



Counting Breakfast in the Classroom as Instructional Time

The Impact of Eating (or Skipping) Breakfast on Academic Performance and Behavior¹

Numerous studies show that students who skip breakfast and experience hunger are at a disadvantage in the classroom. When children are hungry, their ability to learn is impaired, translating into outcomes like lower math scores and increased likelihood of repeating a grade. Studies have found they are also more prone to behavioral problems and more likely to be tardy or absent than other children.

Conversely, children who eat breakfast demonstrate improved academic performance, particularly when breakfast is eaten at school. School breakfast also leads to better student behavior and learning environments. Some examples of the positive outcomes associated with school breakfast include improvements in:

- Attendance and punctuality
- Memory, alertness, and cognitive function
- Comprehension and learning
- Performance on standardized tests

Barriers to Participation in the School Breakfast Program

The impact of nutritious breakfasts on students' academic performance, behavior, and overall learning environment can be dramatic, particularly for low-income children, to say nothing of the benefits to their health. Yet although participation in the School Breakfast Program has risen over the past decade, many of Florida's low-income students still do not participate. In the 2012-2013 school year, only about 40 percent of children who qualified for free or reduced-price meals ate breakfast at school². Barriers to participation include issues of timing (arriving too late to eat due to bus schedules, parents' commutes, and school security lines), students' desire to socialize with friends before school starts, and the stigma that eating breakfast in the cafeteria is only for low-income children.

Advantages of Alternative Breakfast Models

Alternative breakfast models being implemented across the country and throughout Florida help address these barriers. Programs like "Breakfast in the Classroom" (BIC) and "Second Chance Breakfast" make breakfast part of the school day so that students no longer have to arrive early to eat. Moreover, by offering breakfast to all students at no charge and allowing them to eat together in their classrooms through BIC and "Grab and Go" models, the social stigma associated with eating a school breakfast is more likely to be eliminated. The evidence shows that "making breakfast a part of the school day by allowing children to eat breakfast in the classroom [...] has proven to be the most effective strategy for increasing participation in the School Breakfast Program."³ For example, in a survey of 276 school principals from 15 school districts whose schools operate BIC programs, 85 percent saw an increase in breakfast participation.⁴

Finally, the positive educational outcomes associated with eating school breakfast are enhanced under these alternative models:

- Providing students with breakfast in the classroom setting is associated with lower tardy rates and fewer disciplinary office referrals.
- Children who participate in programs that offer a breakfast free to all students have lower rates of absence and tardiness.
- Student math and reading achievement test scores improve when breakfast is moved out of the cafeteria and into the classroom.
- Schools that offer breakfast in the classroom programs free to all students experience an increased sense of community and reduced stigma associated with eating breakfast at school.⁵

Logistics of Eating Breakfast in the Classroom

Eating breakfast in the classroom only takes 10-15 minutes from start to finish and can occur alongside regular morning activities. Depending on what makes sense for the school, breakfast can be delivered to the classroom or students can pick up their meal from the cafeteria or a hallway cart on their way to the classroom; teachers are not expected to handle the food. This is a good time for teachers to have personal interaction with students before launching into the day's lessons, take attendance and make morning announcements, or complete other administrative tasks. Breakfast can also be built into lesson plans. For instance, the U.S. Department of Agriculture notes that "for younger students, eating an apple sliced into four quarters might easily turn into a math lesson using fractions, a writing activity about the five senses, or a fun nutrition education activity. For older students, that same apple might spark a scientific inquiry about energy and calories or even plant lifecycles. The possibilities are endless."⁶

Support for Alternative Breakfast Models

The U.S. Department of Education has issued guidance embracing delivery programs where breakfast is provided in the classroom. Florida Agricultural Commissioner Adam Putnam has also spoken about the benefits of these models. Noting rising academic standards and the increased importance of standardized tests, Commissioner Putnam emphasized that "breakfast is the first step toward giving kids the tools they need to be successful academically." State education departments across the country including Pennsylvania, Indiana, and New Jersey have issued memos confirming that breakfast can count as instructional time when it is served in the classroom.

Florida's Education Commissioner Confirms Breakfast in the Classroom Counts as Instructional Time

Florida has a strong School Breakfast Program, with statute requiring school districts to implement school breakfast programs in all elementary schools, and to implement universal school breakfast programs in all schools where 80 percent or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. **Additionally, in December 2014, Florida's Commissioner of Education Pam Stewart confirmed to Florida's school district superintendents that breakfast in the classroom can be considered part of instructional time.** This is an important clarification for schools considering new strategies to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program, and further supports the implementation of innovative delivery models in Florida. The evidence shows that these programs enable more low income children to access a nutritious meal at the start of each school day and all the educational benefits that brings.

¹ Citations for all studies referenced in this section and additional related studies can be found in the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) brief "[Breakfast For Learning: Scientific research on the link between children's nutrition and academic performance](#)"

² [Florida Hunger Data Center](#) Program Data Reports for 2012 School Breakfast and Free and Reduced-Price Meal Eligibility

³ [FRAC School Breakfast Scorecard: 2012-2013 School Year](#), p. 3

⁴ The National Association of Elementary School Principals Foundation (NAESP) and FRAC Joint Report, "[Start the School Day Ready to Learn with Breakfast in the Classroom Principals Share What Works.](#)" p. 4

⁵ See citation #1

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, "[10 Reasons to Try Breakfast in the Classroom](#)"