

School Breakfast Participation

September 3, 2008
Report 14-2008

*A publication from:
Institute of Public Policy
University of Missouri
137 Middlebush Hall
Columbia, MO 65211*



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Students who do not eat breakfast are more likely to score lower on standardized tests, experience more disciplinary problems, have higher absentee rates, have more tardy days, receive lower math grades, and score lower on psychological adjustment tests.¹ However, nationwide, during the 2006-2007 school year, the School Breakfast Program served less than half of the low-income students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In an attempt to serve more students, schools are implementing alternative methods of serving breakfast rather than relying on the traditional service method.

The School Breakfast Program

The School Breakfast Program (SBP) was permanently authorized by Congress in 1975. The SBP was initially implemented to serve low-income students and students who had long bus rides to school. The program has evolved to target all children in an effort to provide nutritious options for meals.² Nationwide, during the 2006-2007 school year 45.3 percent of the students who qualified for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participated in the SBP.³

Studies show there are several benefits for students who eat breakfast. Students who eat breakfast perform better in school, as seen through improvements on cognitive tests, have fewer tardy days, fewer absences, higher math grades, and fewer disciplinary problems. School breakfasts also tend to provide more nutrients than breakfasts eaten at home.⁴

Increasing Student Participation

The traditional method of serving school breakfast is to serve breakfast in the cafeteria before school begins. The benefit of this method is that the cafeteria is already equipped to serve meals to large numbers of students. However, concerns with this method include the time breakfast is

served and the stigma attached to eating breakfast at school. Because breakfast is served before school begins, there may be conflicts with bus and drop-off schedules. Students may not be able to get to school early enough to eat breakfast. There is also a stigma attached to eating breakfast at school because those who eat breakfast may be identified as students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

In an effort to increase student participation in the SBP, schools are adopting different methods of serving breakfast. New methods include universal breakfast, breakfast in the classroom, grab and go breakfasts, breakfast after first period, and breakfast on the bus. This policy note will focus on the latter four options.⁵

Increasing Student Participation in SBP: Alternative Service Methods

Breakfast in the Classroom

Breakfast served in the classroom
Reduces scheduling conflicts
Reduces stigma for low-income students

Breakfast after First Period

Students eat at break or in second period class
Reduces consumption of vending machine snacks
Reduces stigma for low-income students

Grab and Go Breakfast

Breakfast served at carts and consumed during break
Reduces consumption of vending machine snacks
Reduces stigma for low-income students

Breakfast on the Bus

Breakfast served during bus ride to school
Benefits students with long bus rides
Reduces stigma for low-income students



Through breakfast in the classroom, breakfast is served to students in class at the start of the school day. By serving breakfast at the start of the day rather than before school hours, more students are able to participate in breakfast. Breakfast served in the classroom leads to the highest participation rates as all students are offered breakfast and given a specified time to eat breakfast. Breakfast in the classroom eliminates any scheduling conflicts that result from bus schedules and drop-off times.⁶ Of the four methods discussed here, breakfast in the classroom tends to require less labor time because meals do not have to be individually sold or prepackaged as with other service methods. All of the meals are served at the same time to the classroom and teachers take count of how many meals are served.⁷

Concerns with breakfast in the classroom include the additional cleanup required and the lost class time. Many schools report delivering trash bags with breakfast. Children then throw away their own trash and clean up their desks after breakfast. As for lost instructional time, students often eat during morning announcements. In some schools, teachers reported they used breakfast time to teach students about nutrition.⁸ Other teachers reported they had more instructional time because serving breakfast led to fewer absences, fewer tardy days, fewer visits to the nurse, and fewer disruptions in class.⁹

An alternative method of serving breakfast is grab and go breakfasts, where students can pick up bagged breakfasts or a la carte items from locations throughout the school. They then eat breakfast during a break or during first period. This method takes less time to prepare than traditional breakfast because of the types of food served.¹⁰ As with breakfast in the classroom, concerns for grab and go breakfasts focus on the increase in waste. Schools that implement grab and go breakfasts place trash cans near the breakfast locations to prevent littering in the school.¹¹

Another concern for grab and go breakfast is the nutritional value of the foods served. The foods served through grab and go breakfasts can be as nutritious as options served through traditional breakfast or breakfast in the classroom. The risk presented through this method is that students will buy a la carte items and not purchase a complete balanced meal. In order to encourage students to purchase a balanced meal, schools can package complete meals for purchase. As seen in Table 1, schools can realize greater profits if they encourage students to purchase meals that qualify for federal reimbursement. Schools can also price a la carte items higher to encourage students to purchase a complete breakfast.¹²

A third alternative for serving breakfast is breakfast after first period or mid-morning breakfast. Students are served breakfast that they eat during a break or during second period. This allows students to eat later in the morning. It provides a healthy alternative to vending machine options.¹³ Again, this may create more waste, but schools can address the problem by placing more trash cans throughout the school.¹⁴

A final option for serving breakfast is breakfast on the bus. Students are handed breakfast as they board the bus, and they eat on the way to school. This option benefits students who have long bus rides to school.¹⁵ It also encourages all students who ride the bus to eat breakfast and does not take away from class time. However, this can create more trash for bus drivers to clean up. Logistically, this may also be the more difficult alternative to implement in terms of getting breakfast to buses before they begin picking up students.

Costs of School Breakfast

The cost of implementing alternative breakfast programs can deter schools from trying the new methods. However, reports indicate that schools can benefit from increasing breakfast participation.

TABLE 1: COMPARING A LA CARTE AND COMPLETE BREAKFAST OPTIONS

Student's Choice	Food Cost	Student's Pay	Federal & State Aid	Profit to Foodservice
Cereal + Milk	\$0.46	\$1.00	\$0.00	\$.54
Cereal + Milk + Crackers + Juice	\$0.67	\$1.00	\$0.34	\$0.67

Data Source: Hilleren, H. (2007). School breakfast program cost/benefit analysis: Achieving a profitable SBP. UW–Extension, Family Living Program.



Researchers found schools needed the first year to adjust to new breakfast programs. Schools with excess cash balances are best prepared for the additional costs of new breakfast programs.

The first year of new school breakfast programs often presents the most challenges in terms of adjusting to the programs and developing the most efficient methods for serving breakfast. Schools that are already struggling to break even through meal programs are less likely to successfully implement new breakfast programs. After the first year, many schools adjust to new programs and find ways to break even and realize greater economies of scale.¹⁶

The costs of alternative breakfast methods vary. For each program, labor and equipment remain relatively constant. Therefore schools have large fixed costs for lunch and breakfast programs. Schools that implemented mid-morning breakfast programs, such as breakfast after first period, had lower labor costs because mid-morning options do not require two separate shifts for breakfast and lunch services.¹⁷

Food costs vary depending on the type of breakfast program implemented. Programs such as grab and go breakfast tend to have higher costs because of the packaging of food and types of foods served. However, increased participation leads to a decrease in costs per meal as schools realize greater economies of scale. Schools can benefit from greater efficiency in service as well as discounted prices from food vendors as they purchase larger quantities of food. In schools where food service administrators chose to provide healthier, even if more expensive, options, student participation increased more and offset the cost of providing breakfast.¹⁸

Schools can break even or profit from school breakfast programs. In one study, more than half of the schools reported making a greater profit from their breakfast programs than from their lunch programs.¹⁹ Schools that serve more students also receive more federal funding for the breakfast program. For the 2006-2007 school year, The Food Research Action Center (FRAC) estimated the potential funding schools would have received if they had reached a breakfast participation rate of 60 percent of low-income students who eat school lunch. If schools had reached 60 percent participation, as opposed to the rate of 45.3 percent actually achieved, FRAC estimates 2.6 million more children would have eaten breakfast and states would have received \$555 million more in federal funding.²⁰

Conclusion

Breakfast programs provide many benefits for school-age children. The benefits are not limited to better nutrition, but also include improved academic performance. While the School Breakfast Program attempts to address the need to provide students with nutritional breakfast options, school breakfast programs currently fail to reach more than half of the low-income students served through the school lunch program.

With schools recognizing the need to increase participation in the school breakfast program, new methods of serving breakfast are available. The cost of alternative methods acts as a deterrent, but research has shown that schools can effectively implement alternative breakfast methods without increasing the overall cost of the program. With the potential to increase participation without increasing cost, alternative methods of serving school breakfast warrant further consideration.

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¹⁶ Hilleren, H. (2007). For more information on assessing schools' individual programs and needs, see USDA's Discover School Breakfast Toolkit at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/toolkit/>.

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Author Biography

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Suggested Citation

Minton, S. (2008). "School Breakfast Participation." Report 14–2008. Retrieved [Month Day, Year], from University of Missouri Columbia, Institute of Public Policy Web site: <http://www.truman.missouri.edu/ipp/>

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