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Policy Brief

Expanding School Breakfast Programs to Improve Student Learning

The benefits of breakfast

Confirming the old adage that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, research demonstrates that eating breakfast truly can be a critical factor in improving student health and learning. Because many students do not have access or time to eat breakfast at home, school breakfast programs can be a way for students to get nourishment and attain healthy body weight. Research also suggests that eating a nutritious breakfast can have a number of positive impacts on student learning, including:

- School breakfast programs are correlated with better grades and lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness.^{1, 2, 3}
- In a survey that sampled responses from students in grades 7, 9 and 11, higher Academic Performance Index scores were shown in schools where a higher percentage of students ate breakfast on the day of the test.⁴
- A study of the effects of universal school breakfast found that math and reading achievement scores increased each year that the program was in place.⁵
- Researchers found that serving breakfast to children who do not get a morning meal elsewhere can significantly improve their cognitive and mental abilities.⁶
- After implementation of the federally funded School Breakfast Program, schools experience improvements in attendance, and therefore increased average daily attendance.⁷

School districts and county offices of education that have already implemented various school breakfast program models report other benefits, including a decrease in the number of student complaints to the school nurse of

stomachaches and headaches,⁸ a decrease in the number of students who avoid breakfast programs because of their perceived body image or the social stigma of eating in the cafeteria⁹ and healthier food choices made throughout the day for students who eat breakfast.¹⁰

School boards therefore have an opportunity to improve student health and academic achievement while increasing revenue for the district by initiating and/or expanding school breakfast programs that provide additional federal funds for meal reimbursement. For school boards, knowing that the link between breakfast and academic achievement exists is a key consideration when weighing the cost of investing in a school breakfast program, particularly knowing that such an investment may afford students a greater opportunity to be well nourished and to be ready to learn.

Extent of the problem

Despite the clear benefits of eating breakfast, there are significant numbers of students nationwide who do not eat breakfast. The percentage of young people who eat breakfast decreases with age; while 92 percent of children ages 6–11 eat breakfast, only 77 percent of adolescents ages 12–19 eat breakfast.¹¹ School breakfast programs could help meet the need, but such programs are often underutilized and may not reach the students who are most in need. In California, the School Breakfast Program reaches only 18 percent of students enrolled in public schools, even though 54 percent of the students are eligible to receive free or reduced price meals. Among those who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, over 70 percent do not benefit from the School Breakfast Program, and over 50 percent of the students who are served by the National School Lunch Program are not served by the School Breakfast Program. More districts are working to increase the number of students being served breakfast, but the number of students who are in need and are eligible for free and reduced-price meals is also increasing.¹¹ Thus, it is critical that districts/COEs identify and address obstacles to implementing

breakfast programs and develop strategies for increasing student participation.

School breakfast program facts

The School Breakfast Program is a federally funded meal program operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and administered by the California Department of Education for California school districts and COEs. Districts/COEs that choose to take part in the breakfast program receive cash subsidies from the USDA for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve breakfasts that meet federal requirements and must offer free or reduced-price breakfasts to eligible children. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free meals. Children from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

Return on investment

Particularly during these budget-conscious times, school boards need to examine the fiscal implications of any policy decision. Districts/COEs that choose to implement the School Breakfast Program receive a federal reimbursement for every breakfast served. The amount of federal reimbursement provided for each breakfast depends on the household income of the student. Districts/COEs also receive a state reimbursement for breakfasts served to low-income students. In addition, competitive grants may be available through the California Department of Education for expanding breakfast programs.¹²

Such an investment can pay off even if there are start-up costs associated with implementing the program. Across California, if participation in the School Breakfast Program equaled participation in the National School Lunch Program among low-income students, districts/COEs would have received an additional \$300 million in federal meal reimbursements during the 2008-09 school year.¹³ Increasing participation in the School Breakfast Program increases the number of per-meal reimbursements, which can create a self-sustaining program that could provide an even greater ability to procure, store, prepare and serve nutritious foods that may have been previously cost-prohibitive, such as additional servings of fresh produce.¹⁴

One consideration for districts/COEs in investing in the implementation of the School Breakfast Program is that increased participation does not necessarily mean increased direct costs, such as labor and equipment. In fact,

increasing participation in the School Breakfast Program can decrease the per-meal costs. With an increase in the per-meal profit margin, school nutrition programs often become more financially secure and self-sustaining with revenue from federal and state meal reimbursements.

School breakfast program models

There are a variety of ways that districts/COEs can provide students with access to school breakfasts, taking into consideration financial impacts, facilities issues and how students will obtain the food. While most schools that participate in the School Breakfast Program provide the meal service in the cafeteria before the start of the school day, it has been found that the sites with the largest return on investment and largest percentage of participants are those where students are served when and where they are able and willing to eat. When staff implements the School Breakfast Program, they might consider two alternative models that attempt to address the considerations of increased participation and effective return on investment:

- The Classroom Breakfast model often increases school breakfast participation to nearly 100 percent. With this model, breakfast is served, eaten and cleared during the first 10-15 minutes of class while teachers conduct administrative activities or begin the day's lessons.¹⁵
- With the Second Chance Breakfast model, a school breakfast is offered during morning recess or snack/brunch break. 2CB is effective for serving students who, due to family schedules or transportation issues, are not able to eat in the morning before school begins. 2CB is also effective for students who are not hungry first thing in the morning, but do get hungry before lunch.¹⁶

Role of the governing board

Districts/COEs have a responsibility to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn. The governing board, working closely with the superintendent, can promote an environment where students are well nourished and ready to achieve academically. The board can do this through each of its major responsibilities:

1. Setting direction for the community's schools

As the board establishes a long-term vision, goals and priorities, it should consider the potential positive impacts that implementing the School Breakfast Program could have in providing a school environment where students are well nourished and therefore more likely to attend class, be engaged, learn and achieve academically.

2. Establishing an effective structure for the district/COE through policy and other decisions

It is recommended that the board adopt policies that address nutrition and school breakfast. CSBA provides a sample board policy and administrative regulation, BP/AR 3550 – Food Service/Child Nutrition Program, which address the School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program and other federally reimbursable meal programs. Other policies and administrative regulations address related concepts and should be aligned, such as BP/AR 3553 – Free and Reduced Price Meals, BP 5030 – Student Wellness, and BP/AR 3554 – Other Food Sales.

3. Providing support to the superintendent and staff as they carry out the board's direction

When the policies that impact food service are aligned and adopted, it is important that staff appropriately implement the policies to ensure that the goals and strategies identified by the board for increasing student participation in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs are put into place. The superintendent and staff should develop procedures and plans for implementing the programs based on the needs of each school site, including the capacity of school facilities and the grade levels of the students at the site. The board can support these efforts by continually demonstrating its commitment to student health, upholding its adopted policies and ensuring that budget and other board decisions support the agreed-upon goals for student nutrition.

4. Ensuring accountability to the public

The board has a responsibility to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve student nutrition and to increase participation in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. The board and superintendent should agree on the data that will be collected (e.g., percentage of eligible students being served by the programs, fiscal impact of participation in federal school meals programs, compliance with federal and state nutritional standards, linkages between student achievement data and meal program participation) and how often such data will be reported to the board. The data should be used to recommend policy revisions, if necessary.

5. Acting as community leaders

The governance team should work with parents, staff, community-based organizations (e.g., food banks), local health agencies and health care providers, and other stakeholders in efforts that promote a culture of wellness for all students. Such stakeholders might be involved in developing goals, policies or specific strategies related to nutrition and to the School Breakfast Program.

Questions to consider

As the governance team discusses and determines how to best ensure that all students have access to a nutritious breakfast, it might consider the following questions:

- What are the current participation rates in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, by school site and across the district/COE? What percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals participate in these programs? Are any student populations underserved?
- What barriers currently exist to the successful implementation of the School Breakfast Program? Are there policy directives that the board can take to ensure that students have the opportunity to eat breakfast, without stigma and with the fewest disruptions to the school day?
- How will the superintendent and staff ensure that the implementation of the School Breakfast Program is appropriate for each school site and grade level? Does the process allow for consideration of logistical concerns such as lost instructional time or the removal of additional trash?
- Does the facilities master plan ensure that long-range planning considers the needs of any model of School Breakfast Program that the district/COE chooses to implement?
- Has a cost-benefit analysis been provided to help the board and the public understand the financial implications of implementing the School Breakfast Program?
- How can the board best engage the staff and other stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of the School Breakfast Program?

Case studies

Central Unified School District—Universally Free Grab 'n Go Breakfast

Central Unified School District in Fresno County has two high schools, two junior high schools, 13 elementary schools and two continuation high schools. District enrollment is 14,500 with 64 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

In 2009-10, the district began implementing a “universally free” Grab 'n Go breakfast model. Previously, breakfast had been served only at one time and place—in the cafeteria before school. Participation in school breakfast was low throughout the district. Students, particularly high school students, were not visiting the cafeteria for breakfast.

The majority of students who did participate in the district’s conventional breakfast program were eligible for free and reduced-priced school meals. This made the breakfast program a good fit for Provision 2, an option of the federal School Breakfast Program which allows schools to serve breakfast at no charge to any student who wants it that day, regardless of their household income. With this model, breakfast service carts are stationed at school entrances where students regularly pass through on the way to class. Because the district adopted Provision 2, nutrition services staff only have to keep count of the total meals served from each cart.

Start-up costs (e.g., purchasing milk chests, freezers, signage and service carts) were funded by a California Department of Education breakfast expansion grant. To support the new model, nutrition services staffing was rearranged throughout the district, resulting in only a two-hour labor increase districtwide. A number of strategies were employed to promote the new model, including fliers, onsite signage, newspaper articles and Connect-Ed (telephone) messages.

With the universally free Grab 'n Go, school breakfast participation increased across the district. The most dramatic increase occurred at the high schools, one of which went from serving 155 breakfasts per day to 800–1,000 breakfasts per day. The first year that the new model was implemented, the districtwide increase in breakfast participation generated an additional \$454,000 in meal reimbursements.

Because the Grab 'n Go model serves students at multiple locations on each campus, waste management was a concern. The custodial staff does spend some part of the work day removing trash generated by the breakfast

program. To help mitigate this impact, the Nutrition Services Department procured, free of charge, used barrels from a vendor. The Maintenance Department removed the tops of these barrels so they could serve as additional trash receptacles.

Principals and parents praise the breakfast program for creating a welcoming environment. School nurses confirm a significant decrease in the number of students leaving class due to stomachaches and headaches. Ten of the district’s 13 elementary schools and both junior high schools also experienced double-digit growth in their API scores following implementation of universally free Grab 'n Go breakfast.

As a result of weather conditions during the winter of the 2010-11 school year, breakfast service was returned to many of Central Unified’s school cafeterias. Despite that shift in location, from January through May 2011, the district served nearly 47,000 more school breakfasts than during the same period the prior year. Moreover, from January through May 2011, the district’s school breakfast participation generated \$61,000 more in federal meal reimbursements than it had during the same period in 2010. The addition of music in the secondary schools’ dining areas and increased choices, including extra fruit and yogurt, reportedly contributed to the boost in 2010-11 school breakfast participation. The success of Central Unified’s school breakfast program has been because of many of these factors, but the “universally free” aspect has created a culture where breakfast is now recognized as an important part of every student’s school day.

Hawthorne School District—Classroom Breakfast

Hawthorne School District in Los Angeles County is home to eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and one academy high school. In 2002, the district’s Food Services Department was operating at a fiscal loss. Only 30 percent of students participated in the School Breakfast Program, though approximately 80 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

The Food Services team identified universally free Classroom Breakfast as a strategy to increase breakfast participation and revenue for the district. A cost-benefit analysis showed that Classroom Breakfast would be a fiscal benefit to the district. The Food Services Department shared this analysis, as well as information about the student health and academic benefits of breakfast with the board, administrators, principals, teachers, custodial staff and parents. This effort secured approval for the Classroom Breakfast model.

The Food Services Department received a state breakfast expansion grant to help fund the start-up costs of new equipment required for Classroom Breakfast. The Food Services team developed a comprehensive training manual for all personnel that would be involved with the program. Teachers, food services staff, custodians and students were trained on the operation of Classroom Breakfast, how it would affect their daily tasks and how to implement best practices. Teachers were also invited to enjoy a free breakfast each day with their students. The district provides hot breakfasts twice a week and cold breakfast on the other days, serving items such as whole grain bagels, muffins, egg and cheese burritos, and quesadillas.

Following implementation of Classroom Breakfast, participation rose very quickly to 90 percent of total students. This increase in participation generates \$7,500 per day in additional revenue. The Food Services Department now operates in the black and no longer infringes on the district's general fund.

The Food Services Department committed a period of over two years to refine the program districtwide and gain full acceptance from all stakeholders. Teachers report a high level of satisfaction with the program, noting that students are better behaved and no longer ask to visit the school nurse with stomachaches before lunch. District students and schools continue to benefit from the Classroom Breakfast model.

Compton Unified School District— Classroom Breakfast

On September 22, 2010, Compton Unified School District launched its first Classroom Breakfast program at Rosecrans Elementary School. Since then, the model has been implemented at three additional sites with plans to have all Compton USD elementary schools offering Classroom Breakfast. The Student Nutrition Services team has worked to engage all stakeholders and sufficiently prepare all teachers, other staff, students and parents for a successful transition to Classroom Breakfast.

Compton USD offers breakfast free of charge to all students through the Provision 2 option. Classroom Breakfast is dramatically increasing School Breakfast Program participation. According to the accounting director for the district, revenues generated by Classroom Breakfast will offset costs in one year, if not earlier. In addition to these positive fiscal outcomes, teachers report that students are showing improved behavior and focus during instructional time.

Percentage of Compton USD Participating in School Breakfast Programs

	With Conventional Breakfast	With Classroom Breakfast
Rosecrans ES	20%	76%
Bursch ES	32%	87%
Willard ESS	35%	81%
Foster ES	19%	75%

Sanger Unified School District—Classroom Breakfast and Mid-morning Nutrition Break

Sanger Unified School District in Fresno County utilizes several different breakfast models, including Classroom Breakfast (in six elementary schools as of fall 2011) and breakfast during mid-morning nutrition break, to meet the needs of its 18 schools. One K-8 campus, Quail Lake Environmental Charter School, serves breakfast from the cafeteria during a mid-morning nutrition break that coincides with recess. Less than 30 percent of the students on this campus qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Approximately 10 percent of students participated when breakfast was served in the cafeteria before the start of school. With the nutrition break model, more than 30 percent of all students are served each day.

Sanger High School also employs the mid-morning nutrition break model to serve breakfast. Approximately 75 percent of the students enrolled at this campus are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. With the mid-morning breakfast, 80 percent of all the students on campus participate in breakfast each day.

Sanger USD's innovative breakfast programs are fiscally sustainable and have significantly increased revenue for the district. Principal support has been a key factor in the success of the district's breakfast programs. Sanger's site administrators utilize the school breakfast programs to ensure that their students are well nourished and ready to achieve each day, especially during testing periods.

Parents stay actively engaged in the district's breakfast program through a Nutrition Committee that was established in 2009. The committee is a forum through which parents can provide feedback to the Child Nutrition staff and spread the word about the district's nutrition programs. With support from stakeholders across the district, Sanger USD has increased breakfast participation, generated revenue, supported student health, and bolstered academic achievement through a variety of innovative breakfast service models.

Resources

CSBA

www.csba.org

BreakfastFirst Campaign

www.breakfastfirst.org

California Department of Education, Nutrition Services Division

www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu

California Food Policy Advocates

www.cfpa.net

California Healthy Kids Resource Center

www.californiahealthykids.org

California Project LEAN (*Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition*)

www.californiaprojectlean.org

U.S. Department of Agriculture, School Breakfast Program

www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast

End Notes

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