

Des Moines Register

Kids miss out on free breakfast; D.M. says no to federal help

Nutrition groups are teaming up to promote the federal free or reduced-price breakfast program.

By Philip Brasher and Kathy Bolton
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Many low-income kids in Iowa and nationwide are going to school without the free or reduced-price breakfast they're eligible for.

Some nutrition groups and the National Dairy Council are teaming up with the government and two former presidential candidates, Bob Dole and George McGovern, to promote a initiative called "Got Breakfast?" to get more schools to offer breakfast to kids.

One of the ideas they are pushing: Giving kids "grab-and-go" packs of cereals, along with crackers and juice. Small bottles of milk also would be provided.

"Iowa ought to be a state that's very interested. We're sort of oriented out in that country for farm and food production," said Dole, a former Kansas senator.

In Iowa, about 36 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price breakfasts don't get them, according to the Food Research and Action Center, an advocacy group that supports the initiative. Nationwide, about 44 percent of those eligible get the breakfasts. About 20 percent of schools don't participate in the breakfast program at all.

The push for increasing school breakfast participation is similar to other attempts by the food industry to sell their products to government-subsidized nutrition programs.

The program is being pitched to schools as a potential money maker. The packs cost \$1 each, which is less than the maximum federal reimbursement of \$1.51 per meal.

"They're actually losing money by not going into the breakfast program," Dole said.

But the Des Moines district, which has the largest number of eligible children in Iowa, isn't interested in buying the food packs being pushed by the Got Breakfast? program.

"If we did a grab-and-go program, which is what this is, we'd develop our own," said Teresa Nece, the district's director of food and nutrition management.

She said the district doesn't have space to store the packages and wouldn't make money off them because storage and handling costs would eat up the balance of the federal reimbursement.

Marion Nestle, a New York University nutrition expert who wrote the book "Food Politics" about the industry's lobbying tactics, called the grab-and-go packs a "crass commercial attempt" to market junk food to kids. Some of the sugary cereals and snacks in the packs are little more than low-fat cookies, she said.

"Every chance (food companies) get, they try to make their products eligible for large government programs," she said.

Gary Davis, chief executive of East Side Entrees, a Woodbury, N.Y., company that sells the food packs, says that schools have a choice among cereals if they want lower sugar content.

The Des Moines district has breakfast programs in all its elementary schools.

"Do we have as high a turnout as we would like? No," Nece said.

Studies performed in Iowa and other states show that students who begin the day with breakfast do better in school.

"It impacts their ability to learn," Nece said. "There's enough research out there that shows that."