

School Breakfast Promoted

By Jennifer Mrozowski
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Move over milk. The new question is: Got breakfast?

That's what a lot of schools will be asking as part of a national campaign announced this week to increase awareness of school breakfast programs.

The "got breakfast?" campaign, launched by a group of nonprofit organizations, legislators and private interests, follows a recent report saying states failed to access \$382 million in federal funding last school year to provide breakfast to children who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

According to the report by Washington, D.C.-based Food Research and Action Center, Ohio ranked 49th in the nation for the percentage of eligible schools that participate in the federal breakfast program. Kentucky, a poorer state, ranked 14th nationally.

Advocates say better awareness of breakfast programs is necessary because more than half of students in need don't get a meal at school each morning. That's despite research suggesting that students who eat breakfast fare better academically.

The initiative includes a nationwide essay contest for kids on the importance of school breakfast and donations for programs that reduce childhood hunger.

"Millions of children who qualify for breakfast at school do not receive it," said former Sen. George McGovern, who took part in a press briefing. "Each morning only 9 million children get breakfast at school out of the 29 million who are eligible. The 'got breakfast?' campaign aims to turn a healthy breakfast for every child from a dream into a reality."

The School Breakfast Program works like the National School Lunch Program.

Children from families at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line are eligible for free breakfasts and lunches. Children whose families have incomes

between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level can receive reduced-price meals. School districts receive federal reimbursements for each lunch or breakfast served.

In Ohio, 58 percent of residential child-care institutions, public and private schools participating in the National School Lunch Program also offer breakfast, compared to 93 percent of Kentucky schools, the report said.

Ohio's low percentage could be, in part, because state law mandates only that public schools offer a breakfast program, said J.C. Benton, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education.

But Benton said the state has increased the number of students getting free and reduced-price breakfasts by nearly 8 percent, to 208,000.

Some districts also are trying to provide more breakfasts.

"We've been doing a big push to increase participation in breakfast programs," said Pat Selmeier, supervisor for building operations/food services in Cincinnati Public Schools.

Every school in the district offers a breakfast program, she said.

About 9,500 of the 35,600 Cincinnati students eat breakfast at school, she said. About 20,000 eat school lunches.

"All the research shows that if students eat breakfast and are not sitting on empty stomachs, learning improves," Selmeier said.

The breakfast consists of cereal, juice, milk and a bread product, such as a graham cracker, she said.

Children's Hunger Alliance, a nonprofit children's nutrition advocacy organization based in Columbus, is urging Ohio districts like Cincinnati to improve their participation rates.

Columbus schools have begun offering free breakfast to all children in every district school, said Charlie Kozlesky, the group's senior vice president for community engagement.

"We're trying to try to find out how we can get (Cincinnati) to go to this districtwide, no-cost breakfast," Kozlesky said. "It takes care of the stigma. Nobody has to collect any money. Nobody has to know who is paid, reduced or free. It just removes a lot of those barriers."

Janet Walsh, spokeswoman for Cincinnati schools, said the district is working with schools to improve participation in the breakfast programs, but the district can't offer free breakfast in every school.

"The reason ... is because it is cost-prohibitive," Walsh said. "We try to target it to the areas of greatest need."

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GOT BREAKFAST?

A report on national School Breakfast Program participation said school districts are missing out on hundreds of millions of dollars in federal reimbursements to offer needy kids breakfast at school. The report said that 81 percent of schools nationwide that offer school lunch programs also offer breakfast programs.

In Kentucky: 93.4 percent of schools that offer school lunch programs also offer breakfast programs

In Ohio: 58.2 percent of schools that offer school lunch programs also offer breakfast programs

Source: *Food Research and Action Center*

HOW TO ENTER

Children can submit a short essay by April 30 on why breakfast is the most important meal of the day and why getting breakfast at school is necessary. Pictures of the four winners and portions of their essays will be on new "got breakfast?" posters distributed to schools nationwide. Each winner will receive a new laptop computer. To enter, write or type an essay or story about why breakfast with milk is the most important meal of the day. The essay must be 75 words or less. Send the entry to: East Side Entrees – Essay Contest, P.O. Box 89, Syosset, NY 11791

For more information, go to www.GotBreakfast.org.