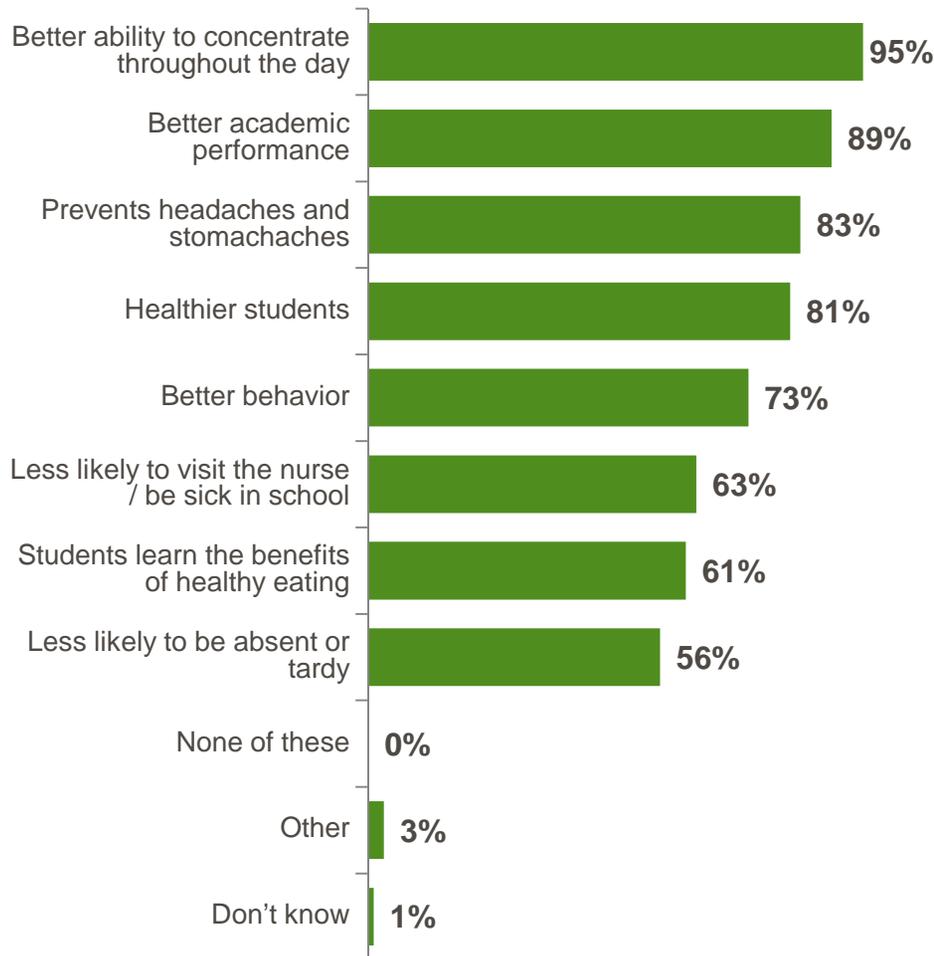
# Importance of breakfast for achievement



- Nine in ten teachers say that breakfast is *extremely* or *very important* to academic achievement.
- There has been a decrease in those who consider it *extremely important* versus *very important*.
- However, very few consider it only *somewhat* or *just a little important*, and no one says it is *not important at all*.

Q23. How important do you think breakfast is to academic achievement – extremely important, very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important at all?

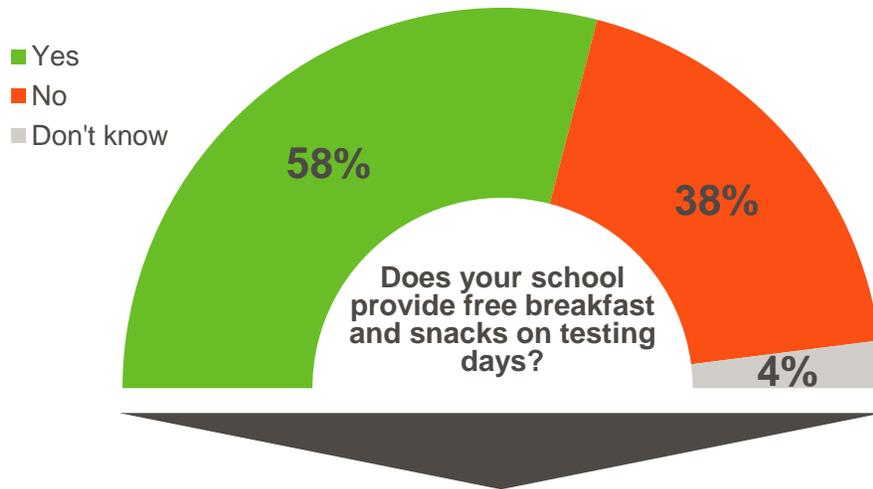
# Benefits of breakfast



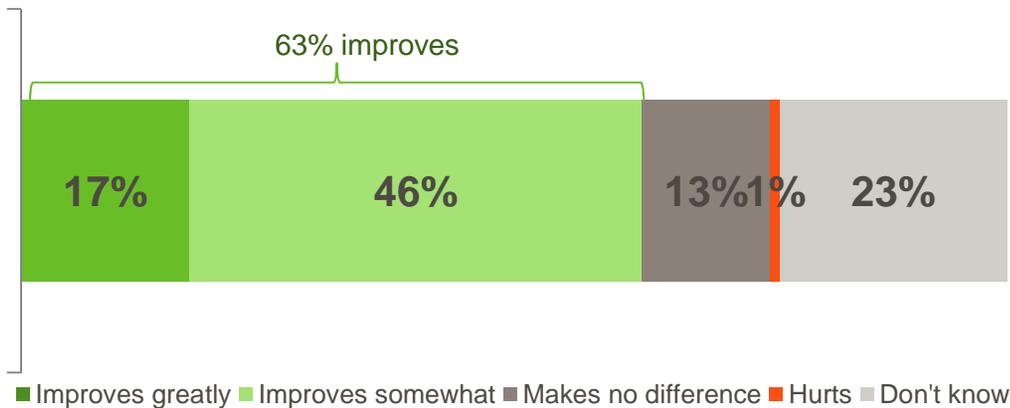
- A large majority of teachers believe that there are numerous benefits of eating breakfast.
- Nine in ten teachers point to the ability to concentrate and better academic performance as advantages.
- Health is also a major factor; eight in ten say breakfast prevents head and stomachaches and leads to healthier students.

Q22. In your experience, what are the benefits of students' eating a nutritious breakfast? [MULTIPLE RESPONSE]

# Breakfast on standardized test days



How does providing students with food on test days affect test scores?



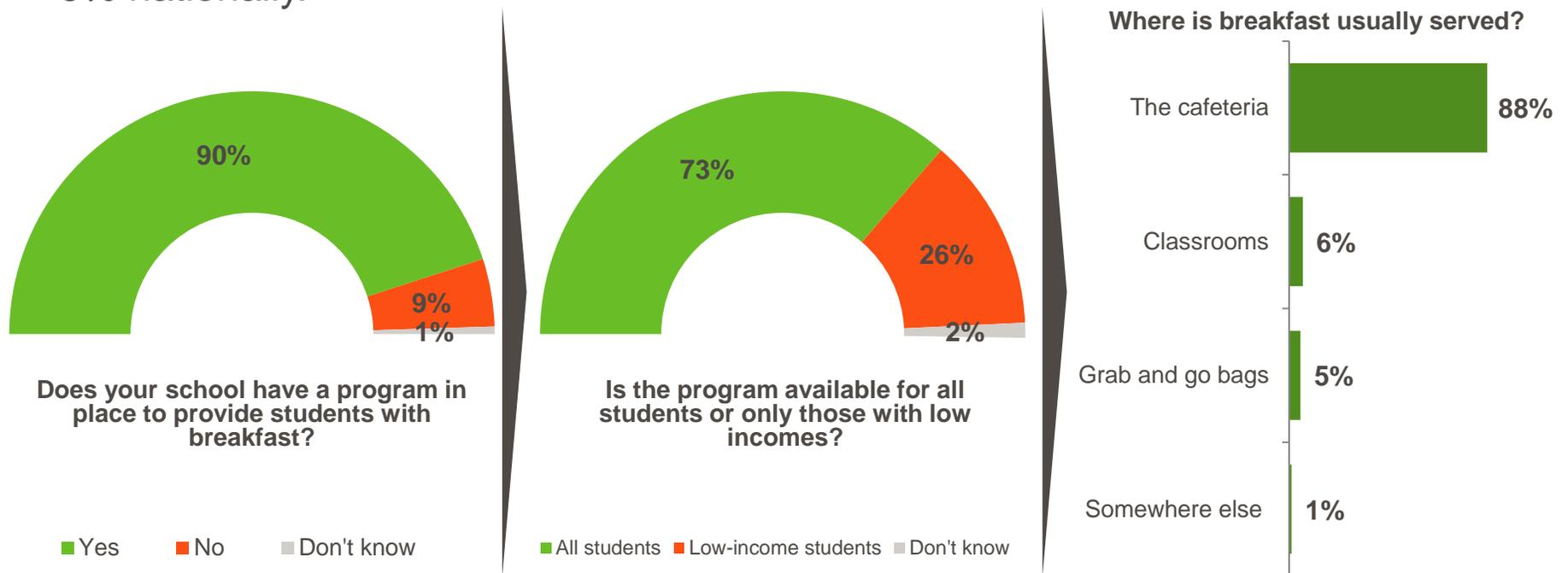
- Schools recognize the detrimental effects of hunger in their approach to standardized testing as a majority of teachers say their schools provide breakfast and snacks on test days.
- At those schools, more than six in ten teachers (63%) say that the food helps students perform better on the tests.
- Schools that are most likely to provide food on test days include:
  - Those in Arkansas, Colorado, and the South
  - Those in urban areas
  - Those who serve larger proportions of minorities and low-income students.

Q19. Does your school provide free breakfast and snacks on testing days?

Q20. (IF Q19=YES) In your experience, how does providing students with food on test days affect test scores?

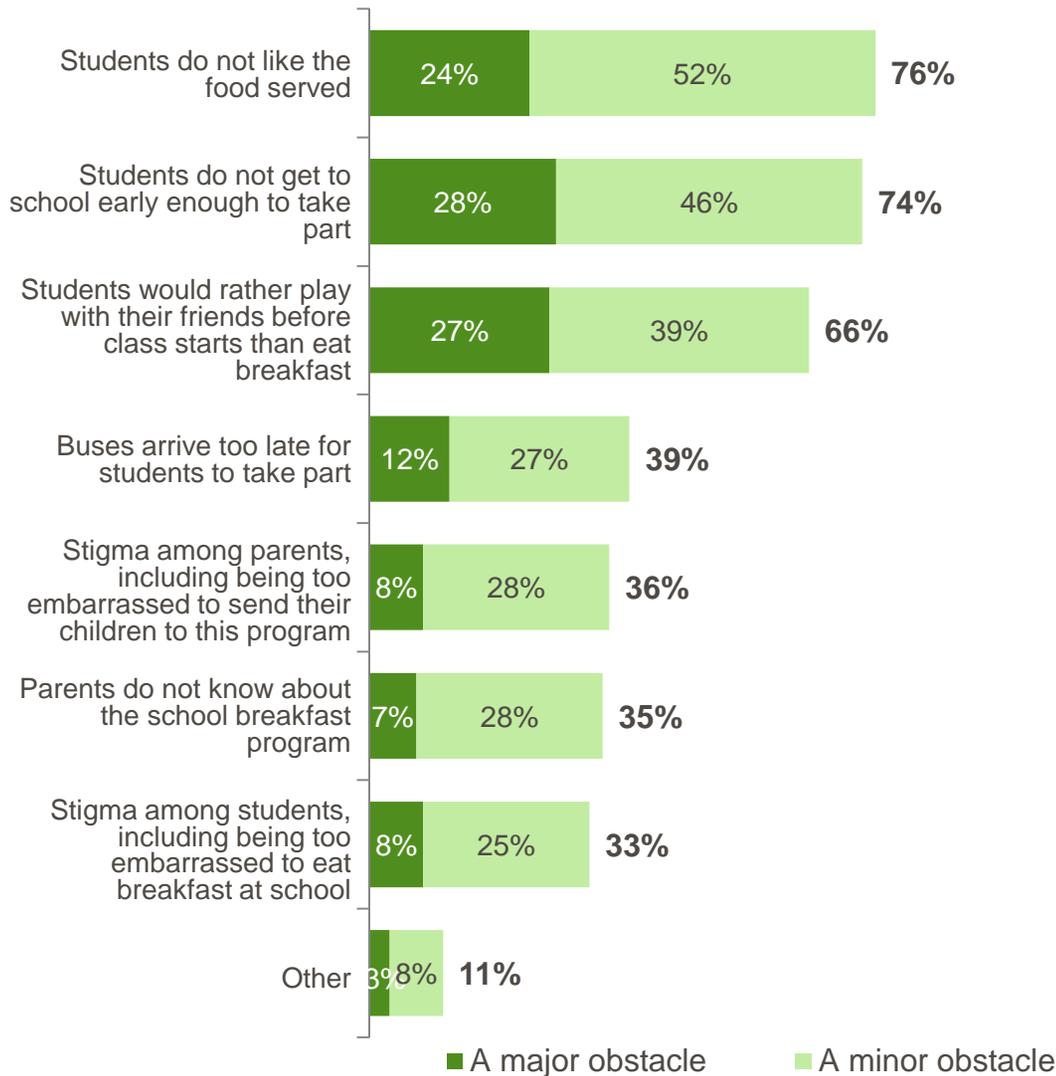
# Prevalence and types of breakfast programs

- Nine in ten K-8 teachers report that their schools have a program to provide breakfast.
- Three-quarters of these programs provide breakfast to all students, regardless of income, and nearly nine in ten serve breakfast in the cafeteria.
- In-classroom breakfast programs are much more common in Maryland, where 17% of those with breakfast programs, serve them in the classroom, compared to 6% nationally.



Q24. Does your school have a program in place to provide students with breakfast?  
Q25. (IF Q24=YES) Is the program available for all students or only those with low incomes?  
Q26. (IF Q24=YES) Where is breakfast usually served?

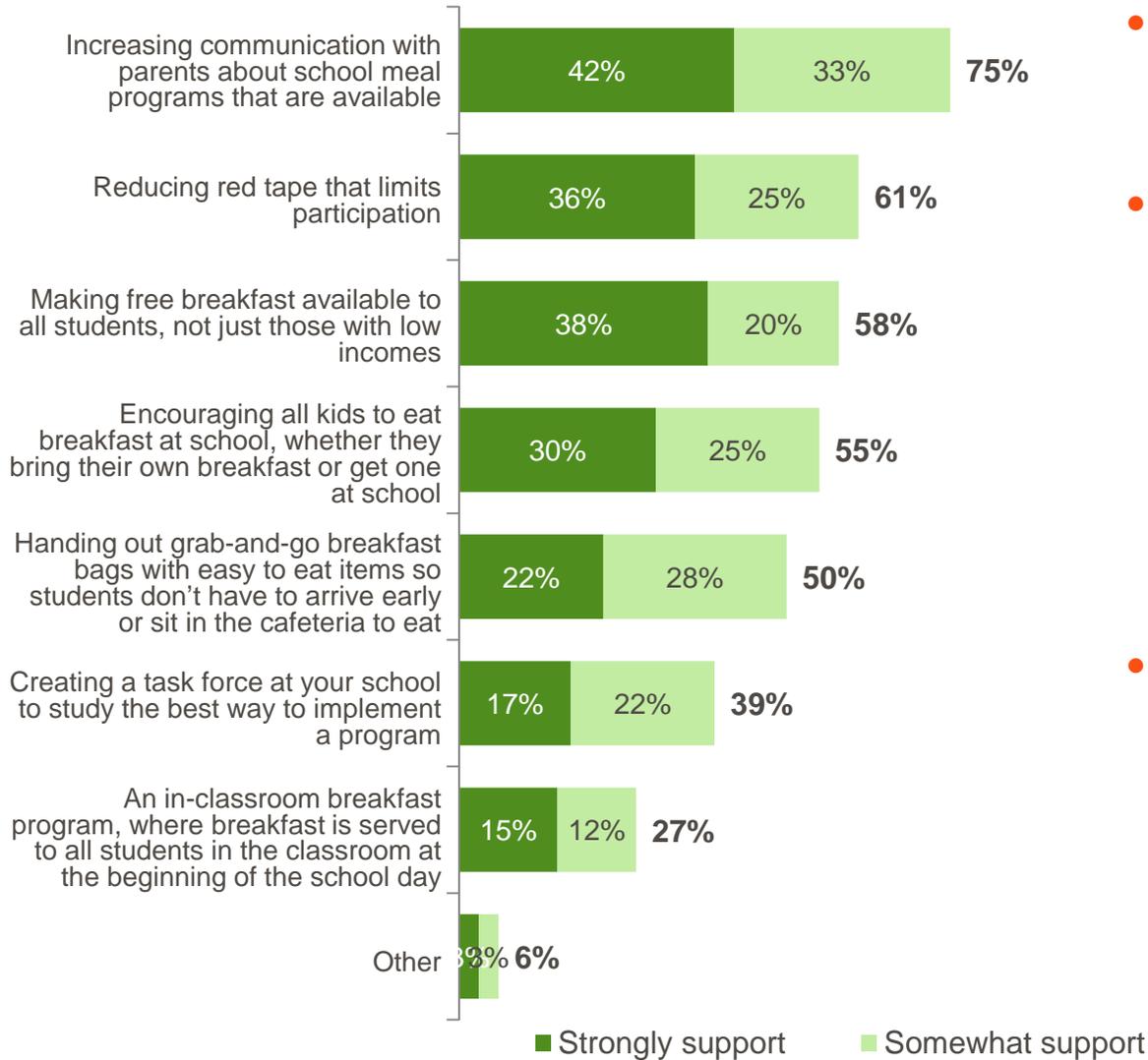
# Barriers to participating in breakfast programs



- The main barriers to students taking advantage of the breakfast programs include:
  - Not liking the food
  - Arriving too late
  - Choosing to spend time with friends rather than eat
- Most believe that these barriers can be overcome, calling them *minor obstacles*, instead of *major* ones.
- Teachers in grades 7-8 are more likely than others to identify students not liking the food and prioritizing socializing as barriers.
- Teachers in urban areas and those serving a high proportion of minority students are most likely to identify late arrival times as a barrier.

Q32. Please indicate how much of a barrier each of the following is to students taking part in your school's breakfast program.

# Ideas for increasing participation



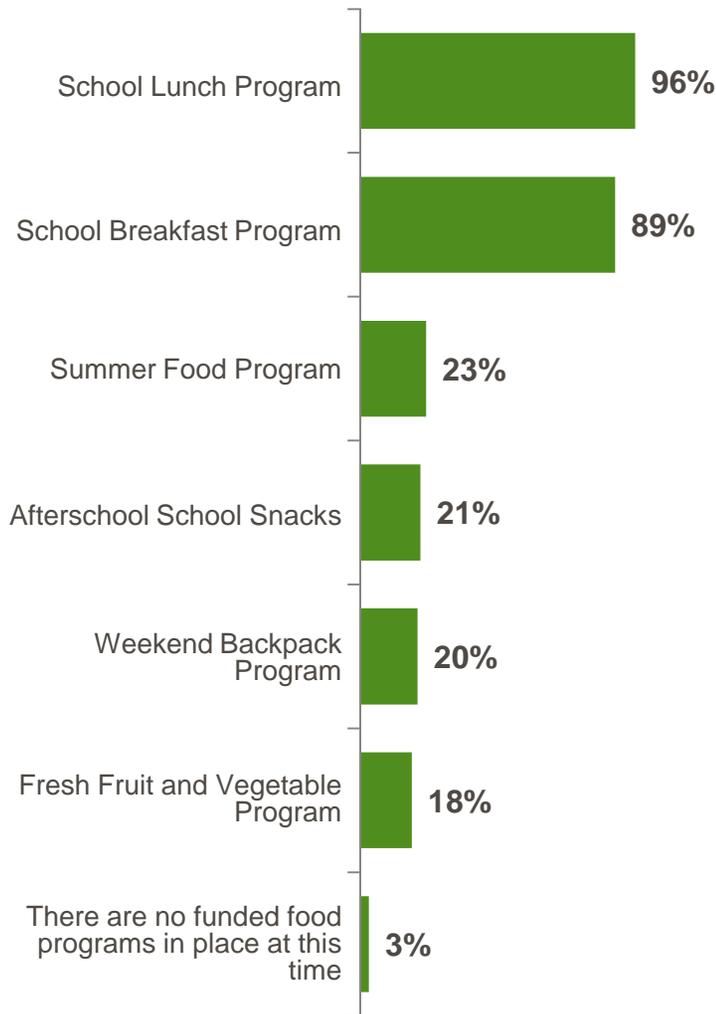
- Majorities of teachers support a variety of proposals to increase participation.
- The most popular ideas are increasing communications with parents, reducing red tape, and making breakfast more inclusive, either by providing it to everyone or by encouraging everyone to eat breakfast at school.
- In-classroom breakfast programs are less popular: 27% support, 20% neutral, 53% oppose.

Q33. Here are some proposals to increase participation in school breakfast programs. Please indicate whether you support or oppose each in your school.



## Addressing Hunger: Other meal programs

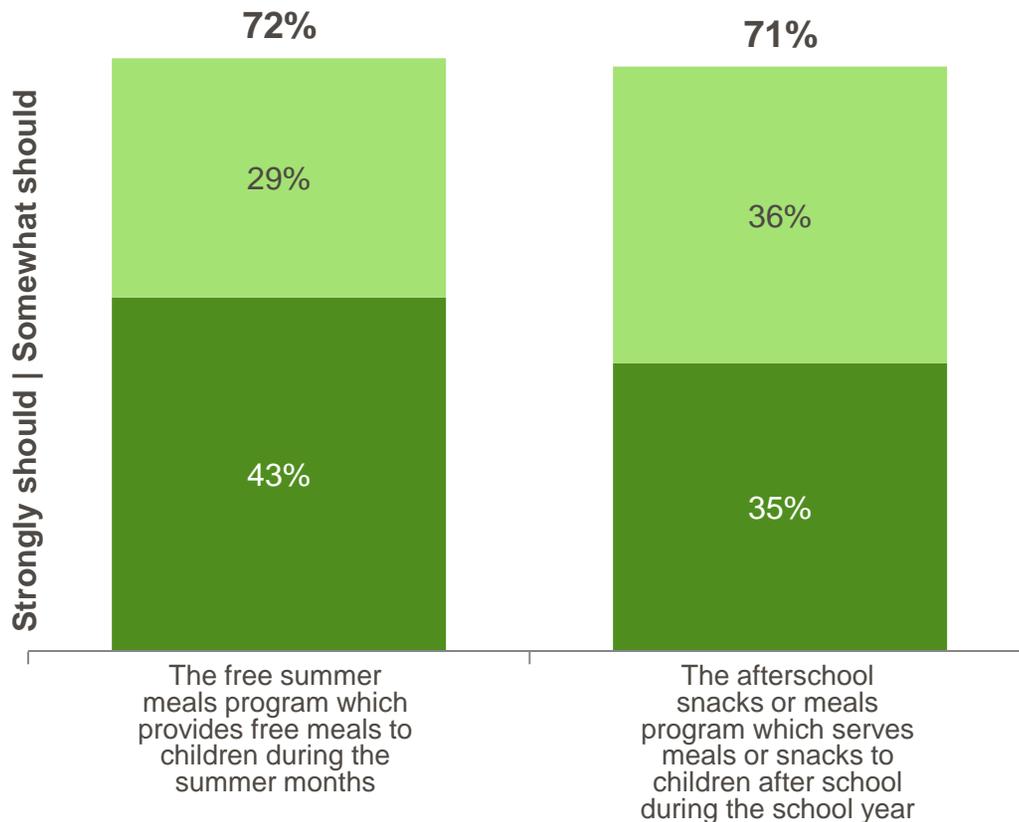
# Prevalence of meal programs



- Nearly all K-8 public school teachers report that their schools have a lunch program, and nine in ten also have some kind of breakfast program.
- Other programs are less widespread, with larger variations in who participates:
  - Summer food and weekend backpack programs are much more common in Arkansas than other areas.
  - Afternoon snacks are more common in LA.
  - Weekend backpack programs are more common in early elementary school.
  - Population density is a factor; summer food programs are more common in urban areas, while backpack programs are more common in rural areas.
  - Teachers serving low-income students are more likely to report having each of these programs.

Q18. What meal programs are in place at your school? [MULTIPLE RESPONSE]

# Support for more meal programs is high

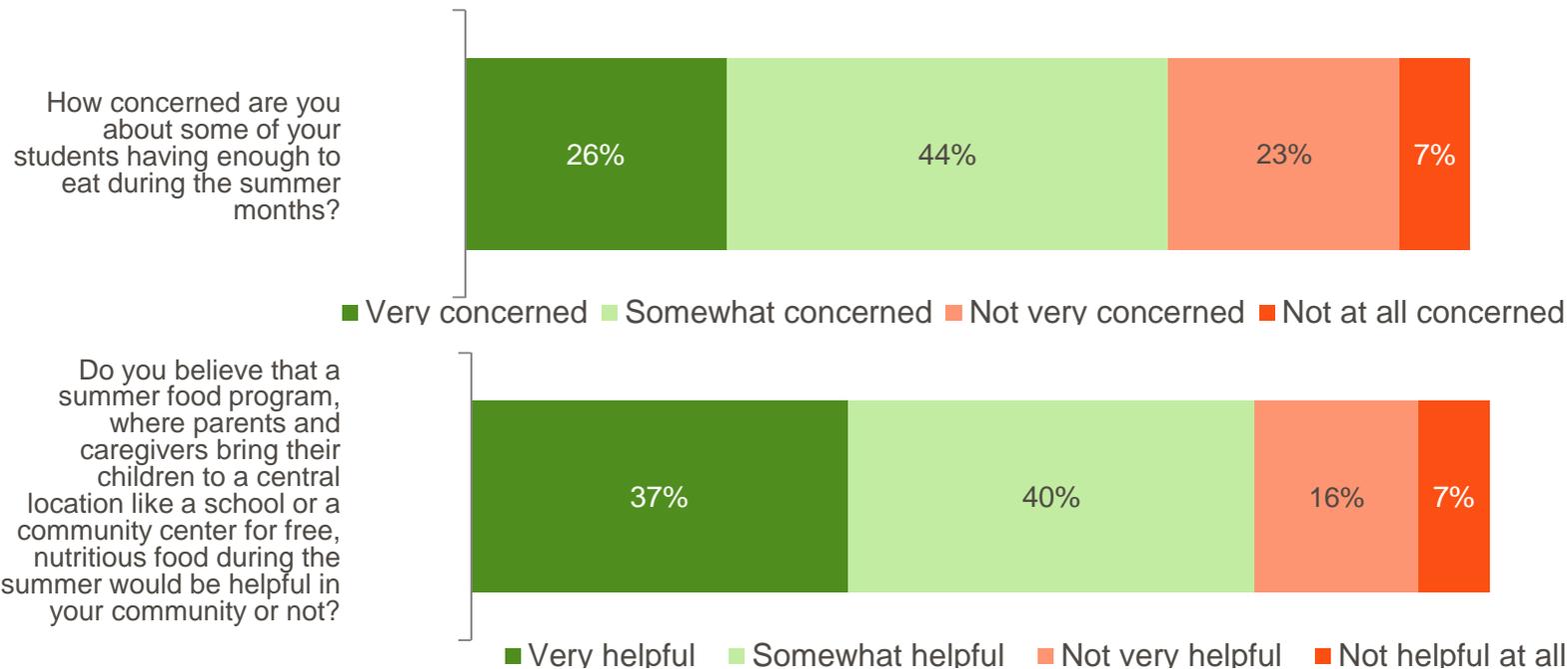


- Seven in ten K-8 teachers believe that their schools should participate in both summer meal programs and afternoon snack programs.
- There is slightly more enthusiasm for summer meals programs.
- Women are more likely to support these programs than men, and teachers serving low-income populations more likely than those in higher-income areas.

Q21. Do you believe that your school should or should not participate in the following programs?

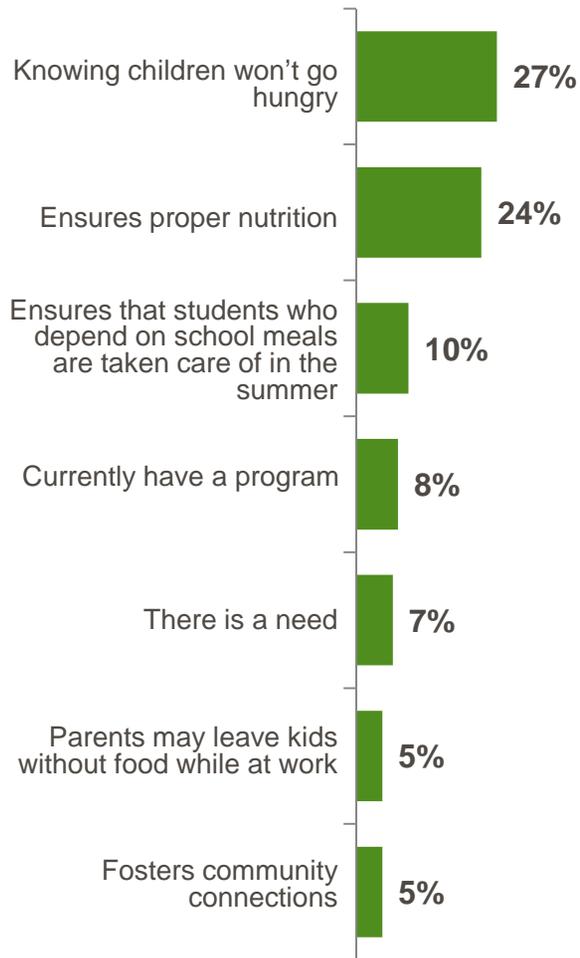
# A closer look at summer meals programs

- Seven in ten teachers are at least *somewhat worried* about their students having enough to eat during summer.
  - Those who are most concerned include teachers in Arkansas, the South, those serving high-minority and low-income populations, and those in urban or rural areas.
- More than three-quarters of K-8 teachers say that a summer meal program would be helpful in their community, including nearly four in ten who say it would be *very helpful*.



Q36. How concerned are you about some of your students having enough to eat during the summer months?  
Q37. Do you believe that a summer food program, where parents and caregivers bring their children to a central location like a school or a community center for free, nutritious food during the summer would be helpful in your community or not?

# Benefits of summer meals programs



- In an open-ended question, teachers explain why they believe a summer meals program would be helpful in their community.
- The main reasons are related to making sure children are fed and getting proper nutrition.

Q38. (IF Q37=VERY/SOMEWHAT HELPFUL) Please list some of the reasons you believe a summer meals program be helpful at your school. [OPEN END-CODED]

## In their own words: Benefits of summer meal programs



We need to make sure children get the food they need to grow. Lessons in good eating could be provided during the meal. This is good thing only if healthy food is served. Processed heated food should not be on the menu.

Many students get much of their nutrition during the week from school breakfast and lunch programs. During the summer they often subsist on convenience and junk foods that are easy to prepare as their parents are at work and the students are home alone (I work in a middle school). This teaches students bad eating habits and discourages them from learning the skills necessary (e.g. buying basic ingredients, reading recipes, etc.) that would allow them to develop better habits as older teens and young adults.

A regular place and time to eat takes away the stress of not knowing when another meal will be available. Providing healthy food helps kids to make good habits

If the food was truly healthy then kids would be much healthier. It would stop kids from living on candy bars...(which some of them do!)

I believe many of my students will not receive enough food this summer or the proper food. I know that many parents of the students I have would participate in summer meal programs if they were provided. Many want their kids to eat they just can not afford it.