



Food for Thought:

Expanding School Breakfast in New Jersey

Everybody Eats Breakfast at Newark Public Schools

By Laura Fasbach Donovan

Before the bell rings at First Avenue School in Newark's North Ward, student monitors dutifully file into the cafeteria to pick up medium-sized bins labeled with their classroom's number.

Packed neatly inside each of the gray containers is the day's breakfast: pints of fat-free and low-fat milk, bowls of whole-grain cereal, small containers of juice and utensils. There's also a garbage bag to use for easy clean-up and a student roster to keep track of who has received a meal.

The students head back to their classrooms and like clockwork begin unpacking the bin's contents. By the time the school bell rings at 8:20 a.m., students have already taken out their journals to begin writing, as they quietly eat spoonfuls of cereal and sip on juice boxes.

"They have it down to a science," says 2nd grade teacher Chelsea Vargo. "There's no time taken away from instruction and breakfast definitely helps keep them energized and focused throughout the day."

This scene plays out each morning throughout Newark's public schools. In total, Newark successfully serves free breakfast to about 25,000 students a day at 67 pre-kindergarten and elementary schools and 16 high schools, according to Tonya Riggins, director of food services. (References to Newark schools throughout this article refer only to traditional – not charter – schools).



Newark students deliver breakfast bins to the classroom.

Breakfast Participation Triples

In 2004, Riggins initiated a program that would move breakfast out of the cafeteria and into the classroom to increase student participation rates. And it would be served right after the bell rings – not before school. This change more than tripled the number of students who eat school breakfast each morning, from 8,000 to 25,000.

"The intent was to find out if it would take off," Riggins says. "It was such a huge success that with the cooperation of principals and teachers, we were asked to do a full implementation throughout the district the following school year."

Newark's school breakfast program has earned national recognition. According to the Food Research and Action Center, Newark was the top urban center in the nation for its high participation in school breakfast. In 2012,

87 percent of eligible students who ate lunch through the federal school meals program also ate breakfast at school.

A sobering comparison: just 30 percent of eligible children in New Jersey received school breakfast during the 2010-2011 school year, according to figures from the state Departments of Education and Agriculture. At a time when more schools are considering changing the way they serve breakfast to increase student participation, Newark's success story provides a road map to districts throughout the state.

Breakfast After the Bell

Nearly all of Newark schools have taken an "after the bell" approach to serving breakfast in the classroom, Riggins says. 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 Newark, like a growing number of districts, has easily overcome these logistical concerns to ensure children begin their school day with a full stomach.

Clean-ups a Breeze

By 8:40 a.m. at First Avenue School, Vargo begins calling her breakfast helpers to begin the clean up process. The students sit in small groups named for major league baseball teams and are called to throw out the containers and packaging one table at a time. "Yankees, if

you're done with your breakfast throw out your cereal bowls," the teacher directs. "Mets next, then Cardinals."

The remnants of the meal are tossed into a clear garbage bag held by the student helper. Once the cleanup is complete, the bag is tied up and placed outside the classroom door in the hallway where a custodian soon collects it.



"Breakfast in the classroom is a concerted effort on the part of principals, teachers and custodians," Riggins says. "It's a win-win for everyone."

Kids Are Focused

Principal Kathy Duke-Jackson said serving breakfast at school takes the guess work out of whether a child has had anything to eat in the morning before coming to school. "You don't know if a child has eaten in the morning," she says. By feeding

students first thing in the morning, Duke-Jackson said teachers can quickly move on to teaching and students can focus on learning.

"Because of the school breakfast program students are focused and ready," she said. "By the middle part of the day they are no longer lethargic. Breakfast gives them an extra boost."

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