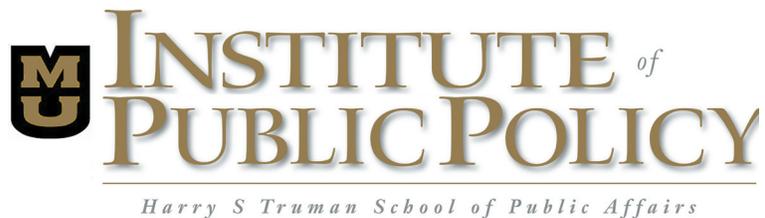


Universal Breakfast Programs in Public Schools

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Universal Breakfast Programs in Public Schools

Sarah Minton

The School Breakfast Program allows schools to provide breakfast to students at free and reduced costs in an attempt to provide nutritious meals for low-income students. 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. Universal Breakfast Programs that provide free meals to all students, regardless of income, are a policy alternative that will reach more students and provide them with several academic and health benefits.

The School Breakfast Program

The School Breakfast Program (SBP) was established by the U.S. Congress in 1966. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 launched the SBP as a pilot program to provide reimbursement for breakfasts served in public schools, nonprofit private schools, and residential child care facilities. The program is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and targets low-income students and students who travel long distances to school. In 1975, Congress permanently authorized the program.¹

Through the SBP, schools receive reimbursements for serving breakfast, with higher reimbursements for schools with “severe needs,” where at least 40 percent of lunches served are free or reduced-price. Under USDA’s National School Lunch Program (NSLP), meals are provided at no cost or at a reduced price to income eligible students. Reimbursements for schools vary for free, reduced-price, and paid meals, as shown in Table 1.

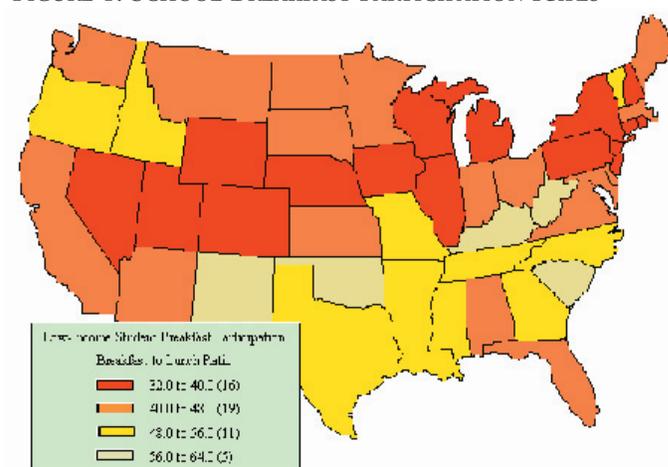
TABLE 1: REIMBURSEMENT RATE FOR THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM (2006-2007)

	Reimbursement Rate		Price of Meals to Children
	Non-Severe Need	Severe Need	
Free	\$1.31	\$1.56	\$0
Reduced-Price	\$1.01	\$1.26	\$0.30 (maximum school can charge)
Paid	\$0.24	\$0.24	Varies

Data Source: Food Research Action Center (2007). *School Breakfast Scorecard*

Nationwide, for every 100 students who qualified for free or reduced-price meals under the NSLP during the 2006-2007 school year, 45.3 percent of eligible students, less than half, participated in the SBP. Participation rates across the states can be seen in Figure 1.² The ultimate goal of universal breakfast programs is to increase this participation rate to 100 percent, by providing free breakfast to all students.

FIGURE 1: SCHOOL BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION RATES



Data Source: Food Research Action Center (2007). *School Breakfast Scorecard*

Across the states, participation rates vary, with the lowest fifteen states serving breakfast to less than 40 percent of eligible low-income students and the highest fifteen serving more than 48 percent of eligible students. New Mexico serves the highest number of eligible students, 61.1 percent. Missouri ranked fourteenth among the states, serving breakfast to 50.2 percent of low-income students.³

Breakfast Programs Benefit Children

Several studies highlight the benefits of breakfast for school-aged children. Students who eat breakfast perform better in school, as seen through increased math and reading scores and improvements on cognitive tests. Those who eat breakfast at school score higher on standardized tests. School breakfasts also tend to provide more nutrients than breakfasts eaten at home.⁴

In studies conducted by Kleinman, et al., students whose parents reported food insufficiencies were more likely to repeat grades, receive educational counseling, receive mental health counseling, score lower on psychological adjustment tests, have lower math grades, and have more absences and tardy days.⁵

In a study of Boston Public Schools, researchers found significant differences across several measures between children with food insufficiencies and children without food insufficiencies. Children who were classified as at risk scored higher on the Pediatric Symptom Checklist, a 35 item questionnaire used to identify “psychosocial problems in children.” The children also had lower grade point averages, lower grades in reading, math, science, and social studies, higher rates of absences, and more tardy days. All of the differences were statistically significant.⁶

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) reports similar benefits from breakfast. FRAC is a national nonprofit organization that works to bring awareness of and reduce hunger and poverty issues. FRAC notes that children who eat breakfast are less likely to experience disciplinary problems at school and are less likely to visit the school nurse.⁷

The Food Research and Action Center also finds school breakfasts tend to be healthier than breakfast served at home. The SBP mandates breakfasts served at school include at least one-fourth of the daily nutrients children need, no more than 30 percent of calories from fat, and no

more than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.⁸ The USDA reports children who eat breakfast at school eat a wider variety of foods, have a better overall diet, and are less likely to be overweight.⁹

Benefits of Universal Breakfast

Through a universal breakfast program, all students would be provided free breakfast, regardless of income. By providing breakfast to all students, universal breakfast will lead to greater participation for low-income students as well as all other students.¹⁰

A study of a free school breakfast program in St. Joseph, Missouri found several benefits from the program. Participation in the school breakfast program almost doubled and children from low income families saw higher attendance rates.¹¹

Benefits of Universal Breakfast

- Increased participation of low income students
- Higher math grades
- Fewer absences
- Lower scores on Pediatric Symptom Checklist

In a study of Boston public schools, the researchers found significant differences after implementation of a universal free school breakfast program. Of the children who increased participation in the school breakfast program, 32 percent showed improved nutritional status as measured through nutrient intake and risk of hunger. Of those who improved nutritional status, there were significant decreases in their scores on the Pediatric Symptom Checklist. They also saw significant improvements in math grades and decreases in absentee rates.¹²

Assessing the Cost of Universal Breakfast

Universal Breakfast programs increase participation in the SBP among all students. Because reimbursement is based on family income qualifications, schools will face increased costs for serving breakfast to more students who do not qualify for full reimbursement. This perceived cost can deter administrators from adopting a universal breakfast program. However, schools can also benefit from the program and increased participation.¹³

The federal funding for the SBP is entitlement money. All meals served through the SBP are reimbursed at the rates noted in Table 1. The Food Research and Action Center estimates the money schools do not receive each year due to schools not reaching higher participation rates. While the ultimate goal of universal breakfast programs is to increase participation to 100 percent, much smaller increases in participation rates will significantly impact the amount of federal money for which schools qualify. For the 2006–2007 school year, FRAC set the school breakfast participation rate at 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 that 2.6 million more children would have eaten breakfast and states would have received \$555 million more in federal funding.¹⁴

Had Missouri reached the rate of serving breakfast to 60 percent of the low-income students who received school lunches, it would have served breakfast to over 31 thousand additional students and qualified for an additional \$6,775,418 in federal funding.¹⁵

“Districts which have increased their participation significantly report that they have done so without adverse financial effects or even that they improved their ‘bottom line.’”

Food Research Action Center (2007). *School Breakfast in America’s Big Cities*.

Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Act also offsets the cost of higher participation in the SBP. Provision 2 reduces the amount of paper work and administrative costs for schools that provide free breakfast, lunch, or both meals to all of their students. Rather than collect applications for students eligible for free or reduced-price meals every year, under Provision 2 schools can collect applications every four years, thus reducing administrative costs. The schools are then reimbursed for student meals based on the base year until the next round of applications is collected.¹⁶

Increasing the number of breakfasts served through a universal breakfast program also requires schools to hire additional food service personnel. While this is an additional cost, it is possible to offset it through greater economies of scale. For example, many schools implementing universal

breakfast programs have found ways to be more efficient in food service.¹⁷

According to USDA’s report on the School Breakfast Program Pilot Project, in schools that implemented universal breakfast programs, total breakfast revenue exceeded total costs and the combined food and labor cost per breakfast served was 11 percent lower than in the control schools that did not implement universal breakfast programs.¹⁸

Conclusion

Breakfast provides many benefits for school-age children. The benefits are not limited to better nutrition, but also include improved performance in school. The School Breakfast Program attempted to address the need to provide low-income students with nutritional breakfasts. However, schools have failed to reach more than half of the students who qualify for free or reduced-cost meals.

In order to reach more students in need and provide greater benefits for students and schools, several school districts have adopted universal breakfast programs. By providing free breakfast to all students, regardless of family income, universal breakfast reduces the stigma low-income children face when eating breakfast at school.

Universal breakfast programs lead to increased participation rates in the School Breakfast Program. The benefits of universal breakfast programs include, but are not limited to, fewer absences, higher test scores in math, and fewer disciplinary problems.

With studies showing the universal breakfast programs do not necessarily lead to higher costs for schools, the benefits of such programs demonstrate the need to further consider providing free breakfast for all students.

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Author Biography

Sarah Minton is a 2008 graduate of the Truman School of Public Affairs. Her MPA specializations are Public Policy and Nonprofit Management. She earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Kentucky Wesleyan College.

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