

# BREAKFAST FOR ALL



# It's the most important meal of the day. Are your students getting what they need?

Naomi Dillon

**A**s families are pressed for time and overwhelmed with responsibilities, breakfast, sadly, is a disappearing morning ritual. Bundled off to school with their books and supplies, children leave home without arguably the most important tool for success: nutrition.

According to recent U.S. Census data, only 35 percent of parents with elementary-age children reported eating breakfast with their kids every day. The figure dropped to just 22 percent for parents of middle and high school students.

Once again, schools are expected to fill in the gaps—and they're trying. Twenty-seven states require some or all of their schools to participate in the federal school breakfast program. SBP, as it is known, is part of the larger federal child nutrition effort that provides cash assistance to states to feed low-income students in schools and residential child care institutions.

Today, as Congress looks to reauthorize the child nutrition program, President Obama is proposing to add \$1 billion more to increase access and improve the quality of meals. That means universal breakfast—providing free meals to students regardless of income level—is back on the table for some school systems.

Dora Rivas, president of the School Nutrition Association, says most districts would like to offer breakfast to all students. The problem, she says, is the money, especially in an economy where costs continue to rise even though funding is flat.

“I don't think there's anyone who would argue against the benefits of breakfast,” Rivas says. “It really comes down to the cost of providing it.”

## **All or nothing**

For school districts, universal breakfast has appeal for a variety of reasons. Student health is one, obviously, as is the access to all that the program provides. But, due to federal

formulas that reimburse districts based on participation rates, there also can be a financial incentive.

If participation rates are not high enough, offering free breakfast to all students can be a financial burden, especially when you add the costs for personnel and equipment wear and tear. In 2007-08, 8.5 million low-income students were enrolled in SBP, compared to 18.4 million in the National School Lunch Program.

That means that for every 100 students who ate a free or reduced-price lunch, 46 ate a subsidized breakfast. According to a 2008 analysis by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), if just 60 of every 100 kids who receive subsidized lunches also eat a free or reduced-price breakfast, 2.5 million more children would start the day off right and states would recoup an additional \$561 million in federal funding.

Districts with universal breakfast programs bank on the likelihood that offering free meals to every child will drive numbers up, making it possible to subsidize the percentage of students who aren't eligible for federal reimbursement.

Crystal Fitzsimmons, FRAC's director of school and out-of-school time programs, says participation levels tend to

increase when the stigma of being singled out is eliminated. "We're very supportive of universal breakfast as a way to reach more children," she says.

But it's hardly that simple.

### **Planning, buy-in are keys**

Successfully implementing a universal breakfast program in a school or expanding it across a district requires buy-in and proper planning across a broad spectrum of employees.

"It does take coordination between the campus and food service to increase participation," Rivas says. Buses must arrive promptly, teachers need to come early to supervise students, trash has to be collected, and cafeteria staff must be prepared to serve a large number of students.

Before all that, however, food service directors must crunch the numbers to make sure the budget works, and then keep a close eye and a tight fist over labor and food costs. That's what the Pittsburgh Public Schools did before it unveiled a universal breakfast program for all 66 of its schools in the fall of 2008.

Michael Peck saw a steady uptick in free and reduced-price meal applications during his first two years as head of the district's food service division. Peck performed a cost

# *Fuel for Success*

*A strong nutrition program can help both your students and your district, but challenges persist*

## **Jane Hentzler**

**T**hese days, school board members have so many responsibilities that it's easy to lose sight of what's on students' plates—their breakfast and lunch plates, that is.

As the director of nutrition services for Lee's Summit School District, I know school meals are critical to student achievement, and assure you that your child nutrition or food service programs are working hard to fuel that success. But they need your support.

We all know hungry children can't learn. In fact, studies show that students who eat school breakfasts make greater gains in standardized test scores than those who don't. But it's more than the quantity of food—quality counts, too.

In a recent study of fifth-grade students, those who ate a

healthy diet that included fruit, vegetables, protein, and fiber were significantly less likely to fail literacy tests. And research has shown that healthy eating correlates with fewer trips to the school nurse and less absenteeism.

Academic success is not the only reason to look closely at your food service operation. School nutrition programs also are critical to the district's bottom line and overall reputation among parents and students.

However, as districts are pushed to offer students greater access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, programs are getting squeezed by federal reimbursement rates for free and reduced-price meals that simply do not keep pace with rising costs. School nutrition directors walk a daily tightrope to balance budgets, and without adequate training and support, programs can easily fall into the red, impacting the entire district budget.

Meanwhile, if operators are so hampered by budget con-

analysis and determined that the district could turn its breakfast service, which had spotty participation, into a universal program that would capture more students.

“We have a production center that prepares and ships out food to the majority of schools daily, so we are able to control costs effectively and be the type of department that runs in the black,” Peck says. “But a big part of the participation rates are the principals. If this was going to work, I needed their help.”

He certainly got help from Cynthia Zurchin, principal of Schaeffer Primary School.

“My first thought, and it still is today, is that this is a wonderful program and long overdue,” Zurchin says.

Too many of her students, a majority of whom live in low-income households, came to school hungry, Zurchin says. Crying and complaining of stomach aches, they appeared in the nurse’s office shortly after classes began.

“We would ask, ‘Well, did you eat breakfast?’ And they would say ‘no’ and we’d give them a granola bar and they’d turn into a completely different child,” Zurchin says.

When universal breakfast was introduced, the school rolled it into a daily assembly it holds every morning to spotlight good deeds and the students who perform them.

straints that the food quality suffers, participation in school meal programs will dwindle as parents and students become increasingly dissatisfied.

Fortunately, just like the students they serve, school nutrition programs can shine with proper leadership and support.

### **A healthy recipe for excellence**

The School Nutrition Association (SNA), the nonprofit professional organization that represents child nutrition workers who plan, prepare, and serve school meals, honored our district with its top award for 2009. Lee’s Summit also received a \$25,000 grant to further enhance our school programs.

Having our school board’s continued support has been critical to our success as we work to improve the health and nutrition of school meals. For many of us, what we think of school lunch is shaped by memories of school meals from our childhood.

But, as our district has shown, lunch can be transformed in schools nationwide.

Lee’s Summit students dine on fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables, whole-wheat chicken wraps, chicken teriyaki, and low-fat yogurt parfaits. Chicken nuggets are breaded in whole wheat and baked, not fried, to make them healthier.

The combination has cut down on nurse visits, tardiness, and bad behavior.

“We give out these certificates to kids who did really nice things and everyone is quiet and trying to listen for their name, then they clean up and help one other because they want to get recognized the next day,” Zurchin says. “The whole thing lasts 10 minutes; we’ve got it down to a science.”

No doubt, efforts like that have resulted in Pittsburgh’s better-than-anticipated results. Peck says his goal was to increase breakfast participation levels by 20 percent. The district ended the 2008-09 school year with rates up by 33 percent.

### **A provision to make it easier**

Much of the credit for Pittsburgh’s success certainly lies with Peck’s fastidious cost containment and building promotion from people like Zurchin. The principal uses words like “complimentary” instead of free, just like a hotel would, to boost excitement and participation.

But a good portion of the outcome is also due to a federal program called Provision 2. Traditionally, schools must annually get qualifying families to apply for free or reduced-priced meals. Provision 2 allows districts to collect the data and submit it once every four years. In return, districts



Student taste tests are held throughout the year to help select new, nutritious offerings, and we have a very active student Nutrition Services Council that helps ensure that the healthy food we serve is food kids will eat.

Our district is not alone. According to SNA’s 2009 *School Nutrition Operations Report*, nearly every district offers fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and salad bars, or prepackaged salads.

agree to provide free breakfast to all students.

Applying for Provision 2 status reduces paperwork, associated administrative costs, and—because a simple headcount suffices—the overall headache of having to track and record the various categories of meals served daily. However, districts must be sure the savings are enough to cover the cost of shouldering students who could afford to pay.

“Provision 2 is a tool that makes it easier for districts to provide universal breakfast, but they are not mutually exclusive,” Fitzsimmons says.

Obviously, the provision does not make sense for districts with a relatively low percentage of low-income students. It also might backfire on a district experiencing demographic shifts.

That’s what happened to the San Antonio Independent School District, which operated its universal breakfast program under Provision 2 for more than a decade. When it first applied for the stipulation in 1996, the Texas district had a sizable portion of poor students and a healthy participation rate. Over time, San Antonio’s ability to meet both of those criterion declined, while operational costs spiked. Complicating matters was a more stringent nutrition policy adopted by the district that made it impossible to supplement the child nutrition department’s income with a la carte sales.

“Financially, we are supposed to be self-supporting, but

we were falling behind,” says Sally Cody, executive director of the district’s food and child nutrition services.

When the district decided to end its participation in Provision 2 in the middle of 2008, the food services division was \$3.2 million in the red.

“It was a hard decision to make, but we could see it wasn’t economically feasible to continue,” Cody says.

But the board settled on a compromise, agreeing to absorb the cost of a universal breakfast program in the elementary schools. Combined with staffing cuts through attrition, a streamlined menu, and a commitment from every grade school to support the program and integrate breakfast into the day, the district’s food service division is again in the black.

“[Provision 2] is a good program, but you have to have high participation and high free and reduced rates, otherwise you’re not going to make it,” Cody says.

### **Varied approaches yield greatest success**

The states and districts that have made the greatest inroads in this endeavor also offer the greatest variety in how universal breakfast is executed.

For instance, Pennsylvania recently enacted a policy allowing school districts to count breakfast as instructional time, as long as someone is providing actual instruction.

Lee’s Summit’s award grant will be used to promote wellness and nutrition education. We are expanding our nutrition library by 50 percent and making materials available to preschools, Mothers of Preschoolers groups, and other community organizations. Library resources include textbooks, cooking videos for kids, nutrition education DVDs and PowerPoint presentations, FoodPlay workbooks, and Color Your Plate activity sheets.

Schools will have access to wellness and nutrition education assembly kits. Parents and students can search our online nutrition calculators, allowing them to track nutritional intake and learn together how to make the best food choices in school. And students in the lunch line will find interactive displays, where they can see the amount of sugars, fats, and nutrients in their food choices.

Programs like these provide students with an education in healthy eating and earn rave reviews from community members. After we hosted a Mothers of Preschoolers group nutrition education session, word got out about the Lee’s Summit school nutrition program and the amount of choices we offer our students.

Before we knew it, we were receiving numerous calls from neighboring districts asking for tips on how to improve their own programs.

### **Funding challenges cut potential**

Many school nutrition programs nationwide are eager to enhance their nutrition education programs, increase offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables, and expand their use of whole grains, yet they struggle to make improvements due to budget constraints.

Part of the problem is the low reimbursement rate for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. These federal programs reimburse schools that serve free and reduced-price meals to eligible children. In some cases, these meals represent the only food children receive all day, making the programs critical to the academic success of at-risk students.

Unfortunately, these underfunded programs can drain school nutrition resources. According to the SNA, the average cost to prepare and serve a school lunch that meets federal nutritional standards is \$2.92, but the federal reimbursement rate for that free lunch is only \$2.68, leaving financially strapped school nutrition programs to make up the substantial funding gap.

Meanwhile, in a recent survey of school nutrition directors, the SNA found that more than half of school districts expect to face continued cost increases for food, supplies, labor, gas, and transportation in 2009-10. Congress should

Recently San Diego and Atlanta public schools began testing “breakfast in the classroom,” a fairly new model of delivery where meals are delivered and eaten in class.

“We’ve been doing this in many different school districts and found it to be very effective, especially in elementary schools,” says Hossein Akhtarkhvari, the district manager of Sodexo, which along with Jackson Hospitality provides the food service for Atlanta Public Schools.

Implemented in three elementary and two middle schools last spring, breakfast in the classroom has driven participation levels up by 57 percent to the goal of 100 percent of students eating breakfast.

“We want to do this right, we want to do it correctly and responsibly,” says Akhtarkhvari. “As long as we have people that are interested, we will continue to expand the program.”

In South Carolina, nearly 40 percent of school districts offer classroom breakfast, which is one reason the state is a leader when it comes to student participation, exceeding FRAC’s benchmark ratio of 60 breakfasts for every 100 lunches served.

But South Carolina’s remarkable success, which is due in part to a state law requiring all schools to offer breakfast, also can be attributed to training and support for schools on how to do it. The state has even produced and sent a 13-minute video on the importance of school break-

fast for districts to use.

“We sold it to the educators, not just food service,” says Todd Bendenbaugh, the state education department’s director of health and nutrition. “That education process is hopefully what sets us apart. We didn’t just leave it up to districts to figure out.”

Still, many districts did have to figure out what worked best for them in making the leap to universal breakfast programs.

“Every district and every school is so different,” says Wanda Knight, president of the School Nutrition Association’s South Carolina chapter and food service director for Laurens County School District #55, which offers universal breakfast at each of its campuses.

Some districts serve breakfast in the cafeteria, while others have grab-and-go options in the hallways. Some offer universal breakfast programs at a certain participation threshold, but others can’t.

“It depends on your costs, the products used, and how closely you work with your principals and parents,” says Knight. “You can’t say universal breakfast is magically going to happen if you have 70 percent [of students who qualify for] free and reduced-price meals. It’s a truly individualized process.” ■

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increase the reimbursement rate for school meals, but the effort needs school board members to raise their voices on this issue as well.

In Lee’s Summit, we have worked extremely hard to stay profitable over the years. Our department is very conscious of expenses and meals-per-labor-hour, as well as food quality. Managers receive extensive training in budgeting; they receive monthly updates on where their departments stand as well as reports flagging any potential problems.

Our program faces challenges, however, as budget cuts have resulted in hits to our large equipment budget. Nationwide, some school cafeterias still contain fryers because the nutrition programs do not have the financial reserves to replace them with professional-grade steamers. Others are eager to do more cooking from scratch, but simply cannot afford the necessary kitchen infrastructure.

### **Training for excellence**

Financial constraints impact professional training as well. Many programs struggle to both hire and train lunchroom staff, but as we have discovered, professional training is critical to successful fiscal management.

The school board in Lee’s Summit encourages our staff to participate in training activities, including state and

national conferences and continuing education and certification programs. All of our production staff must receive extensive safety training before they are classified as production workers. Staff also completes hands-on training in the kitchens with a trainer, as well as six weeks of classroom training. We also are dedicating part of our award grant to offer additional Healthy Edge and Serving it Safe classes for our staff and neighboring school districts.

As school board members, you play a vital role in successful school nutrition programs. You can provide certification and credentialing for your school nutrition teams, lobby Congress to increase federal support for meals, and help maximize enrollment in the free and reduced-price meals program.

Visit your school cafeteria for breakfast and lunch, acknowledge and celebrate the nutrition program’s successes, and foster an atmosphere of support and appreciation for the staff. Every good dish requires all the right ingredients, and your support is the key ingredient to successful school meals. ■

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