

# Food For Thought: School Breakfast Campaign



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## Edison Busts the School Breakfast Myths

By Nancy Parello

When Edison Superintendent Richard O'Malley read a report about school breakfast in New Jersey, he was stunned. He saw that just 1 percent of the 15,000 students who attend Edison schools were receiving school breakfast – a statistic so stark he had to act.

“What really shook us up was Advocates for Children’s report that came out last September,” O'Malley said. “It put the facts on paper. It showed we were under-serving a lot of kids. We had thousands of kids who could benefit.”

The first thing O'Malley did was to break down the myths. Cost, clean-up, lost instructional time are the common obstacles that school officials cite when they say they can't serve breakfast right after school starts, which significantly increases student participation. So many schools continue to serve breakfast before school – when most students have not yet arrived. This has kept New Jersey nearly last in the nation for its low participation in the federal School Breakfast Program.

“Most of the challenges are myths and it's all about getting beyond the myth and getting to the reality,” O'Malley said. And that's just what he did.

“I sat down with my cabinet of principals and supervisors,” O'Malley said. “I explained to them my personal vision for the district, the benefits not only to the students, but the district as a whole, and how we can be leaders in this effort.”

Edison, a large suburban district with 25 percent of children eligible for free- and-reduced school meals, now serves “breakfast after the bell” in three elementary schools, all four middle schools and both high schools. The district is now rolling out classroom breakfast in the seven remaining elementary schools.

Before the district began serving breakfast after the bell, just 200 children ate school breakfast. Now, Edison serves breakfast to 4,000 students each day.

The program has paid for itself, O'Malley said. Students not eligible for free meals pay \$1 for breakfast.



The federal meal reimbursements for eligible students have increased so much that the district has incurred no additional cost.

Breakfast has also been seamlessly incorporated into instructional time in Edison.

“They're working, practicing their letters, coloring or cutting, something simple for them to do while eating breakfast,” said 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher Danielle Rispoli. “After breakfast, they're more focused, more alert, able to concentrate longer. It even helps their classroom behavior.”

“You can eat and learn,” O'Malley added. “It's OK to have milk when you're doing math.”

Rosemary Schutz, an Edison principal, has also seen the benefits of breakfast after the bell.

“So now we know all the kids are nourished and ready to start their day,” Schutz said. I wish I would be able to speak with other principals. If they could see how it works here, it's no real extra work and truly a benefit to all the children.”

O'Malley has this advice for other superintendents: “Don't let those obstacles, those myths get in the way. Take the lead.”

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