

EDITORIALS MAY 8, 2016 3:30 PM

Time for California school kids to get breakfast after the bell

HIGHLIGHTS

School breakfasts go uneaten because of simple logistical issues

Districts lose millions in federal funds because of cafeteria hours and stigma

Serving breakfast during school hours helps dramatically, but adults resist

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

It may come as a shock, given California's place as a world food supplier, but millions of children in this state come to school hungry every day.

Though the federal government subsidizes school breakfasts for students from low-income families, only about a third of the state's 3.3 million eligible kids actually use the program. Some cannot get to school early enough to make the cafeteria deadline. Others are embarrassed to accept a subsidized breakfast. Still others skip the most important meal of the day assuming they'll snack on junk food later.

The result is lower test scores, lethargic students, higher rates of obesity and diabetes and tens of millions of dollars in federal matching funds left on the table. Doing better shouldn't be controversial.

Yet for several years, the adults running the schools in this state have resisted proven and common sense remedies to this problem. This needs to change.

One of the easiest fixes is to move breakfast times into the school day, and, if possible, offer a nutritious meal to everybody in class, not just the needy. It needn't be fancy; teachers can pass out yogurt and granola in the classroom, or schools can tack 15 minutes onto a break so students can grab something from a cart or the cafeteria.

Programs like this have shown dramatic results – and big gains in federal reimbursement. The Los Angeles Unified School District has been offering “breakfast after the bell,” as it is called, since 2012, and in its first three years, breakfast participation rose from 30 percent of low-income students to 80 percent. In the 2014-15 school year, the program fed nearly 290,000 low-income kids on an average school day.

But statewide, this obvious solution has had trouble gaining traction. Last year, a smart bill to require breakfast after the bell at schools with high numbers of low-income students failed.

Concerns ranged from the cost, which actually was modest, to fears that serving food outside the cafeteria and during school hours would cut into instruction time and attract vermin. The arguments echoed initial grumbling from the LAUSD teachers union, which had a tense relationship with the superintendent who had mandated that district's breakfast after the bell program, and felt he had issued a mandate without soliciting their input.

Today, L.A.'s breakfast program is considered a national model. That's why state lawmakers should find a way to move the needle on this issue this year.

California Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit that focuses on health and nutrition access, is trying again to persuade state lawmakers to mandate breakfast after the bell at high-need schools. Last week, they asked an Assembly budget subcommittee to spend \$5.8 million in extra state match money to draw up to \$50.8 million in federal reimbursement and to serve more than 580,000 additional low-income kids.

The group also asked for \$4.2 million in grant money to encourage districts to expand school breakfast programs. School administrators and nutritionists agreed it would be nice to feed more children but told the panel that a mandate would invite collective bargaining problems with teachers and janitors' unions and intrude on local control.

Those are grown-up problems. If local control is a must-have, then at least the state can substantially increase grants to encourage districts to try breakfast after the bell. Surely the details can be worked out with janitors and teachers, who also like children, and districts would welcome the federal reimbursement. Best practices could be developed and shared.

The state and local districts also could work with nonprofits such as the Washington, D.C.-based Share Our Strength, whose No Kid Hungry campaign, with considerable involvement by actor Jeff Bridges, helped underwrite the LAUSD breakfast rollout and is looking to ramp up its California presence.

This is a solvable problem, so let's solve it. California should be ashamed if its adults can't put kids first.
