

Some California Schools Make Breakfast the First Lesson of the Day

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Morning Grumble feeds kids breakfast in the classroom. Photo courtesy Nutrition Policy Advocate.

By Linda Childers

When Ross McGowan and his team of volunteers enter one of the classrooms at Healdsburg Elementary School, the students cheer excitedly. Their enthusiastic response isn't because they remember McGowan from his thirty-plus years in Bay Area television, but rather because he comes bearing food.

After retiring from television in 2009, McGowan, the affable host of shows including KTVU's Mornings on Two, and KPIX's People are Talking, found himself looking for a way to give back to his hometown of Healdsburg. He remembered reading about how many children go to school hungry each day, and he wondered if there was a way he could make a difference locally.

McGowan approached Stephanie Fieth, principal of Healdsburg Elementary, and learned that while two-thirds of her school's students qualified for a federally assisted School Breakfast Program, many of those children did not participate in the school's nutrition program. The United States Department of Agriculture reports that low turnout for school breakfasts is a national problem, with only half of the 21 million children eligible for free or reduced-price breakfasts actually taking advantage of the morning meal.

"I knew there had to be a way to get healthy breakfasts into the hands of students," says McGowan who met with Fieth and school nutritionist Nora Bullock to brainstorm ways to feed the approximately 400 children who attend the K-2 campus, including the Healdsburg Charter School.

Their efforts resulted in the Morning Grumble program, an initiative launched almost three years ago that provides every student at Healdsburg Elementary — not just those from low-income families — with a healthy mid-morning meal, including items such as granola bars, fresh fruit and cheese sticks. Each morning at 9 a.m., McGowan and a core group of volunteers deliver breakfasts to 17 classrooms at Healdsburg Elementary, one of a handful of schools in California that has found success by offering students breakfast in the classroom.

"Research has linked eating a healthy breakfast to higher academic performance, fewer discipline problems, and reduced visits to school nurses," says Nicola Edwards, of California Food Policy Advocates, a statewide policy and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food.

Edwards has worked with schools across California to set up Breakfast in the Classroom programs similar to the one offered at Healdsburg Elementary. In 2012, the Los Angeles Unified School District began providing a universal breakfast — one that is free to all students regardless of their income — to nearly half a million students. Similar programs exist in Compton, Long Beach, Oakland and San Diego. "Making breakfast universal eliminates the stigma for low income students who may not want their friends to know they qualify for a free breakfast," Edwards says. "In addition, moving breakfast into the classroom teaches kids about healthy eating and etiquette and promotes camaraderie between teachers and students."

In addition to the nutritional benefits of a healthy breakfast, a February 2013 study released by the non-profit Share Our Strength/No Kid Hungry campaign found that students who regularly ate a school breakfast had better

attendance records and scored higher on tests.

Moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and into the classroom has been a win-win situation for both students and staff, says Jeff Harding, Superintendent, Healdsburg Unified Schools District.

"We used to have a low turnout when we served breakfast in the cafeteria at 7:30 a.m., before the start of classes," Harding says. "Many students weren't getting to school on time to eat breakfast, or didn't have an appetite that early in the morning."

Since the inception of the school's Morning Grumble program three years ago, it's rare for Fieth to encounter a hungry student.

"We used to have a line of students in the office each morning who had headaches and stomachaches from not eating," Fieth says. "Many of our teachers would buy snacks with their own money and keep them in the classroom for kids who were hungry."

Today, Fieth says teachers often report unexpected benefits after watching their students eat breakfast as part of a classroom community.

"Kids are trying foods they might not have otherwise tried like Kiwi or hummus," Fieth says. "Some teachers are also using the time together to discuss table manners, and we frequently hear that students are better able to focus on their classroom studies after the Morning Grumble."

McGowan, who has recruited a stable of approximately 50 volunteers, says the volunteers, many of whom are retired, get as much out of the experience as students.

"There's a lot of laughter and talking among volunteers as we're packing the meals," McGowan says. "When we get to the classes, the kids are so excited and they give the volunteers a warm welcome. Many volunteers say they miss doing volunteering with Morning Grumble over the summer break."

While Healdsburg Elementary uses adults as Morning Grumble volunteers, Edwards says other schools have had great success using students as "breakfast sheriffs."

"In some schools, students pick up insulated bags filled with breakfast items from the cafeteria and deliver the bags to classrooms," Edwards says. "It teaches the children about responsibility and they take a great deal of pride in their work."

While breakfast in the classroom programs continue to receive high marks from those at Healdsburg Elementary and other schools, some school officials aren't completely sold on the concept.

An April 2013 online survey conducted by United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), 51 percent of teachers said they disliked the program and wanted to put an end to it, citing loss of instructional time as their greatest concern. Although the national non-profit Breakfast in the Classroom says morning meals should only take 10-15 minutes, some UTLA teachers surveyed said the program often takes longer and cuts into valuable classroom time. Other UTLA teachers reported an increase of bugs in their classrooms. Eighty-eight percent of teachers surveyed said they would support breakfast for students as long as it was served in the cafeteria and not the classroom.

"When Breakfast in the Classroom programs are done well they can offer many positive benefits," says Edwards, who helps interested schools link with other educators who are successfully offering the program.

Edwards says many grants are also available to schools that want to start a Breakfast in the Classroom program, and the funding often goes unused.

"Most schools who have implemented the Breakfast in the Classroom program have reported great success," Edwards says. "We even have middle and high schools who have started the program using a Grab and Go model where students pick up conveniently packaged breakfasts from mobile service carts in high traffic areas, when they arrive at school or between classes. It makes it easy for the students to access healthy meals."