

BEATING CHILDHOOD HUNGER: YOU CAN HELP | PAYING FOR HIGH-QUALITY TESTS

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Feeding **HUNGRY** *Children*

School nutrition programs can go a long way toward defeating childhood hunger, and school leaders play a pivotal role in making sure these programs are available to children in need

**Kelli J. Windsor
and Kumar Chandran**

Students today are asked to balance a great deal—perform on tests, engage in the classroom, and participate in extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, in a society in which food is readily available, a large number of our students are coming to school hungry. That makes it harder for these students to meet all the demands and succeed.

School leaders can play a key role in solving this dilemma. Teachers and principals agree—more than eight out of 10 teachers and principals say school boards are critical to promoting school nutrition programs and ending childhood hunger.

“Hunger In Our Schools: Teachers Report 2013,” recently released by Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry campaign, finds that three out of four K-8 public school teachers and principals say they see kids who regularly come to school hungry because they aren’t getting enough to eat at home.

One out of every five kids in the U.S. struggles with hunger. Teachers and principals see this hunger firsthand in their schools, reporting overwhelmingly that students have trouble learning when they’re focused on their empty stomachs instead of on their lessons. Hungry students—teachers say, and research supports—lack concentration and motivation. They also struggle with poor academic performance,

behavior problems, and health issues.

"When I volunteered in the classroom, you could tell some students might be hungry. They weren't focused or staying on task, and snack time couldn't come fast enough," says Deborah Seelinger, a member of the school board in Minnesota's Rochester Public Schools.

Christopher Barclay, president of the school board for the largest district in Maryland, Montgomery County Public Schools, also has seen the problem firsthand. "You see kids coming to school who haven't had breakfast. They're frustrated, unhealthy, and unhappy. These students have a hard time focusing on schoolwork because they are distracted by their personal emotional needs."

As pressure increases around standardized testing and Common Core State Standards, we are asking our students to achieve more every day. That means we can't let them fall behind. Ensuring our students start the day with a healthy breakfast can help fuel them for achievement and success.

School breakfast can change lives

At least one in two teachers and principals says breakfast is extremely important to academic achievement—and they're right.

"Ending Child Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis," a report by Deloitte and the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices, finds federal nutrition programs like school breakfast are not only important in the fight to end childhood hunger, but also can have a potentially powerful and positive long-term impact on attendance, academic performance, graduation, and employment.

Deloitte analyzed publicly available data to develop several frameworks connecting outcomes from the School Breakfast Program, a federally funded nutrition program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with potential long-term health, education, and economic outcomes.

Research found that, on average, students who eat school breakfast have been shown to achieve 17.5 percent higher scores on standardized math tests and attend 1.5 more days of school per year. Students who attend class more regularly are 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school. High school graduates typically earn \$10,090 more per year and enjoy a 4 percent higher employment rate.

It's easy to see the ripple effect. Students who eat school breakfast can do better in school, leading to greater self-sufficiency after high school and, therefore, become less likely to struggle with hunger during their lifetime.

Closing the school breakfast gap

Even though more than 21 million low-income kids in the U.S. rely on a free or reduced-price school lunch, only half—about 11 million—also are getting a school breakfast.

Closing this gap is critical to ensuring success for students across the country. For example, in Minnesota, home to Seelinger's school district, if 70 percent of elementary and middle school kids eating a free or reduced-price lunch also were getting school breakfast, the potential impact could be 41,000 more students per year achieving better scores on standardized math tests, 62,000 more days of school attended per year, and at least 10,000 more students graduating from high school.

How do we close the school breakfast gap? It takes rethinking how breakfast is served.

Traditionally, schools serve breakfast in the cafeteria before class begins. We've learned this model can make it difficult for students to access their morning meal. Busy morning schedules and incompatible bus routes make it difficult for kids to arrive early enough in the morning to eat school breakfast. Often, a perceived stigma attached to the free meal in the cafeteria or preferences to socialize keeps students from getting school breakfast even if they really want and need it.

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Moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and making it a part of the school day, however, ensures more low-income students are able to start the day with a healthy meal.

In Rochester, a school system of 16,000 students in southeastern Minnesota where more than 34 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, increasing school breakfast participation was achieved by implementing new ways of serving school breakfast.

"Schools were serving breakfast in the cafeterias before the school day began, but we realized stigma was a big issue. Kids eating breakfast in the cafeteria were perceived to be the 'poor kids' and it kept many students who needed that healthy morning meal from participating," says Seelinger.

The Minnesota Department of Health awarded the Rochester Public School District a Statewide Health Improvement Grant. Some of the funds were used to change the way breakfast is served at school—making it easier for students to access and reducing the stigma attached to free school meals.

"My son's middle school started a Grab N' Go school breakfast program. Students can grab a breakfast on their way to class and eat it in the classroom. Many students par-

ticipate," says Seelinger.

In Maryland, Barclay's district also has been working to increase school breakfast program participation by changing the way it is served at school. "We've worked with our governor and local legislators to increase the number of schools who qualify for programs that make it easier for students to get a healthy breakfast in the morning," he says.

The difference school breakfast can make

One Rochester school, Riverside Elementary, saw an increase in school breakfast participation by 163 percent, thanks to implementing Grab N' Go and breakfast in the classroom models.

According to Seelinger, "The changes we've made to school breakfast have meant less tardiness, and teachers hear fewer complaints about hunger pains. The impact benefits all our students because it is an opportunity to start every day healthy."

One out of every two principals and teachers with breakfast in the classroom experience say it has been pos-

itive. The reported benefits include improvement in alertness (76 percent), better attendance (57 percent), fewer disciplinary problems (54 percent), fewer visits to the school nurse (55 percent), and fewer tardy students (49 percent). More than half of teachers report seeing behavior and health improvements in students since implementing the program.

Beyond the research findings, schools in the No Kid Hungry campaign report an improved sense of community among students.

Overall, Seelinger says, changes in her community to make school breakfast more accessible for all students were "definitely worth it. The whole program does more than just feed kids. It teaches them responsibility and helps ensure they are prepared to succeed." Barclay adds, "No matter the standards we ask our students to achieve, if a student is hungry, they can't learn." ■

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School leaders are key

As a school leader, you are in a strong position to help increase school breakfast participation and help ensure our students succeed in school and in life. Across the country, school boards are supporting efforts to expand school breakfast participation.

Having seen firsthand the implementation of new ways to serve school breakfast, Seelinger and Barclay have the following advice for school leaders:

Support increased school breakfast participation:

Says Seelinger, "It's the right thing to do, and if there is an academic benefit, all the better."

Barclay suggests the connection to achievement is key: "If you really look at ways to support schools to improve achievement, one clear way is to make sure our children get breakfast." As a school leader, supporting changes to improve school breakfast participation is critical to the success of the program and the future success of students.

Choose strategic areas: Barclay suggests looking for places where you can make the most impact. "Look at where you have pockets of poverty

or high free and reduced-priced lunch rates and focus on making the biggest changes there first."

Visit a program: "Learn from the success of other school districts that have increased school breakfast participation. Visit the schools and ask about how the changes were made and what were the benefits," Seelinger recommends.

Develop a system: Seelinger says, "The school has built a process where students collect trash and put it in the hall for janitors. Teachers use the time to center and organize students for the day. By creating a system for school breakfast, the school has a well-run

program that feeds kids, preparing them for the school day, and has minimum logistical obstacles."

Seek resources to help: "You will need to invest in equipment and training to make changes," says Seelinger. Many grants are available to help, including some through the No Kid Hungry campaign. There are also toolkits and resources, including the Start School with Breakfast Toolkit developed by the National Education Association and the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices. Other resources are available at <http://BestPractices.NoKidHungry.org/School-Breakfast>.

Help inform research: The No Kid Hungry campaign is building a map that paints an unprecedented view of school breakfast programs across the country. Help identify how schools are serving school breakfast by asking teachers and principals to visit NoKidHungry.org/Breakfast and map their school.