



Kathleen Carroll [Follow](#)

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FOOD MONTH

EDUCATION

Why Some Schools Want Students To Eat Breakfast In Class

Students do better when they've been fed. And sharing a meal ends the free-food stigma, while giving kids a chance to practice teamwork.





Grace Santos and Sidney Fletcher eat breakfast in their third-grade class at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School #11 in Jersey City, N.J. Photographs by Amy Newman for Bright

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The third-graders of Room 105A were ready for their morning routine. Just before the 8:30 a.m. bell, they lined up with their teacher outside P.S. 11 in Jersey City, N.J., all chatter and fidgets and giggles as they waited for the first bell to ring.

Brrrrring! In neat rows of two, they walked down the hall and into the classroom, hung up their backpacks, and took their seats. Three students at the front of the room unzipped insulated red bags that had been delivered moments before. They circulated throughout the class of 25, carefully placing a cold orange juice container and warm plastic bag with the day's free, in-school breakfast on each desk.

And just like that, a regular Tuesday was transformed into Pancake Day — pretty much everyone's favorite.

"I really like this breakfast," said Elisa Tadros, 9, who was savoring her maple-flavored, whole-wheat miniature pancakes. "It tastes really good." Her seatmate Ramia Fawzy, 10, had already finished her meal and was moving on to the morning's second activity: logging onto her laptop to access a literacy skills app.

This innovative approach to school-based nutrition is called "breakfast after the bell" — a strategy as straightforward as its name. Instead of asking students to show up early and come to the cafeteria to eat, schools like P.S. 11 deliver breakfast to students right at the start of the school day.

The practice significantly boosts the number of students who fuel up at school: in typical before-school cafeteria programs, only 53 percent of eligible students eat breakfast, on average. Schools that serve breakfast after the bell report major gains, with 80 percent or more of students taking part.

Educators say it is not only convenient, but also minimizes the potential stigma of arriving early for a separate program for low-income students. And the simple act of sharing a meal is itself a learning experience, a chance for students to practice teamwork, responsibility and serving others.



Tamoor Faisal and Kush Patel, eighth-grade students at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. P.S.#11 in Jersey City, help deliver breakfast to fellow students with help from Assistant Principal Mary K. Truesdale. Breakfast is packed into cooler bags in the cafeteria and delivered to individual classrooms.

“It just has so many positive effects,” said P.S. 11 Principal Cleopatra Wingard. “Students used to visit the nurse throughout the morning for food. We don’t see that anymore. They serve one another and see the importance of a balanced meal. And it also helps get

kids here on time — they are often running up the stairs in the morning, just to make sure they don't miss breakfast.”

American schools have served breakfast to low-income students since the 1960s, as an offshoot of the National School Lunch Program. The programs take on the stubborn shame of childhood hunger in the United States: some 6.4 million children live in homes that do not reliably have enough food on the table, about one in five U.S. households, according to federal data from 2015.

The country is on track to serve 12.4 million free and reduced-price school breakfasts this school year, to students who qualify under family income eligibility guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service. It's a record high.

The number of subsidized breakfasts has grown by about 50 percent in the past decade, from 7.9 million meals in 2006.

States and school districts administer the program and receive cash subsidies from the federal government to help pay for the meals, which cost around \$1.75 each. USDA subsidies for the School Breakfast Program will top \$4.2 billion in 2016–2017 — a considerable investment, but far less than for the National School Lunch Program, which is on track to top \$13.6 billion in subsidies and provides 22 million free and reduced-price lunches nationwide.

In addition to providing subsidies, the federal government also regulates what can and cannot go on students' meal trays. It is an arrangement prone to gaffes and political fistfights, especially when you throw finicky kids and regional food traditions into the mix. The most modern iteration dates back to a Reagan-era proposal that characterized ketchup (and fries) as a vegetable, stretches across the childhood obesity explosion of the 1990s and early 2000s, and reaches former first lady Michelle Obama, who advocated for stricter school nutrition standards and health initiatives under her “Let's Move” campaign.

One result was the bipartisan 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which required fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains and other changes to students' lunch trays. The regulations were widely criticized by state leaders and GOP members of Congress for being overly restrictive and forcing schools to serve food that students would not eat, and lawmakers have since introduced several bills to either soften or repeal the law, without result. A series of studies examined student eating habits in Seattle, Texas, Connecticut and Massachusetts and found children made healthier food choices — such as eating more fresh fruit — after the standards were implemented in cafeterias starting in 2012.

Rolling back the nutrition rules was a stated goal of President Trump's campaign, and in May 2017, his appointee at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Secretary Sonny Perdue, issued a proclamation doing just that. It allows schools to serve children flavored milk, and food with more sodium than the original rules allowed. States also can be granted exemptions from serving only whole grains in coming years, which the law requires.

“If kids aren't eating the food, and it's ending up in the trash, they aren't getting any nutrition — thus undermining the intent of the program,” Perdue said, lauding the return of decision-making authority to local school districts instead of the federal government.





Can subsidized school breakfast continue to grow in the current political climate?

While the Trump Administration's budget proposal targets a host of anti-poverty initiatives for deep cuts in spending, funding school meals is not among them.

Other sources of nutrition support for low-income students are slated for steep reductions, however, such a proposed 25 percent cut to food stamps under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP) and the elimination of all \$1.2 billion in federal funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which support after-school enrichment programs that include snacks and meals. Administration officials have said that, while the programs are supposed to feed children and help them at school, they are ineffective. However, a 2013–2014 U.S. Department of Education study reported that between one-third and half of participating students earned better grades in math and English and improved their homework and in-class participation.

Outside of the budget process, a key provision in the school-nutrition law that has fueled the growth of breakfast participation may be headed for reform by Congress: the Community Eligibility Provision. Under that rule, schools or districts where more than 40 percent of families receive direct assistance, such as food stamps or welfare benefits, can receive extra subsidies to make breakfast universal by offering free in-school meals to all students, whether or not they meet income eligibility guidelines. In Jersey City, for example, every school provides breakfast to all students, even though only about 70 percent of families qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, said Barbarito Ramos, acting food service director.

Advocates support universal school meals because it cuts down on paperwork, minimizes stigma and boosts participation. But some conservatives, particularly Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, have criticized the practice for unfairly subsidizing meals for families who are able to pay. In past sessions, GOP representatives have proposed reforms such as raising the threshold to 60 percent, an idea poised to take root.



Outside the beltway, state and local leaders have moved

aggressively over the past decade to expand school-breakfast participation by instituting “breakfast after the bell.”

Lawmakers in 10 states, plus the District of Columbia, have mandated or funded breakfast after the bell: Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. The practice is officially “recommended” by state law in New Jersey, home to P.S. 11. And bills mandating the practice are circulating in statehouses in Maine, Massachusetts and Washington. Several state education departments have used regulation to promote the practice, including by specifying that minutes spent on in-class meals can count toward required instructional time.

Schools that shift breakfast programs to the classroom report enormous growth.

For example, at Parker Middle School in the Taunton district in southern Massachusetts, student breakfast participation grew from 26 percent to 95 percent after it was offered during the school day, according to Children’s Healthwatch. School officials reported that the number of nurse visits dropped by 24 percent, which they estimated boosted on-task learning time by 18,000 minutes overall.

Big-city districts such as Chicago and Houston have doubled school breakfast participation by moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and after the bell, according to the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices campaign. In Houston, where 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, just 30 percent were eating school breakfast when it was offered before the start of the day. After a successful 2009 pilot involving 30 schools, it was expanded to all elementary and middle schools in 2010, and the number of students eating breakfast doubled. Two years later, nearly four out of five students eating school lunches also ate school breakfast.

The programs look different depending on the age of the students, with most high schools swapping out meal delivery for “grab and go” kiosks in the hallway, so fast-moving teenagers can pick up a meal to bring to homeroom. Keeping track of it all, not to mention keeping classrooms clean, can be daunting to some principals, teachers, food-service workers and custodians.

Lunch aide Sandra Palms picks up the breakfast bags and garbage from 15 classrooms after breakfast at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School #11 in Jersey City.

In Jersey City, some building leaders were sold on the idea at the outset, but others were concerned about the logistical challenges, said Superintendent Marcia V. Lyles. What would serving a meal at the start of the school day mean in terms of lost instructional time and expanded clean-up duties?

“At the end of the day, I just had to mandate it,” she said. “We are always having a conversation about what we can and cannot control. We can’t control poverty, that’s true. But when we have an opportunity to mitigate those factors, like serving breakfast, which is so important — the question is, why aren’t we doing that?”

Serving breakfast after the bell “isn’t really that hard,” she said. “And the principals and the people in the schools really recognized its importance. This, for me, is like preschool and other readiness programs. We are addressing our equity issues and making sure kids come to school ready to learn.”

That is a driving interest at P.S. 11, said Assistant Principal Mary K. Truesdale. “There are some children who would not have gotten any breakfast without this.”

Being ready to learn is important — but there’s a coziness factor too. Getting together in the morning to share a common meal before a long school day is, well, *nice*.

“They come and interact a little,” said teacher Kristin Haviland. “It’s a good way to practice their manners and having a quiet conversation.”

Her student Grace Santos, 8, agreed.

“We eat, and sometimes we talk a little,” she said. “But when we’re done eating, we can go straight on to our next thing, and we have energy to do more things in our day.”

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