

Increasing Access to School Breakfast to Improve Student Outcomes

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Introduction

The School Breakfast Program plays a vital role in supporting children's health and academic achievement. Breakfast is considered the most important meal of the day, particularly for children. Research shows that eating a healthy breakfast can have a positive impact on children's academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as their overall mental and physical health. (Hoyland et al. 2009).

Eating breakfast can improve cognitive function, memory, attention, and overall academic performance. Several studies have found that children who eat breakfast perform better on tests, have higher grades, and are more likely to attend school regularly (Rampersaud et al. 2005; Hoyland et al. 2009; Adolphus et al. 2016). Eating breakfast at school can also help to reduce absenteeism and tardiness in schools. Studies have found that children who eat breakfast regularly are more likely to attend school regularly and are less likely to be tardy (Haines et al. 2010). On average, students who eat school breakfast attend 1.5 more days of school per year and have been shown to achieve 17.5 percent higher scores on standardized math tests. (No Kid Hungry, 2022).

Eating breakfast can also have a positive impact on children's behavior. Children who eat breakfast are less likely to be irritable, restless, or aggressive (Adolphus et al. 2016). Additionally, studies have found that providing breakfast in schools can help reduce disciplinary problems and improve the overall school climate (Adolphus et al. 2016). Eating breakfast can also improve children's overall health outcomes. Studies have found that children who eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight or obese, have lower cholesterol levels, and have lower rates of type 2 diabetes (Moore et al. 2009; St-Onge et al. 2016).

Problem Statement

Ensuring access to a nutritious school breakfast is critical for the overall well-being and academic success of students. However, there are several challenges and barriers that need to be addressed in implementing a school breakfast program including: access for all students, impact on the classroom and instructional time, and buy-in from teachers and staff.

Solution

While breakfast in schools is typically served before the start of the school day, alternative strategies of serving "Breakfast After the Bell" can increase the accessibility of meals to students, allowing for greater participation in the school breakfast program and ultimately leading to improved outcomes. These strategies include grab-and-go breakfast, second-chance breakfast, and breakfast in the classroom. Using all of these strategies together can maximize the number of students who eat breakfast at school. The implementation of the Universal Meals Program in California in the 2022-23 school year has created the ideal circumstance for school food administrators to offer these strategies now that collecting payment for meals is no longer a requirement.

Grab-and-go breakfast is a service model where children (particularly older students) can quickly grab their convenient, pre-packaged breakfast from carts or kiosks in high-trafficked school entry areas, hallways, or the cafeteria line to eat in their classroom or common areas. Moving breakfast out of the school cafeteria to make it more accessible and allowing students to take it on the go, has proven to be a very successful strategy for increasing school breakfast participation.

Beardstown Junior High and High Schools in Beardstown, Illinois made the switch to a grab-and-go breakfast model resulting in a 122 percent increase in the schools' breakfast program participation (No Kid Hungry 2018). As a result, the school district observed an overall improvement in attendance and classroom productivity.

Early morning breakfast schedules and late school arrivals are often barriers to students eating a traditional breakfast before the school day begins. With second chance breakfast, students are given another opportunity to eat breakfast later in the morning, usually during a morning break or after the first period of the day. By offering breakfast later in the morning, students can have access to a meal that they may have otherwise missed and allows them to perform their best at school.

The second chance breakfast strategy has been implemented in schools across the United States and has shown to be an effective way to increase breakfast participation rates. Starting in June 2015, San Diego Unified School District in San Diego, CA began targeting 20 middle school sites for their Second Chance Breakfast model, typically offering meals from a mobile cart placed in high-traffic areas between first and second-period classes. One of these schools experienced a 260 percent increase in breakfast participation within a year (Schumate 2016).

The final strategy to increase access to breakfast is allowing students to have breakfast in the classroom. The basic structure of this method is students are allocated time at the start of class to eat their breakfast, thereby providing all who are in the class access to the meal. Much like second chance breakfast, this model circumvents barriers preventing students from eating breakfast before the school day begins.

Magee Academy of Arts & Sciences in Pico Rivera, CA witnessed a jump in participation from 18 to 80 percent after implementing a free breakfast in the classroom model in 2019 (No Kid Hungry 2022). Kucera Middle School in Rialto, CA also

experienced a 350 percent increase in breakfast participation when they instituted a breakfast in the classroom program along with California's Universal Meals Program in the 2022-23 school year (No Kid Hungry 2022). Common concerns such as loss of instructional time, staffing requirements, and classroom cleanliness can be easily overcome with proven success strategies.

When it comes to breakfast in the classroom, classroom cleanliness is always a primary concern due to the potential for mess and attracting pests to crumbs or food particles left behind. Schools have demonstrated great success by developing simple, student-friendly practices including utilizing construction paper as a mat on desks to easily pick up crumbs and trash when students are done (CSBA 2014). With consistent practice and a few added resources such as additional trash cans and basic cleaning supplies, breakfast cleanup will become a standard routine for students.

The impact on instructional time is another frequently cited concern. The typical time to serve and eat breakfast in the classroom is around 10 to 15 minutes at the start of class, often reserved for attendance taking, morning announcements, or warmups. Providing students with 10 minutes to eat and five (5) to clean up during morning procedures is a complimentary routine that can easily be executed. On average, schools allowing breakfast in the classroom reach 88 percent breakfast participation with this model (No Kid Hungry n.d.).

The final concern is that additional staff are needed to facilitate this breakfast model. Some schools have utilized their current staff by limiting menu items to easily disposable meals or prepping the day before with shelf-stable items such as cereal bars or certain fruits packed in transport containers for delivery to each classroom (Los Angeles Unified School District n.d.). In the morning schools can provide cold meal components for classroom delivery in separate containers. This makes for a streamlined process of dropping off each container to classrooms for service when students arrive. Instead of cleaning a large meal service area or cafeteria, custodial staff need only make rounds to classrooms to empty trash cans.

After participating in the implementation of a new breakfast in the classroom program, one teacher with San Diego Unified School District reported that "attendance rates were up, tardiness was down, and visits to the nurse for a stomach- or headache were nonexistent. The whole thing took about 10 minutes each morning and was an excellent way to build community, discuss food etiquette, and learn about healthy foods. If you organize it and manage it well, it isn't a huge distraction, it's a godsend." (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.).

Conclusion

Eating a healthy breakfast is key to all students' success, providing the necessary fuel students need in the morning. Schools can implement an alternative School Breakfast Program model at any time that may include grab-and-go strategies, second-chance breakfast, and breakfast in the classroom models. It's never too late to increase access to a healthy breakfast. These strategies are valuable tools for improving the health and

well-being of students and are worth considering for schools desiring to improve student performance and overall health outcomes.

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