



Food for Thought: *Expanding School Breakfast in New Jersey*

Classroom Breakfast Helps North Brunswick Students Focus

By Laura Fasbach Donovan
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Each morning, breakfast is waiting in the classroom for children at Parsons Elementary School in North Brunswick. As they walk through the classroom door, students grab a brown bag packed with the day's morning meal before heading to their desks to unpack their knapsacks and begin eating.

The process takes just a few minutes. Before the morning announcements are completed, most children in teacher Ashley Blaine's 3rd grade class are finishing up the remaining morsels of their meal and getting ready to start the day's lesson.

Third-grader Brandon doesn't need scientific data to know that skipping the most important meal of the day makes it harder for him to learn.

"You feel like you're not ready for school," Brandon says when asked how he would feel if he didn't eat breakfast. "I feel tired."

"I would just feel hungry," adds his classmate, 8-year-old Patrick.

Fortunately for North Brunswick students, the school district has been running a successful school breakfast program for the past eight years, serving up meals to some 1,375 students each day in its six schools. Among elementary school students who are eligible for free or reduced priced breakfast, about 83 percent participate – far exceeding the state average of just 30 percent, Sawchak says. North Brunswick's four elementary schools



North Brunswick food service staff pack brown bags with a healthy breakfast for students.

serve breakfast in the classroom, which significantly increases students' participation. By contrast, many New Jersey districts still serve breakfast in the cafeteria before school starts – when most children are not yet at school and when bus schedules, stigma and other factors prevent many hungry children from arriving in time to eat breakfast.

School officials are often reluctant to serve breakfast in the classroom, concerned about clean-up, lost instructional time and cost. But North Brunswick, like a growing number of districts, has easily overcome these logistical concerns to ensure children begin their school day with a full stomach.

Overcoming Challenges

Though breakfast has become a daily ritual throughout North Brunswick's schools, there were challenges when Director of Dining Services Adam Sawchak was first tapped to create the program.

“There was a lot of pushback at first,” Sawchak said. “But once the program starts, people realize it’s not a hassle and it becomes part of the routine.”

Sawchak said some initial concerns were that breakfast would take too long or create a mess in the classrooms. Those concerns, however, turned out to be unfounded, as classroom breakfast easily became part of the daily routine, he added.

The key to building a successful program is securing buy-in from the superintendent. That makes it more likely that other stakeholders, such as principals, teachers and custodial staff, will follow suit.

School nurse Mary Liotta, R.N., doesn’t need any convincing. Though she started working in the district after the program was already in place, she has no doubt that it prevents students from visiting her office during the morning with complaints of an empty stomach.

“For students, having a good breakfast sets the tone for the rest of the day,” Liotta said. “The benefits of having breakfast outweigh any issues that may come up.”

In Ashley Blaine’s classroom, the students listen to the morning announcements while they eat and then quickly throw away remnants of the meal once they are done. The teacher says her students are better off for having breakfast.

“They are less sluggish and more ready to learn,” Blaine said.

School Breakfast Runs Like Clockwork

Although the school day at Parsons Elementary School begins at 9 a.m. for students, a team of four cafeteria workers begins packing brown bags with breakfast items starting at 7 a.m.

The bags are labeled with each student’s name and classroom number. The bags are sorted and packed into larger bags that are then loaded on carts. The team of workers rolls the carts through the school’s hallways, delivering them to teachers about 15 minutes before students arrive.

“A key part is to get the timing right,” says Superintendent Brian Zychowski. “It only becomes an interruption if the kids have started their lessons and then you bring the breakfast in. We’ve made it part and parcel of the early morning procedure.”

On a recent morning students enjoyed a meal of low-fat milk, mini blueberry pancakes with syrup baked inside and raisins. Other choices throughout the year include whole grain cereals, cereal bars and whole wheat bagels and cream cheese.

A major benefit of classroom breakfast, Sawchak adds, is that students can concentrate – and that translates to better behavior and better grades.

“If they eat breakfast the students are actually paying attention to school work rather than wondering the whole morning when they are going to lunch,” Sawchak said.

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