

Milwaukee Public Schools and Hunger Task Force Unite to Support Classroom Breakfast

Schools across the country are administering Classroom Breakfast with much success, reaching many students with nutritious meals who desperately need them the most.

The Academics and Breakfast Connection in New York documented facts related to the benefits of breakfast¹:

- Improvements in attendance
- Reduction in tardiness
- Fewer stomach aches and visits to the school nurse
- Increased test scores
- Fewer disciplinary problems
- Improved diets
- Reduction in obesity rates; and
- Increased revenues due to tremendous gains in breakfast participation

The Maryland Meals for Achievement study highlighted the following outcomes from Classroom Breakfast²:

- Standardized test scores increased 17 percent above the state average.
- Tardiness decreased by 8 percent.
- Referrals to the office for discipline decreased by 20 percent.

A unique coalition between advocates for hunger relief and Wisconsin's largest school district formed to improve the opportunities for the children of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Milwaukee, WI ranks fourth in the nation for child poverty rates. The majority of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, yet prior to the introduction of classroom breakfast many eligible students did not receive this most critical meal of the day. In an effort not only to feed hungry kids, but to close the achievement gap between a low socio-economic status (SES) district and higher SES counterparts, the Milwaukee Public Schools, together with the Hunger Task Force, tested Provision 2 and Universal Free Breakfast (UFB) with Classroom Breakfast.

With the help of the Hunger Task Force, six pilot schools began serving all students free breakfast in the fall of 2005. School staff reported positive impacts on student behavior, learning, health and socialization, as well as decreases in complaints of hunger. **Although most schools saw at least some increases in participation, breakfast participation doubled in the two pilot schools with Classroom Breakfast.**

With this success, Hunger Task Force and MPS began work to expand their UFB campaign. **Based on the results of the pilot, MPS officials mandated that, along with other key components, schools "must agree to serve breakfast in the classroom if they're to participate in the UFB initiative."**

One of the requirements for site participation in the UFB program in Milwaukee was a 95% meal application return rate, which proved to be a labor-intensive process on the part of the MPS and Hunger Task Force. To offset this effort, increasing the meal application return rate can increase E-rate and Title I funding to the district, and increasing breakfast participation brings more federal and state money for breakfast reimbursements.

In October 2006, 61 out of 207 total MPS schools were eligible to participate in the UFB initiative, with a total student enrollment of over 26,000. Evaluation of the 2006-2007 UFB classroom initiative took place from September 2006 to January 2007 by the Hunger Task Force staff. Interviews and surveys were conducted with MPS staff members including principals, teachers, nurses, foodservice personnel, social workers and engineers.

Preliminary findings³ as cited by Megan Lent, Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow, Hunger Task Force, are listed below:

The most commonly mentioned barriers to breakfast participation are:

1. Students do not get to school early enough;
2. Students do not have enough money for breakfast if they do not qualify for free meals;
3. Students would rather play outside with their friends than come inside for breakfast;
4. Buses are late; and,
5. Students or parents feel a social stigma (students are too embarrassed to eat breakfast at school or parents are too embarrassed to send their children to school for breakfast).

Many of these barriers were found to be alleviated by the UFB initiative when it was implemented in the classroom. **And, by November 2006 school breakfast participation in these schools had increased 240% in the UFB schools, in comparison to the same time one year ago.**

Many other positive results of Classroom Breakfast were cited.

1. At least 70% of school staff surveyed said the UFB program had a positive impact on their students' learning, learning readiness and health.
2. At least 55% of school staff surveyed said the UFB program had a positive impact on students' attendance, tardiness and behavior.
3. All principals agreed that breakfast at school is important to their students and ninety-four percent said they would like the district to provide free breakfast for all students.
4. Eighty-four percent of school staff said the quality of the food served during breakfast, including milk, cereal, juice and crackers, was very good, good or adequate.
5. Seventy-one percent of school staff are satisfied with serving breakfast in the classroom, and 52% say they were satisfied with the clean-up process. Building engineer's who do not have elevators in their buildings face additional challenges, and were least likely to be satisfied with clean-up procedures.
6. Sixty-eight percent of school staff surveyed said the UFB program has a positive impact or no impact on instructional time.
7. **At least 70% of school staff surveyed said it is important or very important for UFB to continue at their schools and be expanded to other schools in MPS.**

Through the dedication and efforts of personnel within the Milwaukee Public School District and the input and assistance of the Hunger Task Force, Milwaukee has been able to dramatically alleviate hunger and improve learning preparedness in over a quarter of the district's school sites. And with this success, the overwhelming recommendation is to both continue and expand the program to bring the benefits of classroom breakfast to more children within the district.

The full report can be found here: http://www.gotbreakfast.org/media/HFCR_full.pdf

¹ Academics & Breakfast Connection Pilot: Final report on New York's Classroom Breakfast project, 2005.

Breakfast for Learning: Recent scientific research on the link between nutrition and academic performance, 2006.

School Breakfast Programs: Energizing the Classroom, March 1998.

² Classroom Breakfast Scores High in Maryland, December 2001.

³ Excerpts modified from "Preliminary Findings From the 2006-2007 Universal Free Breakfast Initiative in Milwaukee Public Schools", Megan Lent - Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow, Hunger Task Force (February 2007) and "Exploratory Assessment of High School Breakfast Programs in Milwaukee Public Schools, 2006-2007", Amrit Mehra - Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow, Hunger Task Force (February 2007).