



California Schools Magazine

Perspective: Help wanted: School breakfast champions needed in your area

By: Ellen Braff-Guajardo Published: March 17, 2011

While 2011 guarantees to be another daunting year for schools, improving local school breakfast programs is a promising strategy leading to substantial educational and fiscal gains. Successful school breakfast programs enhance student achievement, attendance, behavior, and health, and can contribute significantly to a district's bottom line. Assuring your school district or county office of education operates an effective school breakfast program is a win-win-win in an economic and educational climate frequently overshadowed by woe-woe-woe.

In mid-2010, California Food Policy Advocates and a core of statewide education sponsors, including the California School Boards Association, launched the BreakfastFirst Campaign. BreakfastFirst is a three-year effort dedicated to improving access, participation and nutritional quality of school breakfast programs throughout California.

BreakfastFirst is off and running! Statewide sponsors and partners actively promoted the benefits of school breakfast and widely publicized the BreakfastFirst Campaign among their constituents. Then-state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell issued two letters extolling school breakfast's virtues and encouraging implementation of alternative models, particularly Classroom Breakfast. O'Connell's July 1, 2010 letter, issued jointly with state Controller John Chiang, confirmed that, for state audit purposes, Classroom Breakfast counts as instructional time so long as instructional activities are also conducted—thereby putting to rest an oft-expressed concern about moving breakfast into the classroom.

The Campaign's website, www.breakfastfirst.org, developed into a rich, expanding inventory of "best practices," case studies, tools, fact sheets, breakfast videos and data. Moreover, a growing network of school breakfast "mentors" emerged, willing to lend support and guidance to others interested in improving their school breakfast programs.

Most exciting, more and more local educational agencies are revamping school breakfast. For example, Compton Unified School District and Pajaro Valley Unified School District mounted flourishing, multisite Classroom Breakfast programs with ambitious expansion plans. Ceres Unified School District piloted "universally free" breakfast at one elementary site and will implement it districtwide next school year. Central Unified School District's thriving Grab 'N Go program, where breakfast is universally free on every campus, serves as powerful inspiration to others willing to look at how to restructure school breakfast to better meet the school communities' needs.

Still, much work is needed. In the 2009-2010 school year, over half of California's public school students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals. Yet just 30 percent of these low-income students (and just 4 percent of higher-income students) participated in school breakfast. That means over 2¼ million low-income California students missed out on the learning and health benefits linked to a healthy school

breakfast.

Moreover, as a result of California's dismal school breakfast participation rate, LEAs lost out on \$350 million in federal breakfast reimbursements last school year. The bulk of those "lost" dollars would have paid for food, labor and other direct costs associated with providing more healthy breakfasts to more hungry students each school day.

However, the fiscal benefits of enhanced participation aren't confined to financing breakfast. Approximately 4.4 percent of all breakfast reimbursements flow to LEAs' general funds as "indirect costs" available for other expenses.

That "indirect" contribution can be significant. (During the 2008-09 school year, one California district forfeited \$5.5 million in federal breakfast reimbursements due to low school breakfast participation among its FRP-eligible students. Of that \$5.5 million, about \$248,000 would have augmented the district's general fund.) Additionally, increased Average Daily Attendance is an oft-reported impact of successful school breakfast programs, further boosting LEA budgets.

Bottom line, maximizing school breakfast participation just makes educational and financial sense. Evidence of the learning, behavioral and health benefits of school breakfast is swelling. Where nutrition services departments are operating profitably, increased breakfast participation means increased revenue. Where nutrition services departments aren't self-sustaining, increased breakfast participation means reduced or eliminated encroachment on general funds, freeing up precious dollars for other uses.

How can you improve your LEA's school breakfast program? First, learn your LEA's school breakfast participation rate and program design. (You can view your LEA's school breakfast participation rate and "lost" federal breakfast reimbursements at the "Your District's Data" tab at www.breakfastfirst.org.) Low breakfast participation is largely attributable to where and when breakfast is served. Most schools offer school breakfast only in the cafeteria and only several minutes before the first bell. That delivery model ignores the reality that many students simply aren't hungry so early in the morning, and that bus and parent drop-off schedules often leave even ravenous students with insufficient time for a cafeteria breakfast. Alternative breakfast models like Classroom Breakfast, Second Chance Breakfast, and Grab 'N Go Breakfast are known to significantly increase participation by providing students with opportunity to eat at a time and place better suited to their needs.

Investigate other factors' impacts on your LEA's breakfast participation. Do bus and bell schedules create barriers between students and breakfast? Is stigma attached to the breakfast program and, if so, what are its contributors? Could easy promotion, marketing and outreach strategies build and sustain enthusiasm and support for school meals? Do parents and students have genuine opportunities to weigh in on and learn about school menus, nutrition standards and the array of benefits associated with healthy school meals? Who are the LEA and community stakeholders who have been identified and recruited to support and sustain an improved school breakfast program?

Finally, enactment of supportive school breakfast policies contributes to breakfast success. The ultimate goal of school boards is to improve student learning and achievement. Specific, unambiguous school breakfast policies align with that ultimate goal while also supporting students' health needs.

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to designing and implementing effective school breakfast programs. Administrators, community groups, custodians, nurses, parent groups, students, teachers and wellness councils—in addition to school boards and nutrition services departments—all have important roles in strengthening school breakfast. BreakfastFirst's ultimate success depends upon the commitment of local champions. CFPA is here to help. Together, we can ensure that all California students start the school day well-nourished and ready to learn.

Ellen Braff-Guajardo is a senior nutrition policy advocate with California Food Policy Advocates' BreakfastFirst campaign.

BreakfastFirst Campaign

In addition to the California School Boards Association, other statewide BreakfastFirst Campaign sponsors include:

- California Department of Education
- Association of California School Administrators
- California Teachers Association
- California School Nutrition Association
- California School Nurses Organization
- California State PTA
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Western Region

Statewide partners include:

- California Action for Healthy Kids
- California Project LEAN
- Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program
- Central Coast School Food Alliance

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson serves as honorary chair of the BreakfastFirst Campaign.

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