

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Stay Connected » sacbee.com

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Reddit](#) [Email](#) [Share](#)

Rancho Cordova elementary school bell means the start of classes – and breakfast

BY DIANA LAMBERT - DLAMBERT@SACBEE.COM

03/25/2015 6:34 PM | Updated: 03/26/2015 6:53 AM



Hovhannes Muradyan 10, eats breakfast while doing his schoolwork at his desk at White Rock Elementary School in Rancho Cordova on Friday. Low-income students at White Rock Elementary School eat a free breakfast in their classrooms. RANDALL BENTON / RBENTON@SACBEE.COM

One by one, students trickled into the multipurpose room at White Rock Elementary School, grabbed the handle of a little red wagon loaded with food and drinks and trotted off toward their classrooms.

The school bell was about to signal the start of class – and time for breakfast.

While most schools require low-income students to show up before school to eat breakfast in the cafeteria, the Rancho Cordova elementary campus is one of the few to integrate breakfast and lessons for all students after the school bell rings.

“This way we know everyone is getting a good meal,” said fourth-grade teacher Pam Pisciotto.

White Rock teachers pushed for the program seven years ago, after they realized that only about 30 percent of students were eating the breakfast offered in the multipurpose room before class though nearly all students qualified for a free morning meal based on family income. Either they couldn’t get to school on time, fell asleep or preferred to play with friends on the playground, said Principal Sandy Spaulding.

“In the classroom, 100 percent of the kids eat,” she said. “More also are making it to school on time. They want breakfast.”

States are considering whether to require schools to offer breakfast for low-income students after classes begin each day. In California, state lawmakers proposed legislation in February requiring schools to offer after-the-bell breakfast if at least 60 percent of students are eligible for subsidized school meals.

“We know from a large body of science that, when our kids start their school day with breakfast, they are better learners, they are less distracted, they are more focused and they are healthier,” said state Assemblyman Rob Bonta, D-Alameda, earlier this month. Bonta and Assemblyman Tony Thurmond, D-Richmond, co-authored Assembly Bill 1240.

Bus schedules and transportation problems often keep students from showing up early enough to take part in breakfast before school, advocates say. Children also may try to avoid the stigma associated with showing up to the cafeteria before school and identifying themselves as low income, said Tia Shimada of California Food Policy Advocates, which sponsored what it’s calling the “Breakfast After the Bell” bill.

On an average school day, 2.2 million, or 65 percent, of the state’s low-income students don’t eat a school breakfast, even though 80 percent of the state’s schools serve breakfast, according to California Food Policy Advocates, which promotes programs that improve the health of low-income residents.

Spaulding said a free breakfast is particularly important at a school like White Rock, where 95 percent of students are from low-income families. She said the breakfast program has resulted in better attendance and behavior at the school, but it hasn’t meant higher test scores. The school’s Academic Performance Index score fell from 725 in 2011 to 709 in 2013, below the state’s goal of having every school score higher than 800.

If AB 1240 passes, schools where more than 60 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches must serve breakfast after the bell starting in July 2017. Schools with at least 80 percent of its students in need must serve the breakfast for free starting in 2018. The bill also would require that breakfast – before or after the bell – be served at all schools where more than 40 percent of students qualify for the meal program.

Students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals based on their family income. A student from a family of four qualifies for reduced-price meals (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/rs/scales1415.asp>) with a household income of \$44,123 or free meals with a household income of \$31,005.

Last week, Miyah Stone, 11, pulled open zippers on the red and yellow insulated bags in the food service wagon parked in the back of her classroom after teacher Tricia Jenkins asked students to begin working on math exercises.

Her fellow fifth-graders lined up to grab a wrapped slice of French toast, a low-fat milk box and a carton of apple or orange juice. The Folsom Cordova Unified breakfast menu for March showed a variety of other breakfast entrees including mini pancakes, cinnamon rolls, breakfast pizza, banana bread and oat bars, along with the ever-present fruit selection and milk.

“How many students ate breakfast?” Stone called out after the last student returned to his desk. Twenty-five hands shot into the air.

Stone and her classmates take turns each day taking charge of breakfast. On Friday, she said students should be able to eat breakfast at school “because maybe, if they don’t have breakfast at home, they can get the nutrition they need.”

One by one, four stragglers knocked on the door of the fifth-grade classroom after school started. Getting students to school on time can be a challenge in a neighborhood where many families lack reliable transportation. The meal allows kids who wake up late the opportunity to eat breakfast, said fifth-grader Gisele Garcia, 10, after her meal.

There is no lack of food programs at the White Rock Elementary. Breakfast and lunch are free for all students. Dinner, which Spaulding compares to a “hearty snack,” is offered to 85 students in the after-school program. Sacramento County also runs a summer meal program at the school.

Joye McKetty, food service director of Folsom Cordova Unified, said three other district schools have tried serving breakfast during class in the last three years, but reverted back to serving the meal before the bell. “The principals didn’t want it anymore,” she said.

Asked about drawbacks, McKetty ticked off a list: ants, messy desks, spilled milk. She said serving meals in classrooms also makes it difficult to monitor the program, which requires that students take all three meal items – milk, a bread and a fruit – in order for the district to be reimbursed.

AB 1240 is expected to go before the Assembly Education Committee in April. If passed by the Legislature, it would be phased in over three years starting in July 2016.

Call The Bee’s Diana Lambert, (916) 321-1090. Follow her on Twitter @dianalambert (<https://twitter.com/dianalambert>).

Comments (#tabs-b0710947-1-tabPane-2)

Twitter

Facebook

Reddit

Email

Share