



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

Dual Approach to Breakfast Works in Vineland

By Laura Fasbach Donovan
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Buses pull up outside of Gloria M. Sabater Elementary School in Vineland and within seconds, student pours through the double doors into the lobby. They grab a brown bag from a table stationed near the door and head to their classrooms to eat the breakfast packed inside.

Down the hall, students who walk to school or arrive by car make their way through the cafeteria line to receive their brown bags before sitting down at tables to eat and then head to class when the morning bell rings.

This dual approach to serving children breakfast has worked well for Vineland's public schools and illustrates that districts can be as flexible as they need to be to ensure students have full stomachs at the start of every school day.

"This was good for us because one-third of our students come by car or walk," said Principal Monica Dannenberger. "Logistically, this was a godsend."

Dannenberger said the district first tried to serve all students in the cafeteria before school started, but the morning gatherings ended up being more about socializing and less about eating. When Director of Food Services Keith Nocco devised the new



Students from Gloria M. Sabater Elementary School grab a brown bagged breakfast as they head for their classrooms.

approach to divide bus riders from car riders and walkers, the system became more streamlined.

In all, the district serves 4,600 breakfasts a day at its seven elementary schools and one middle school. Of those students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, 90 percent participate in the school breakfast program -- far greater than the statewide average of just 30 percent.

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. This causes our low participation rate.

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

“It has allowed for much more structure in the school that they didn’t have before,” Nocco said. “At each school, we designed it a little bit differently.”

Nocco said that he rolled out the breakfast programs one school at a time and advises other food directors to start in schools where the initiative will have the support of the principal.

“Find the principal that’s going to be the champion,” Nocco said. “If the principal is a champion of it then everyone is going to be enthusiastic about it.”

Collaborating with all staff -- from custodians to teachers -- also helped ensure buy-in from the school community as a whole and make the program a success, Nocco said.

Although school officials did hear initial concerns from the community about clean up and other issues, Nocco said they were able to easily address those concerns. The classrooms are kept clean, for example, with trash cans on wheels stationed in the hallways where students can easily dispose

of trash and custodians can quickly wheel the cans away.

Ailine Estrada, a 5th grader, said she’s happy to eat breakfast at school knowing there’s a correlation between being hungry and being able to focus on school.

“It would be hard to concentrate if you didn’t have breakfast,” the 12-year-old said.



Her teacher, Tara Wainwright, agrees.

“This gives us comfort knowing every child has had a breakfast before school starts,” Wainwright said. “I used to send students to the nurse who were

complaining about headaches. Now I believe there is a correlation between having the breakfast program and fewer trips to the nurse.”

In fact, school nurse Patricia Abdill, who has worked in the school for 17 years, is one of the program’s biggest supporters. She had grown far too familiar with students showing up at her door mid-morning, complaining of stomach aches and asking for crackers.

“Seeing children in the morning who were hungry, who didn’t have breakfast at home, that’s diminishing,” Abdill said. “We know all children do better at school having a balanced meal in the morning.”

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