

Model school-breakfast program in spotlight

By: **JASON HARRIS** (Tue, Mar/06/2007)

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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — Tim Pirolli says all the clichés about the need for children to eat breakfast are true.

"They have better attendance, better grades," said the supervisor of the township school district's food service. "They're not thinking about eating, they're thinking about what the teacher is saying. They're less disruptive and more attentive.

"Everybody agrees they've got to eat," he said. "Now, we've got to encourage them and make it easier for them."

The "got breakfast?" Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works to expand access to school breakfast programs, is recognizing Pemberton Township's efforts to get students to eat the most important meal of the day.

Along with a handful of other school districts in the country, Pemberton Township has been included as a model program in the foundation's newly published "Classroom Breakfast Playbook."

The foundation maintains that its Classroom Breakfast program, which calls for serving breakfast in the classroom, raises test scores, reduces health issues and doubles participation numbers in the federal School Breakfast Program.

The "Classroom Breakfast Playbook" includes studies investigating the importance of breakfast and the opinions of food-service directors who support the program. The foundation released the playbook yesterday for the start of National School Breakfast Week.

The playbook will be sent to school officials nationwide who are considering expanding or starting the Classroom Breakfast program.

Pemberton Township has long offered breakfast for students from pre-kindergarten through high school, but Pirolli said that when the district got involved with the foundation and introduced "Breakfast Breaks" last year, participation shot up as much as 25 percent. About 1,000 of the district's 5,205 students eat breakfast at school each morning.

"Breakfast Breaks" include a sealed bowl of cereal, a box of juice, and a high-carbohydrate snack such as animal crackers, pretzels or graham crackers. The district buys the packages from Woodbury, N.Y.-based Eastside Entres and provides the milk.

"It's a real simple concept, but sometimes the simple things turn out to be the best," Pirolli said. "Cereal, even into college, is still the No. 1 breakfast food."

The district expands the program to offer a hot breakfast during exams and standardized testing.

Peg Duncan, the principal at Stackhouse School, said her students' proficiency scores have jumped since more students began eating breakfast. She doesn't think the early morning calories are entirely responsible for the increase, but she said breakfast makes a difference.

"Nutrition helps the brain," she said. "The brain has to be fed in order for it to work, in order to think."