

# San Jose Mercury News

## CONTRA COSTA TIMES

### The Oakland Tribune

## Improving student performance in California starts with breakfast

BY JEFF BRIDGES AND ROB BONTA

It's hard being a kid. There's class work, homework and, in some cases, part-time work.

It's even harder being a hungry kid. Imagine trying to focus on an important lesson with an empty stomach. How well would you perform?

Now multiply that feeling by 4.3 million.

That's the number of California students who are missing out on school breakfast each day. At least 2.2 million of these kids live in hard-working, low-income households where it's already a battle to make ends meet. Every student has the right to a quality education, and hunger should not deprive them of that right. When our kids don't get a nutritious start to their day, the quality of their education declines and California suffers.

Now, let's talk economics. Failing to serve breakfast at school is a poor use of existing resources. When kids don't get school breakfast, many of our most challenged schools lose out on federal funding, undermining local economies and our children's long-term success.

Breakfast is essential to academic achievement. A recent University of Iowa analysis of the national school breakfast program found that serving breakfast during the school day significantly increases test scores.

Experts in education and nutrition have linked school breakfast to better grades and improved attendance. The research also points to improved physical, mental and emotional health. Together, this translates into lower dropout rates and improved earning potential for our graduating students.

Students can't focus if they're hungry. When students can't focus, they struggle to learn, are less productive and are more likely to be tardy or absent. It's all part of a harmful cycle that can be prevented with practical changes.

California's schools are trapped in an outdated school breakfast model that doesn't work. Under the current system, most schools serve breakfast in the hour before the school day begins. Between working parents, busy school and work schedules, and challenges transporting kids to school, it's complicated to find time for breakfast, and children often slip into class just minutes before the bell rings, missing the opportunity to eat breakfast. The problem is made even worse because one in five schools does not serve breakfast at all.

A recent proposal introduced in the Assembly would solve many of these systemic problems and make a morning meal a reality for thousands of students.

AB1240 (Bonta and Thurmond), "Breakfast After the Bell," would establish basic requirements for school breakfast programs based on levels of student need. Many schools that do not offer breakfast would be required to do so. Higher-need schools would be required to integrate breakfast into the school day, after the first bell rings. Where student need is the highest, schools would also begin to offer breakfast free of charge to all students.

AB1240 would also provide schools with the flexibility to implement breakfast after the bell in the manner that works best for their students, teachers, administrators and staff. This could take any number of forms like offering breakfast during homeroom while taking attendance, serving breakfast from grab-and-go carts or making breakfast available in the cafeteria during a mid-morning break.

These approaches have proven effective in pioneering schools across California. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) -- the second largest district in the country -- has increased breakfast participation from 30 percent to 80 percent of low-income students in three years.

Districts in San Diego, El Monte and other cities have seen similar results. It's time to replicate that success in every corner of our state.

This smart modernization and expansion of the School Breakfast Program would largely be paid for by existing federal funds, funds that have been left on the table for decades. This money would not only feed hungry children, it would immediately boost local economies as more schools buy state produce and hire local workers. And more importantly, every kid would have the opportunity for a quality education and a quality breakfast. It's a win-win for schools, for students and for communities committed to seeing our children succeed.

We have the food. We have the funding. We have the proven models. Now, we need to make sure that every child has access to school breakfast.

If we want our students to be successful, we must provide them with the basic building blocks of an education. There is nothing more basic than keeping hunger out of our schools.

Every child deserves to start the day well nourished and ready to learn.

*East Bay Assemblyman Rob Bonta is the chair of the Assembly Health Committee and serves as a member of the Assembly Budget and Appropriations committees. Jeff Bridges is the national spokesman for Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign.*