



Insight

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School Nutrition Directors Discuss the Issues Influencing School Breakfast Participation

O A relationship between student participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and individual improvements in academic performance was shown by Murphy et al. (1998). In their study they showed children who participated regularly in the SBP earned higher grades in math, had better school attendance, and decreased tardiness. Another study showed that students who ate breakfast through the SBP tended to eat a more nutritionally sound breakfast than those who ate breakfast at home (Worobey & Worobey, 1999).

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Even though benefits of the SBP have been well documented, many of America's neediest children are not participating. In the 2003-2004 school year, the SBP served 8.4 million children daily with 6.9 children receiving free or reduced price breakfasts (USDA, September 2005a). During the same school year, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) served 28.4 million children daily with 16.5 million children receiving free or reduced priced lunches (USDA, September 2005b). This indicates that 9.6 million needy children who participate in the NSLP do not participate in the SBP.

Published in 2004, *The Fourteenth Annual Status Report on the School Breakfast Program*, which provides state-to-state data on SBP participation, shows that while SBP participation is low across the nation, it is critically low in New Hampshire, Nebraska, Alaska, Illinois, Utah, New Jersey, and Wisconsin (Rosso et al., 2004). Their report shows that in these seven states, fewer than one in three children eating lunch through the NSLP are being served by the SBP.

Many reports have been published on school administrators', teachers', parents', and students' perspectives and attitudes regarding the SBP. However, only one report could be found that investigated the perspectives and attitudes of school nutrition (SN)



directors with regards to the SBP (McConnell et al., 2004). SN directors who have primary responsibility for the daily operations of the SBP can provide valuable information on various barriers and issues leading to low student participation. As reported by McConnell et al. (2004), SN directors agree that it is difficult to sustain student participation in the SBP when other events or school activities are scheduled during the same time period. SN directors also described challenges they face in operating a successful SBP when opposition to the program was presented from school administrators, staff, and parents. McConnell et al. (2004) also found that SN directors believe that school nutrition service staff have a significant influence over the success of SBPs. SN directors believe a positive relationship between nutrition service staff and students contributes to higher participation rates.

Ultimately, for the SBP to be successful and experience continued growth, many program obstacles and challenges need to be addressed through the research process. SN directors have first-hand experience in addressing various challenges to operating a successful SBP. The purpose of this research was to obtain SN directors' perceptions of issues impacting participation in the SBP.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to:

- identify advantages, disadvantages, and barriers to students participating in SBPs in Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois as perceived by SN directors, and
- identify resources needed by SN directors to support operating a successful SBP.

METHODS

Questionnaire

- An eight item questionnaire was developed and piloted for SN directors.
- The questionnaire asked SN directors to indicate their work and education experience, and to rate various aspects of the SBP.
- An open-ended question asked SN directors to identify barriers to students participating in the SBP.
- Questionnaires were completed by each SN director immediately prior to beginning each focus group discussion.
- Questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics that included frequencies of each rating from the questions.
- All responses from the open-ended question were transcribed verbatim and saved as a Microsoft Word document.

Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were conducted with SN directors to gather in-depth information regarding their perceptions of the SBP. Included in the discussions were three groups of SN directors who were responsible for nutrition service in elementary schools recruited from Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois. These three states were selected from a list of the top ten states identified in the *Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) 2004 School Breakfast Scorecard* (Rosso et al., 2004) as having reached 34 or fewer low-income students with school breakfast per 100 reached with school lunch. SN directors were recruited based on recommendations from state directors of Child Nutrition Programs in Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois. Ten SN directors from each state who were within driving distance (less than 100 miles) of the selected state meeting place were recruited to participate.

Seven questions were presented to SN directors during discussions that lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each discussion was led by the same person with the same set of questions and an assistant taking notes. After all discussions were completed, a professional transcriber typed a transcript of each audiotape. To analyze the transcripts, a four step process was used to:

1. identify themes (similar statements from different participants) resulting from each question asked,
2. identify statements to be coded and assigned to an appropriate theme,
3. utilize a software program to systematically sort statements by theme, question, and frequency, and

4. account for possible subjectivity and/or research bias in coding by determining inter-rater agreement using the Holsti formula.

FINDINGS

QUESTIONNAIRE

SN Directors' Demographics

- 24 SN directors completed the questionnaire
- 42% represented urban school districts
- 42% represented suburban school districts
- 16% represented rural school districts
- 54% had more than 10 years experience in school nutrition service
- 54% were certified by the School Nutrition Association
- 58% had a college degree

SN Directors' Perceptions

- 79% agreed it is very important to have a school breakfast program
- 70% agreed that in schools that have a SBP, school principals were supportive to very supportive of the SBP
- 92% agreed that less than 10% of teachers ate the school breakfast

SN Directors' Answers to Open-Ended Question

"What would you say is the number one barrier to student participation in your school's breakfast program?"

- 29% identified lack of parental support for / or understanding of the breakfast program
- 29% identified lack of time for students to eat
- 21% identified busing schedules
- 21% identified lack of support from school administration

Focus Groups Findings

When discussing with SN directors their perceptions of the SBP, researchers were able to group responses into advantages, disadvantages, and barriers of students participating in the school breakfast program. Listed below are tables categorizing key areas of discussion.

Advantages of Students Participating in the School Breakfast Program

Theme	Responses	Percentage
Eating Environment and Social Interactions	14	50
Better Nutrition	5	18
Students' Preferences	5	18
School Performance	4	14
Total	28	100

Table 1

- 1) **Eating Environment and Social Interactions** contributed 50% to the general discussion. SN directors were very positive regarding the eating environment and made statements such as, *"It gives a chance for the kids to see a warm heart and happy face with those lunch personnel," "It's low key at breakfast and not so rushed," "It provides a calmer atmosphere when they're at school,"* and *"It's a safe environment for those kids."*
- 2) **Better Nutrition** contributed 18% to the discussion. SN directors believe that at times the SBP provides better nutrition and a greater variety than what students receive at home. Statements from SN directors included *"...they have a balanced nutritional breakfast (at school) where at home they may not,"* and *"...the nutritional advantage to kids. I am absolutely certain that it's school meals that present milk."*
- 3) **Students' Preferences** contributed 18% to the discussion. In many instances students prefer to eat at school because they are offered more of a variety of breakfast foods than what they receive at home. One SN director stated, *"I think we probably give them more variety than they get at home."*
- 4) **School Performance** contributed 14% to the discussion and included statements regarding improving students' punctuality and attendance.

Disadvantages of Students Participating in the School Breakfast Program

Theme	Responses	Percentage
Poor Stigma	5	29
Time Issues	4	24
Meal Quality	3	18
Parent Concerns	3	18
Conflicting Events	2	11
Totals	17	100

Table 2

- 1) **Poor Stigma** contributed 29% to the discussion. Statements referred to the SBP as being primarily for low income and disadvantaged children. One SN director stated, *"...depending on the economics of the school, if you eat (school) breakfast it signifies that you're free or reduced (price)."* The SBP is viewed by many potential student participants and school staff as a program meant only for low-income students. Even though SBP policies mandate that confidentiality of students' free and reduced-price status be maintained, many factors outside the SN directors' control may compromise that confidentiality. As stated by a SN director, *"Some of my schools only want to encourage the free students to eat. So that's definitely another overt identification."*
- 2) **Time Issues** contributed 24% to the discussions and included statements related to the time of morning the breakfast period was scheduled and the short

time period allowed for students to eat. Presently, the majority of schools participating in the SBP schedule the breakfast meal prior to the beginning of the school day, requiring students who wish to participate to arrive at school earlier.

- 3) **Meal Quality** contributed 18% to the discussion. SN directors were concerned that due to limited resources and/or facilities in providing a SBP, some of the smaller schools only received cold breakfast food items versus the greater variety of breakfast food items offered in the larger schools. One SN director stated that her superintendent only allowed cold breakfast food items to be served.
- 4) **Parent Concerns** contributed 18% to the discussion. SN directors conveyed that parents were concerned to discover that their child was eating one breakfast at school after eating breakfast at home. SN directors were familiar with handling parent complaints of having to pay for the additional school breakfasts their child consumed. SN directors viewed the additional breakfast as a disadvantage in view of childhood obesity. SN directors stated that parents may prefer their child eat at home due to food intolerances, religious practices, or cultural food preferences.
- 5) **Conflicting Events** contributed 11% to the discussions. One SN director stated, *"There's a conflict between playing outside with that kick ball and coming inside to eat breakfast."*

Barriers for Students Participating in the School Breakfast Program

Theme	Responses	Percentage
School Staff Support	12	39
Students' Preferences	5	16
Time Issues	4	13
Bus Schedules	3	10
Parent Influence	3	10
Meal Quality	2	6
Financial	2	6
Total	31	100

Table 3

- 1) **School Staff Support** presented the greatest depth and number of statements, contributing 39% to the discussion. SN directors acknowledged challenges in operating SBPs due to resistance from school professionals for a variety of reasons. Statements such as, *"Until the mandate came, there was no way I was going to push a breakfast program without the cooperation from the principal and the staff,"* and *"I would say an active discouragement (to participate in the SBP) of paying children in two of my elementary schools (would be a barrier)."*

- 2) **Students' Preferences** contributed 16% to the discussion. SN directors believed many students who chose not to participate in the SBP most likely preferred sleeping later, were not hungry early in the morning, would rather play with their friends who did not eat the school breakfast, or enjoyed staying outside during nice weather.
- 3) **Time Issues** contributed 3% to the discussion. Of concern was the limited length of time allotted for the breakfast meal. Also of concern was that it was scheduled before school, and the budget limited staffing hours.
- 4) **Bus Schedules** contributed 10% to the discussion. SN directors see the school bus schedule as a barrier, since busses are scheduled to arrive shortly before the school day starts. Therefore, students who ride the bus are challenged to eat breakfast before classes begin. SN directors are concerned that feeding students after the meal period has ended interferes with classroom time and places additional demands on the school nutrition staff.
- 5) **Parent Influence** theme contributed 10% to the discussion and included statements such as, *"I have a lot of community opposition. They truly believe it is the family's job to serve breakfast"* and *"I had one group of parents tell me I couldn't put anything good on the menu."* SN directors believe marketing the SBP to parents can be very challenging but critical to the success of a SBP, especially in the lower elementary grades.
- 6) **Meal Quality** contributed 6% to the discussion. SN directors voiced concerns about limitations with their production facilities in providing hot breakfast foods. They also expressed concern regarding the availability of purchasing a wide variety of breakfast items.
- 7) **Financial** contributed 6% to the discussion. SN directors acknowledged that some parents are unable and/or unwilling to pay for a school breakfast.

Influencing Factors on the School Breakfast Program

SN directors were asked who has the greatest influence behind starting or having

a school breakfast program. They were very clear that the school principal held the key to whether or not the SBP was supported at the local level. Some SN directors were able to open the door by offering the SBP as a "pilot" program. Others were successful in gaining grassroots support from teachers, school nurses, and nutrition service staff by having them document the number of hungry children they gave snacks to prior to lunch time. SN directors also turned to their professional associations who in turn approached state legislators in efforts to gain support and funding for SBPs. Private and non-profit groups, such as the National Dairy Council and Hunger Coalitions, also provided support for SBPs.

Resources Needed by SN Directors

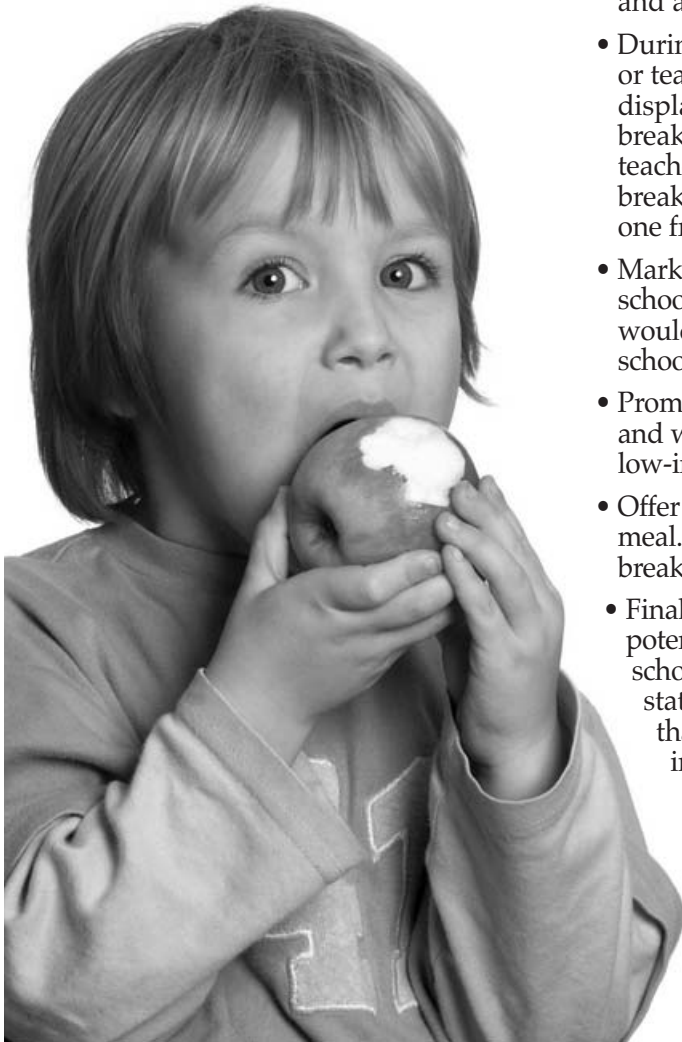
SN directors were asked what resources would assist and support their efforts in operating a SBP. All three SN director groups voiced three requests: 1) legislative support mandating breakfast programs, 2) assistance from food manufacturers in supplying breakfast food items that meet breakfast program food-based meal patterns, and 3) access to "In-Class-Breakfast" program material, such as that developed by the National Dairy Council. Other resources identified by SN directors are listed below:

- Research-based literature on the benefits of breakfast. Information adapted for:
 - Parents
 - School Administrators
 - Teachers
 - Students
- Professional 30-second television/radio ads promoting school breakfast
- Camera-ready promotional material in several different languages
- Start-up grants for the SBP
- Funding to support longer breakfast meal periods
- Classroom nutrition curriculum that supports the breakfast program
- USDA regulations to support the reprocessing of commodities into foods better suited for breakfast
- Nutritional data showing breakfast menus meet federal guidelines for nutritional requirements
- Promotional materials on how to market and make breakfast "cool"

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

The benefits of eating breakfast have been well documented. The School Breakfast Program (SBP), a federally administered program designed to provide school children an opportunity to eat breakfast, currently feeds 8.4 million school children daily. However, there is still a large population of children who do not eat breakfast and/or do not take advantage of the SBP. The purpose of this study was to ask SN directors of elementary SBP in Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois what they believed were the advantages, disadvantages, and barriers to students participating in the SBP.

On a daily basis, SN directors witness the advantages for students who participate in the SBP. However, unless teachers, school administrators, parents, and non-participating students take the opportunity to participate and/or observe the SBP, they will not be aware of or experience the advantages first hand. Following are ideas for ways to increase awareness within these key groups.



Top Three Resources Identified by SN Directors to Assist in Operating a Successful School Breakfast Program

- Legislative support/ mandates for the breakfast program (i.e. universal breakfast)
 - Food manufacturers support in development of a variety of food items that comply with the five menu planning approaches
 - Materials in a "Kit Form" for implementing "In-Class" breakfast programs
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- Strategically plan and provide special invitations to various members of the school community.
 - Twice a month, invite a teacher and his/her students to come dine in the SBP, and set up a special table for them with name plates and a banner welcoming them.
 - During Parent-Teacher Association meetings or teacher conferences set up a table to display the breakfast menus with samples of breakfast food items for parents and teachers. Everyone who samples the breakfast food could receive a coupon for one free breakfast meal.
 - Market the school meal programs through school newsletters and bulletin boards. This would help "sell" the breakfast program to school staff.
 - Promote the SBP as a program that benefits and welcomes all students, not just low-income and disadvantaged students.
 - Offer breakfast as a packaged ready-to-go meal. Students could pick up brown-bagged breakfast items on the way to class.
 - Finally, in order for SBPs to reach their full potential, SBPs must have the support of the school community. SBPs also need for local, state, and federal officials to initiate policies that promote and recognize the importance of the SBP for advancing the well being of the students served. Also, support must be garnered from food manufacturers to increase their efforts to produce and make available healthy and conveniently packaged breakfast foods that not only comply with the federal regulations that govern the SBP, but are also appealing to the students.

For More Information

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