



BREAKFAST
in the classroom

BY CHRISTINA UTICONE

GOOD Mornings



“I think breakfast is going to change the WORLD!”

That was the bold and passionate sentiment of a school nutrition professional attending a breakout session about breakfast-in-the-classroom programs during SNA’s 2011 Legislative Action Conference. Her exclamation was met with enthusiastic applause from the standing-room-only crowd. Changing the world one breakfast at a time may sound like a lofty goal, but the folks at SNA’s School Nutrition Foundation (SNF) think it’s possible—and that notion is the seed for its participation in the Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom project.



SNAPSHOT

- The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom initiative initially funded universal breakfast pilots in five metropolitan area school districts.
- Addressing breakfast-in-the-classroom service as a solution to hunger, as well as its positive effect on overall well-being, creates stakeholder engagement.
- Coalition building is crucial to the success of any breakfast-in-the-classroom program.

SNA's School Nutrition Foundation is helping to ensure that the most important meal of the day comes to a classroom near you.



The Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom initiative was developed when five organizations with a shared passion for child nutrition joined forces to work toward improving child health and educational outcomes through the expansion of the School Breakfast Program via the classroom delivery of healthy morning meals. In 2010, SNF, along with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the National Association of Elementary School Principals Foundation (NAESPF) and the National Education Association Health Information Network (NEAHIN), formed this partnership, with generous funding support from the Walmart Foundation. To launch the initiative, five school districts were chosen to establish universal breakfast-in-the-classroom pilot programs: Dallas (Texas) Independent School District, Little Rock (Ark.) School District, Memphis City (Tenn.) Schools, Orange County (Fla.) Public Schools and Prince George's County (Md.) Public Schools.



CREATING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

How do you gather support for your new or expanded breakfast-in-the-classroom program? The following tips may help.

- **Do your research:** Have at least a working budget as a starting point to bring to the attention of decision-makers. Estimate costs for food, equipment and staff time, as well as projected revenues from increased participation.

- **Visit districts or schools** already offering breakfast-in-the-classroom service. Collect data and testimonials from supporters.

- **Identify at least one administrator** who supports the concept and work together to tap your respective networks in building a team of engaged stakeholders.

- **Approach your local teachers' union** and the PTA, as well as any community-based advocacy groups and agencies working on hunger and nutrition issues.

- **When making your case for breakfast in the classroom,** be sure to emphasize the value of school breakfast both as a tool to fight hunger and its role in the improvement of students' overall well-being and health.



“The Walmart Foundation is providing SNF critical support to significantly advance our shared mission of feeding hungry children,” credits SNF Chair and SNA Past President Nancy Rice, MEd, RD, LD, SNS, director, school nutrition division, Georgia Department of Education. “With [their] support, we are now engaging teachers, principals and the hunger community, bringing all these key stakeholders together to join us in promoting school breakfast with a unified and powerful voice.”

Breakfast in the classroom is not a new idea. Some schools have been using this alternate service approach for more than a decade. But when participation in the national School Breakfast Program (SBP) continues to lag far behind the rate seen in the National School Lunch Program (nearly 12 million for the SBP, compared to close to 32 million for lunch), many child health and education advocates see breakfast in the classroom as *the* answer to ensuring that all students receive the many benefits of the morning meal. The experiences of the five districts participating in the first year of the Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom initiative provide further evidence that the barriers to this approach are worth breaking down. They also offer strategic advice to school nutrition professionals seeking to build support for such a program in their own communities.

Why Breakfast at School—and in Classrooms?

Why school breakfast? Studies show that students who eat breakfast at school perform better academically and demonstrate better behavior in the classroom;

absenteeism and tardies drop; standardized test scores rise. Students who eat the morning meal—at home or school—also demonstrate broader vocabularies, higher math and reading scores, improved memory and faster speed on cognitive tests.

Universal breakfast-in-the-classroom programs help families with limited resources by delivering this critical meal to children who may be at risk of starting their day hungry or malnourished. And by offering breakfast in the classroom to *all* students, on a universal basis, schools can help to eliminate any stigma associated with free/reduced-price eligibility.

“Too many students are missing out on the most important meal of the day!” laments Rice. “As school nutrition professionals, we have the ability—and the responsibility—to help children get the nutrition they need to learn and grow, and breakfast is a critical part of that mission.” Addressing breakfast-in-the-classroom service as a solution to hunger and food insecurity, in addition to its effect on academic performance, allows for meaningful dialogue among a greater number of stakeholders.

Teachers and administrators in schools participating in breakfast-in-the-classroom initiatives report additional benefits for students. For example, a commonly cited obstacle to the implementation of breakfast in the classroom is the unfounded concern that it will take away from instructional time. On the contrary, insist experienced veterans of this approach. A breakfast-in-the-classroom program actually *enhances* opportunities for teachers and students to interact,

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

When you encounter resistance to the idea of breakfast-in-the-classroom service, meet concerns with a three-step approach to developing win-win solutions.

- **Listen:** When teachers, custodians, principals and other stakeholders share concerns, be sure to listen to these thoughtfully. They might anticipate legitimate problems that you had not considered.

- **Dialogue:** Ask stakeholders for their suggestions on how anticipated problems might be addressed. Offer your own ideas for solutions. Research common areas of resistance and compile best-practice approaches that work in other schools and districts.

- **Plan:** Work together with administrators, instructional staff, custodians and your cafeteria team to create an individual breakfast-in-the-classroom framework that is right for each school site.

developing students' social skills, teaching them responsibility and etiquette through direct participation in the meal and allowing all to prepare for the day's lessons and activities.

To this point, Alexis Caston, NET coordinator, nutrition services, at Memphis City Schools, shares observations of the program in action: "One of the things we do [with breakfast in the classroom] is cover the cost of the teachers' breakfast, so that they can eat with their students and model that behavior." At one of the district's schools, 3rd-graders are doing work, like reading about current events in an issue of *Time* magazine, while they have breakfast. "The kids think they are just having a good time, but they are reading something educational that is helping them be aware of what's going on in the world," recounts Caston, adding, "Teachers have reported that breakfast in the classroom can be a learning tool to enhance classroom instruction, tying lessons about food and nutrition into math, history and science."

To chronicle the steps and achievements of the Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom initiative, SNF began a blog that it calls "Beyond Breakfast." The name reflects the importance of breakfast from a 360-degree perspective. When kids eat breakfast at school, empty bellies are filled, but that's just the first in a chain reaction of benefits.

It Takes a "Village"

Dora Rivas, MS, RD, LD, SNS, executive director, food & child nutrition services, Dallas Independent School District—and an SNA past president and former SNF chair—acknowledges that fear of change is still the greatest obstacle to overcome when schools begin talking about a breakfast-in-the-classroom program. "Change is difficult," says Rivas, "and a general fear that [this program] will take away from class time, create a mess in the classroom or be difficult to implement is still our biggest challenge."

That's why coalition building and the formation of strong relationships with key partners are crucial to the success of any breakfast-in-the-classroom program.

When school nutrition professionals encounter resistance to the idea of this service alternative, they are encouraged to turn to those districts or schools that are already running a successful program for help. "[Stakeholders at] schools that have concerns or reservations about breakfast in the classroom are asked to visit a school that is currently participating in a program," explains Kim Stewart, RD, SNS, a nutrition instructor at Memphis City Schools. "We want to give the principals and their staff the opportunity to see a [program] in action...to see how smoothly the program can work."

Seeking support from the outset by identifying stakeholders who believe in the breakfast-in-the-classroom model is an excellent way to create a team atmosphere and lend strength to a pitch for this type of breakfast service. Inviting "independent" experts to support your position also can help convince reluctant administrators and teachers. In Orange County Public Schools, Lora Gilbert, SNS, senior director of food & nutrition services, made arrangements to have Keith Ayoob, EdD, RD, "our 'outside expert,'" speak on "brain-smart eating" and explain why eating breakfast is so important.

Enlisting the help and support of principals, and giving them input into the development and implementation process, is another way to help ensure the success of a breakfast-in-the-classroom program. One way to quell fears, explains Rivas, is

to present the program as adaptable and individualized. "The process for implementation at each campus has been unique and dependent on the collaboration and relationship between the central office, cafeteria manager and the principal," she notes. "Approaching each school, preparing staff with resources, being flexible and willing to adapt to *their* needs has been





helpful in moving each school forward.”

In Memphis, Alexis Caston echoes the importance of getting principals involved: “We let principals take the lead and tell us what would work best for their school. We give them leeway, so they can have ownership of the whole process, and that works out a lot better.”

Getting out front in addressing common concerns—such as clean-up—is another way to overcome resistance. Gilbert cites the support that her department is able to provide to facilitate clean-up at her breakfast-in-the-classroom sites: Teachers are given a new trash can just for breakfast leftovers; they place these in the hallway after breakfast is finished. Custodians are provided with new 50-gallon rolling trash cans to pick up classroom refuse. Teachers also are given “spill kits” for clean-up. In addition, “We are seriously thinking about funding custodial time,” notes Gilbert. “For example, if we get over 75% participation, then we can fund one hour for the custodian per 300 breakfasts, calculated by the number of classrooms of 18-28 students per class.”

Finding allies *early* in the process is critical. “The most important step to remember is to seek support of instructional staff,” advises Lilly Bouie, foodservice director, Little Rock School District. This may mean approaching the local teachers’ union or parent-teacher association, seeking support at the outset and working to create an atmosphere of collaboration. Such organizational support, in turn, can be helpful if resistance is encountered from individual teachers and staff.

Twin Missions

It is important to communicate to stakeholders that breakfast in the classroom is more than a feeding program; rather, in-classroom breakfast should be viewed as part of an overall child health policy that addresses the whole child from a health and nutrition standpoint. Stressing the myriad ways in which a universal breakfast-in-the-classroom program will benefit your students and your school will help bring stakeholders on board.



“Breakfast in the classroom ensures *all* students have the opportunity to eat a healthy breakfast, providing the nutrition they need to reach their full potential in school,” asserts Nancy Rice. Research finds that an increase in breakfast participation has a correlating positive effect on lunch participation. “Knowing that more students are eating healthy school meals meets our number one priority—to make sure that every child is receiving the nutrition he/she needs to reach his/her full potential,” continues Rice. “Secondarily, maximum participation creates a program that is innovative and responsive to the needs of its customers—the students.”

Still, the role breakfast-in-the-classroom programs play in addressing child hunger should not be overlooked, but addressed openly and honestly. This is especially important and useful in districts with higher reported levels of food insecurity.

In a survey of school nutrition directors offering breakfast-in-the-classroom service, most of them cited the approach as an important tool in fighting food insecurity in their communities. In Maryland’s Prince George’s County, Food and Nutrition Services Director Joan Shorter credits universal breakfast with increasing access and eliminating “stigma or embarrassment associated with students receiving free meals, resulting in increased participation.”

Kim Stewart can go beyond mere statistics to illustrate the realities of hunger in Memphis, recollecting the story of a teacher who was initially resistant to offering breakfast in the classroom. “After implementation, we met with the school staff to discuss possible changes. One of the

teachers stood up and said she was ashamed of herself for being so negative about the program; she said she did not realize how hungry her children really were until this program began,” recounts Stewart.

It’s a refrain heard over and over again when breakfast in the classroom is on the table. Resistance gives way to team building and teamwork, and the success of the program surprises even its most ardent supporters while changing the hearts and minds of the most determined critics. Breakfast in the classroom is changing the world, one student, one teacher, one school at a time.

One Size Doesn’t Fit All

Once you have a support system in place, *then* what? It can be a long journey from well-intentioned theory to a working daily program. Reaching out to schools and districts that have breakfast-in-the-classroom programs is always a helpful place to start; other directors can give you tips on funding and budgets, equipment and infrastructure. Also, be sure to check out SNF’s online Breakfast in the Classroom Resource Center, <http://docs.schoolnutrition.org/SNF/BIC>. You will find links to help guide you through all the steps to implement breakfast in the classroom, from feasibility studies and other supportive research to financial and menu planning to promotion and marketing. In the meantime, following is a brief look at some of the initial areas you will need to research.

The first determination will be identifying the delivery system that will work best at each location. This can vary based on many factors, including labor restric-



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tions, the layout of the school and schedules for bus drop-off and class start time. Will meals be delivered directly to classrooms? By cafeteria staff, teachers or students? Will you have a grab 'n' go kiosk at the school entrance, or will students pick up meals in the cafeteria and take them to their classes? These are common approaches, but you need to determine the one that fits the needs of your operation and your school the best.

Next, consider changes you may need to make in menu plans if you are transitioning from a cafeteria-based service to classroom dining. How can you provide variety with greater portability, as well as with the food component requirements of a reimbursable meal? Again, it can be helpful to look to other schools as a model for potential meal planning. Directors from the participating Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom districts identified several items that score with students, including lowfat yogurt with granola topping; breakfast sandwiches, such as sausage-egg-and-cheese biscuits; breakfast burritos; lowfat string cheese; and whole-grain fruit muffins. Cereal and fresh fruit are other popular favorites.

The type of equipment you will need in order to facilitate breakfast in the classroom will depend on the delivery method you adopt and the menu you devise. For



example, if you choose a classroom delivery, carts, insulated bags and warmers/coolers may be necessary for efficient delivery and to keep foods at proper temperatures. On the other hand, if a pick-up program is the preferred approach, you may want to investigate purchasing portable kiosks. Other considerations could include added refrigeration to handle the increased inventory of perishable items, as well as a wireless, real-time point-of-sale system to help maintain accurate accountability for meals served.

Budget Boosters

Of course, these three areas alone—delivery, menu, equipment—will have an impact on your budget. But don't forget that increased participation in the program will mean greater reimbursements. Given the disparity between breakfast and lunch participation by free/reduced-price-eligible students alone, millions of available federal dollars are going untouched. In its 2012 *School Breakfast Scorecard* study, FRAC estimates that if states could increase participation to reach 60 children with breakfast for every 100 that also eat lunch, an additional 2.4 million low-income children would be added to the breakfast program—and states would receive an additional \$583 million in child nutrition funding.

Identifying partnering opportunities within the greater community is another way to secure additional resources (while also increasing awareness and excitement about a breakfast-in-the-classroom program). For example, in Memphis, the local professional basketball team is teaming up with the district's middle and high schools to provide breakfast carts.

Creative solutions like this help to get kids excited to eat breakfast, and they help you secure needed resources—like equipment—while building a greater coalition within the school and the community at large.

Brighter Days Ahead

With the recent release of new nutrition requirements for school meals, school nutrition professionals face fresh challenges in providing healthy school meals to students. But the meal pattern changes also present operators with a natural *opportunity* to work with stakeholders throughout the school community toward more comprehensive child health and education goals. Indeed, there may never be a more ideal occasion to have serious conversations about implementing breakfast-in-the-classroom service in your schools!

Nancy Rice sums it up concisely: "As child nutrition professionals, we know we are a vital part of the team that helps *every* child achieve. Breakfast in the classroom is a great example of how working together can make a difference." All students deserve a nutritious start to their day—you can help fuel them beyond breakfast toward a brighter, more productive future. **SN**

Christina Uticone is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas, and a regular contributor to SNF's *Beyond Breakfast* blog, <http://beyondbreakfast.org>. Photos on page 49-52 by **Rick Brady** at Prince George's County (Md.) Schools. Photos on page 48 courtesy of **Dallas (Texas) Independent School District**.

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BONUS WEB CONTENT

The Walmart Foundation has announced it will provide funding to extend the Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom initiative through 2014, expanding support for universal breakfast in the classroom pilot programs in several new districts. At press time, the names of those districts had not yet been released, but a complete list will appear at www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus content as soon as they are available.