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Rise and shine

School breakfast programs give students a good start

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Stop by Cindy Foley's office at the Salina School District, and it doesn't take long to see that the director of food and nutrition services has more on her plate than lunch.

The November issues of several trade magazines, such as the Journal of the American Dietetic Association and School Foodservice and Nutrition, have a common theme.

Breakfast.

Though school-provided lunches, which date to the post-World War II era, have been accepted for generations, the notion of school breakfasts is finding difficulty gaining traction, even after 30 years.

Sir Taylor, 7, son of Elbert and Rachelle Taylor, eats breakfast Wednesday morning at Cottonwood Elementary School.

Numbers from the Salina School District show that during this past school year, the district served 900,164 lunches, but just 225,790 breakfasts.

Nationwide, the numbers cut about the same, with 29 million lunches served compared with just 9 million breakfasts.

But it's another number that suggests an even more telling story.

The majority of students who eat a school lunch in the Salina schools pay full price, with 40 percent getting a federally subsidized free lunch -- yet 72 percent of the breakfasts served are free.

The obvious conclusion is that while for many students, school lunches are a convenience, school breakfasts are a necessity for those who, for various reasons, wouldn't get breakfast at home.

Lot faster at school

Sir Taylor explains that in his case, he simply doesn't have time in the mornings to eat breakfast at home.

"It's a lot faster here, and faster than cleaning up at home," said the Cottonwood Elementary second-grader. On this morning, he was eating cereal with milk, applesauce, fruit juice and blueberry bagel -- he likes the cinnamon bagels better, but the blueberry ones are OK, too.

"I don't have time to eat breakfast," at home, he said. "So I eat at school, instead. If I eat breakfast at home, it means I'll be late for school."

And, he added, "My dad has to take my little brother to day care."

A mom who has to get younger brothers to child care before going to work also plays into why second-grader Bailey Lafleur is sitting across the table from Sir.

"Mom has to take my three little brothers to day care," she said. "So I eat breakfast here, so I won't be late for school."

"It's impossible for a single parent, in many cases, to drop their kids off and get to work on time," said Cottonwood principal Jerry Baxa. By 7:45 most mornings, as many as 50 children already are lined up for breakfast at the school, he said.

The schools' staggered starting times contribute to more students eating breakfast at schools, Baxa said. Middle schools and high schools start at 7:30 a.m., while elementaries start at 8:30 a.m.

"A parent isn't going to leave their first-grader at home to take their seventh-grader to Lakewood (middle school)," Baxa said. "They bring them both, and that means they get here at 7:45."

"We want breakfast to be there for the working parent, or the busy parent," Foley said.

Not so much at home

But for others, it's clearly more than a matter of time, Baxa said.

"Mondays, we have a lot longer lines for breakfast," he said. "Kids are coming back after a weekend, and sometimes there's not much to eat at home."

Even among those who qualify for free breakfasts -- the income qualifications are the same as for lunches -- fewer than half as many students eat school breakfast as lunch.

Nationwide, those numbers are about the same -- meaning some \$2 billion in potential federal reimbursements for breakfasts go uncollected each year.

Food for achievers

There are numerous hurdles to serving school breakfasts, Foley said. Chief among them are that breakfast is usually served before school, meaning children have to arrive that much earlier; bus schedules are usually planned to get children to school right before the bell.

But with the federal No Child Left Behind law and an ever-increasing emphasis on academic performance, schools are looking for every edge they can get; and stacks of studies show that children who eat breakfast perform better in school.

Districts around the country, Foley said, are experimenting with alternatives, such as serving breakfast in class, having a breakfast break about an hour into the school day, or even passing out breakfasts on school busses.

But especially on busses, Foley said, a whole new set of logistical problems crop up, namely dealing with the trash and accounting for each student who gets a breakfast.

And as for taking time out of the school day for breakfast, Baxa said he can imagine the response from teachers already facing jammed schedules.

"Staff-wise, they're going to be saying 'Oh, God, one more thing to do.' " he said.

Yet at Cottonwood, first-graders eat lunch last, meaning not until about 12:20 p.m. -- prompting the school to adapt.

"Our first-graders go to lunch later," Baxa said. "So we provide them with a graham cracker snack in the middle of the morning to get them over the hump."

And, he added, "We think it's worth the five to 10 minutes it takes to do that ... having breakfast later in the day is an interesting idea."

Breakfast in a box

With \$2 billion going untapped each year, companies are looking for ways to overcome those hurdles and get their products into the stomachs of more students.

A few seconds of digging around in her office yields a small box Foley received near the beginning of the school year, a prepackaged breakfast -- a bowl of cereal, fruit juice and a

snack in a convenient, colorful box -- needing only milk to meet federal breakfast guidelines.

Called Breakfast Breaks, they're the 18-month-old brainchild of New York-based East Side Entrees.

From its start in 2004, the Breakfast Breaks have grown in popularity to where they're served in 46 states and eaten by 3 million children a month, said East Side vice president David Horowitz, who said the company projects 4 million a month by the end of this school year.

The product has proven popular across all kinds of school districts, Horowitz said.

"Of course, there's urban areas, but also suburban areas, and in rural areas, where there's long bus rides, it's served on the bus," he said.

But it's also often served to children as they come into class.

"A lot of teachers, and superintendents, are starting to realize that students who eat breakfast perform better," Horowitz said. "Whatever you give up in class time more than comes back to you in better learning."

Kellogg's, too, has introduced a similar product called Morning Jump Starts, with cereal, juice and a Pop-Tart -- again, needing only milk to meet federal guidelines; the company declined requests for interviews.

"We think there are a number of food service directors out there looking to serve breakfast, but without a prepackaged product, it's very difficult, especially without increasing labor costs," Horowitz said.

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