



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

In Burlington, School Breakfast is a “Moral Imperative”

By Laura Fasbach Donovan
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Some houses have eat-in kitchens. B. Bernice Young School in Burlington Township has eat-in-classrooms.

Each morning, children enter their classrooms at the elementary school and head to the breakfast table where the morning meal is waiting. Packed inside insulated cooler bags is an assortment of individually-packaged whole grain cereals, along with pints of low-fat milk.

After helping themselves to their selection, the students sit down at the table and quietly begin eating. When they are finished, the children throw their empty containers away in a nearby garbage can and wash their hands at a classroom sink, before going back to their desks to start the day’s lesson.

“It runs really smoothly,” said first grade teacher Erika Stratton. “It doesn’t cause a distraction.”

Hungry Kids Can’t Learn

In fact, Stratton recalls mornings before the school district started offering breakfast when her young charges would interrupt lessons to say they were hungry or didn’t feel well.

“It helps the kids get through the day,” said Stratton, who has been teaching for 11 years. “You can’t learn if you are hungry.”

Before the breakfast program was created last year, school nurse Debbie Ford had grown



accustomed to at least a few students coming to her office every week, complaining of hunger.

“We would send students to the cafeteria to tide them over until lunch,” Ford said. “Having breakfast (in the classroom) is a much better way to start the day in the morning,”

Growing Poverty

Like so many New Jersey communities, the recession hit families hard in Burlington Township. In the seven years that Dr. Christopher Manno has been superintendent of the school district, he has seen the numbers of students eligible for free- and reduced-priced meals more than double.

Last year, the percentage of eligible children grew to 25 percent of all students, exceeding the 20 percent threshold at which school districts,

under New Jersey law, are required to provide breakfast. When Manno started the job in 2005, only 10 percent were eligible for these free- or reduced-priced school meals.

“Families of all backgrounds have been impacted by our economy and need some assistance,” Manno said. “The breakfast program is just a logical, sensible way to address the needs of our community.”

In planning its school breakfast program, school officials opted to serve breakfast in the classroom at the elementary schools, but continued to serve breakfast in the cafeteria before school at the middle and high schools.

Business Manager Mary Ann Bell, who helped orchestrate the district’s breakfast program, said middle- and high-school students are permitted to take their breakfast from the cafeteria to their first period classes, unless it’s a science lab, physical education course or music class.

“The better nutrition students have in the morning, the better they will do academically,” Bell said.

Involve All Stakeholders

District officials worked together with all stakeholders to ensure Burlington’s breakfast program got off to a good start. This included the custodial staff, teachers, parents and principals. Over the summer, the district held meetings and was in constant communication with parents through e-mail, letters and newsletters.

Pat Gould, director of food services, talked to other school districts that had implemented successful school breakfast programs and advised others to do the same.

“Why reinvent it,” Gould said. “By talking to other schools, you can see how it was implemented and then make it work in your own buildings.”

The district opted to offer breakfast in the classroom to all elementary school students to avoid creating a social stigma.

“That’s always a concern because we don’t want any student to feel isolated,” Bell said.

The cost of breakfast for full-paying students is \$1.25, plus 30 cents for milk. Parents can set up an account for their children, so no money is collected in the classrooms. Teachers simply check off on a roster which students eat each morning. The food services directors then use those sheets to calculate reimbursements from the federal government, which subsidizes the school meals programs. Students who eat breakfast at home do not have to participate and can spend the few minutes while other children are eating to begin their school work.

It took a lot of legwork to turn around the program so quickly, but Manno said it was worth it.

“The benefits so far outweigh the management of the logistics,” Manno said. “We believe for learning to take place the basic needs of children have to be addressed and that includes nourishment. School breakfast is a moral imperative for us.”

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