



FACT SHEET



What About the Kids? In the 2011 NJ Legislative Election

Food for Thought: Expanding School Breakfast Participation

When children are hungry, they cannot concentrate on a reading assignment or solve a math problem. A good breakfast keeps kids healthy and helps students focus in class, score higher on standardized tests and avoid trips to the school nurse.

Despite strong evidence of the benefits of serving breakfast to children in school, just a fraction of eligible New Jersey children get this healthy start to their school day. According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the state ranks 46th nationwide for its participation rate in the School Breakfast Program.

Only 37.4 percent of New Jersey children who receive free- or reduced-priced lunch also eat breakfast at school, despite already being enrolled in the school meals program. The total percentage of eligible children participating in school breakfast is just 30.5 percent.

New Jersey law requires districts that have more than 20 percent of students qualifying for free- or reduced-price lunch to establish a school breakfast program. School districts must advertise the program to parents, minimize the stigma attached to receiving school meals and encourage participation of students who are not income-eligible in this federal program.

Why Breakfast is Important

Breakfast has long been identified as the most important meal of the day. Eating a healthy breakfast helps jumpstart metabolism and provide energy. The school breakfast program has been shown to increase children's scores on the Healthy Eating Index, improve the quality of children's diet and intake of essential nutrients and reduce childhood obesity.

Policy Recommendation

New Jersey's Departments of Education and Agriculture, in partnership with school districts, should expand innovative approaches to providing breakfast to children in school.

School breakfast also promotes a positive social environment and can help foster relationships between students and teachers. A case study of three breakfast programs served in the classroom in three states found that participation in school breakfast resulted in fewer school discipline referrals, increased attendance, a smoother morning transition for students and a growing sense of community within the school.

In short, a good breakfast for school children leads to improved health and stronger academic achievement.

Barriers to Breakfast

School districts across the state and the country routinely report that the primary barrier to healthy school breakfast participation is that children simply do not get to school with enough time to eat breakfast.

Many districts, however, are recognizing the nutritional and educational importance of starting the school day with a healthy meal and are taking innovative approaches to overcome this logistical problem. These include serving breakfast in the classroom, providing “grab-and-go” breakfasts to students as they enter the school or serving “second chance” breakfast during a natural break in the school day.

Districts that adopt these approaches report sharp increases in breakfast participation and positive results in many areas, including student achievement and behavior. They also say that the initial logistical concerns about taking a more innovative approach to serving breakfast turn out to be unfounded.

Currently, few New Jersey school districts serve breakfast in the classroom or use these other creative approaches. New Jersey’s school districts and the state Departments of Education and Agriculture must make expanding school breakfast a top priority.

For little or no cost to the state and districts, this healthy start to school can vastly improve both child health and school achievement, leveraging the considerable investment the state makes in public education and health programs and giving children a better chance for school success.

For more information, contact ACNJ at advocates@acnj.org or (973) 643-3876.