

Food for Thought: Boosting Breakfast for Teens



By Nancy Parello

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When Atlantic City high schoolers arrive in their classrooms each morning, breakfast is waiting.

And that's a good thing. Because like most teenagers across New Jersey, they have no time for scrambled eggs or even a Pop-Tart before they rush off to make it to school by 7:30 each morning.

Atlantic City students are lucky. While classroom breakfast has swept elementary schools across New Jersey, most high schools have been slow to make this switch from serving breakfast in the cafeteria before school to offering it during the first few minutes of the school day.

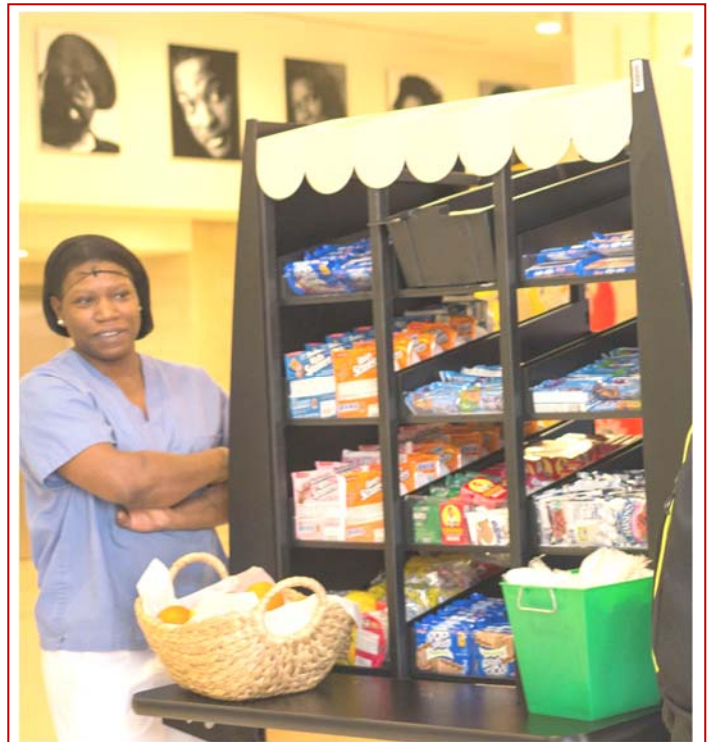
Known as "breakfast after the bell," this approach significantly increases student participation in the federal School Breakfast Program. And, because the program is federally-funded based on the number of meals served, this method also brings more federal dollars into districts to feed hungry kids.

Yet, according to an ACNJ analysis of data provided by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, just 12 percent of secondary schools were serving breakfast after the bell, compared to nearly one-third of elementary schools.

Participation Soars with Breakfast after the Bell

Serving breakfast after the bell guarantees a surge in students receiving this all-important morning meal – as well as an influx of needed federal dollars into districts to feed hungry students.

"Since making the switch to breakfast after the bell, our high school participation has grown from about 20 percent to 85 percent," said Teresa Smith, general manager for Sodexo, which administers Atlantic City's



Public Schools/Sites Serving Breakfast by Method of Service, 2016

Method of Breakfast Service	Elementary	Secondary
Number serving breakfast before the bell	886	301
Percent serving breakfast before the bell	61%	80%
Number serving breakfast after the bell	444	45
Percent serving breakfast after the bell	30%	12%
Number serving breakfast before and after the bell	129	30
Percent serving breakfast before and after the bell	9%	8%
Total number of schools/sites	1,459	376

Note: Secondary sites are any NJ Department of Agriculture sites in which students in grades 9 - 12 received breakfast including Jr./Sr. high schools serving students in grades 6-12, 7-12, etc. Elementary schools/sites include middle and elementary schools. Single sites serving students grades Pre-K, K-12, or ungraded students were excluded from primary and secondary totals. NJ Department of Agriculture sites may include annexes, satellite campuses, and other sites under the NJ Department of Children and Families. Source: NJ Department of Agriculture Service Group Details as of 2016.

food service. “We realize there is a need to feed the high school students, to be sure they are eating nutritional meals. The breakfast is absolutely helping students.”

Like the majority of high schools, Atlantic City had been serving breakfast before school in the cafeteria, but very few students were able to make it to school that early. Time constraints, the need to care for younger siblings, transportation, the early start time and other issues often prevent teenagers from getting to school with enough time to eat breakfast before the first bell rings.

Serving breakfast after the bell does present unique challenges in high schools. Typically, the large size of the buildings makes delivering breakfast to all classrooms challenging. Supervision can be an issue, as well as clean-up. And lost instructional time is often cited as a barrier, despite the fact that the New Jersey Department of Education has issued guidance saying breakfast can count toward instructional time.

High Schools Stepping Up

But districts like Atlantic City, Newark and Union City are proving that high schools can operate efficient breakfast programs that give their students the nutrition they need to concentrate and learn.

In Atlantic City, classroom breakfast was piloted in 2014 in certain wings of the 1,900-student high school. The biggest challenge was figuring out how to deliver the meals to all classrooms before students arrived.

After some dry runs, food service staff were able to accomplish delivery of containers filled with breakfast items in about an hour. The pilot went so well that the district rolled it out to all high school students in the fall of 2015. Food Service Director Smith says the program is running smoothly, enabling kids to eat breakfast within the first 10 minutes of class, and has earned the support of teachers and other school staff. While the change did add

to staffing costs, the increase in federal per-meal reimbursements has covered those expenses.

“I’m not saying it’s easy, especially in high school,” Smith admits. “You have to have good communication with the



teachers. The relationships you have in the building are very important.”

Variety is Key in Newark

Newark has taken a combination of approaches to boost school breakfast participation, which has tripled in the four high schools where alternative methods are now being used, according to Tonya Riggins, the district’s food service director. She said offering a variety of options entices teenagers to eat breakfast.

At Eastside High, breakfast is served in the classroom every morning, with students helping to distribute the breakfast. At Science Park High, Central High and Arts High, a hot breakfast is served in the cafeteria before school starts, while kiosks are stationed at entrances for students who are unable to arrive early enough to eat the hot breakfast.

Students can enjoy a hot meal of eggs, lean bacon, a whole grain biscuit and fruit, while the kiosks offer Nutri-Grain bars, fresh fruit, raisins, low-sugar, whole-grain cereal and low-fat milk.

Newark was recently awarded grants from the American Dairy Association Northeast and the American Association of School Administrators to create an inviting café-style area in Arts High School where students eat breakfast. The invigorating new space sports signage that promotes healthy food choices. Since the new cafés kiosks were created, breakfast participation has tripled there, Riggins said.

The other difference in Newark is that breakfast is available for a full hour in the morning from about 7:15 a.m. to 8:15 when the first bell rings. Most high schools do not offer the meal for that long a period.

“It’s excellent,” said Science Park High Principal Kathleen Tierney. “We’ve seen a big increase in the number of students eating breakfast. The quality of food makes a big difference. I’m seeing more students coming in early and it helps with attendance.”

Riggins is planning school promotions, expansion of alternative breakfast service to the city’s other nine high schools and other initiatives to continue to drive up participation.

“We want to make sure every child receives a nutritious meal,” Riggins said. “That benefits everyone. It’s a win/win.”

Breakfast Buddies

And the kids love it. Not only do students get a hot breakfast before class, but they also have time to socialize with their friends -- a nice prelude to settling down to their school work for the day.

“It’s a routine now at school,” said Nelisa, a Newark freshman. “You eat, hang out, talk to your friends. Last year, they just had cereal. I didn’t used to eat the school

breakfast that much then, but now I try to get here every day.”

“I never used to eat breakfast,” added a Newark 10th grader. “The new options are great. Now I never miss breakfast on a school day.”

Breakfast Builds in Union City

The sprawling 2,700-student Union City High School, which spans four city blocks, is also using a variety of methods to ensure their teenagers begin their day with a healthy meal.

Cafes and kiosks are stationed around the school, eliminating the challenge of delivering food to every classroom in such a large school. These food stations are open from 7 a.m. until 8:30 a.m. Homeroom starts at 7:50 a.m. Kids have the choice of a hot meal, which may include eggs, croissants and waffles, or grabbing breakfast on the go, like a bagel with cream cheese or milk and cereal with graham crackers and fruit.

At Union City’s smaller Jose Marti Freshman Academy, breakfast is served in the classroom so that all students eat during homeroom.

Since the district began providing all these options, participation has climbed to 70 percent of high school students, according to Susan Prusko, the district’s food service coordinator.

“Some students arrive early and eat before school starts, but most come later and take food into the classrooms,” Prusko explained. “They can even save the meal for later in the morning if they’re not hungry first thing.”

Extending the time for kids to grab a morning meal has also improved attendance, Prusko said, noting that students no longer had to rush to get breakfast before the bell or miss it all together, for fear of being marked absent.

“After homeroom anyone can come here and get breakfast and they’re allowed to take it to their first period class,” she says. “No one stops them from eating in the morning.”

Union City High School senior Kajal said that she always eats a morning meal at school now because it helps her “wake up” and provides her with the energy she needs for the rest of the day.

“I don’t have a lunch period so it helps keep me full until I can eat another meal after school,” she explained. “I think it’d be hard for me if they didn’t have this program because I come to school a little later and I have a full schedule, so I wouldn’t be at my full potential.”

Another Union City student said that he only started eating breakfast when the school began serving it after the morning bell. “I didn’t get breakfast because I had to go to school earlier and normally, I would get to class right on

time or late,” he says. “Now, we can get it before and after homeroom.”

For English Supervisor Angela Hutton, there is no question that students who eat breakfast regularly perform better in school.

“It also establishes good, healthy nutritional habits and gets them thinking and alert much earlier in the day,” she said.

According to School Nurse Kim Castelli, expanding access to school breakfast for teens is a “no brainer,” providing them with the fuel they need to pay attention in class. “Especially for our students with diabetes, this is extremely beneficial,” she explained. “Teenagers are in so

Breakfast Boosts Teen Health, Academic Success



Breakfast is an important meal for all of us, but this is especially true for adolescents. A recent study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that youth and young adults who experience hunger have much higher odds of having health-related social problems, including poor educational performance, unstable housing and substance use.ⁱ

Another study found that food insecurity was linked to an increased risk of mental health problems among adolescents. The study, conducted by the Children’s Hospital at Montefiore in New York, found that adolescents who experienced household food insecurity – a limited or uncertain availability of healthy food -

were twice as likely to have emotional and conduct problems, including bullying, stealing, truancy and other detrimental behaviors.ⁱⁱ They were also more likely to suffer from hyperactivity and difficult peer relationships, the study found.

All of these factors impede an adolescent’s chances to achieve academic success.

The researchers recommend exploring public health interventions, including expansion of federal nutrition programs like school breakfast.

ⁱ. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 57(6):601-607 · December 2015 with 57 Reads
DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2015.08.013

ⁱⁱ. Montefiore Medical Center. (2016, February 16). One in ten adolescents living in households with food insecurity have poor mental health. ScienceDaily. Retrieved August 11, 2016 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/02/160216143910.htm

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many activities and with school work on top of it, if they're running late in the morning, this is one less thing they have to worry about."

Union City parent Angela Andrews said that the district has done an amazing job bringing breakfast after the bell into the high school. "Breakfast goes a long way because in

Union City the majority of kids live below the poverty line," she said. "The parents I've spoken to are extremely grateful to have that worry or concern alleviated, knowing their children are getting fed."

To make high school breakfast work, Prusko advises other districts to get buy-in from the district's administrators and



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To learn more about the campaign, visit njschoolbreakfast.org.

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