
For Students Who Don't Eat Breakfast at Home, California Takes a New Approach

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Breakfast in the classroom encourages children to start school days with a meal. Photo: Courtesy Food Research and Action Center.

By Fran Kritz

The next school year doesn't start for more than two months but many schools in California are already thinking about the breakfasts they'll serve to students on the first day of classes.

That's because over 90 schools in high poverty districts in the state that applied for funds for a morning meal program called Breakfast After the Bell recently learned they have been awarded program grants of up to \$15,000 per school.

The funds come from a new \$2 million pool for the program authorized by the state legislature and administered by the California Department of Education.

While breakfast served before classes start at most California public schools is open to all students, kids from lower income families often shun the early breakfast for fear of being stigmatized, said Tracey Patterson, director of legislation for Oakland-based California Food Policy Advocates, which did advocacy work for the new grants. Lower-income students get free or reduced prices on school meals, while higher-income students typically pay full price. Higher-income students are far less likely to come to the early breakfasts, because they usually eat at home.

Patterson said serving breakfast after school has started is more accessible for students because many schools serve everyone the meal for free, making a student's income status immaterial while they eat breakfast.

The new state grants for Breakfast After the Bell cover non-food needs such as cleaning materials, garbage cans and storage containers. Food costs are covered mostly by the US Department of Agriculture with a small grant from the state of California.

Jennifer LeBarre, head of nutrition services for the Oakland Unified School District, where ten schools have been awarded a total of just over \$145,000 in new grants for their Breakfast After the Bell programs, said she expects the grants to boost breakfast participation at public schools in her district from a current rate of 20 percent to over 70 percent of students eating morning selections such as yogurt, fruit, breakfast sandwiches, cereal and milk.

"That increase isn't just because of concern about being stigmatized," Patterson said. Another reason students don't make it to the early breakfasts "is because parents and school buses can't always get them there in time for breakfast."

Many schools in California and around the country have introduced Breakfast After the Bell programs in the last few years and have found that while reducing hunger is the main goal, there are many other benefits. A 2015 survey published by the Food Research & Action Center in Washington, DC and the National Association of Secondary School Principals found positive outcomes of the program include improved student attentiveness, fewer visits to the school nurse, less absenteeism, fewer disciplinary referrals and improved reading and math scores.

Hoover Elementary in West Oakland, which has a 98 percent poverty rate, introduced Breakfast After the Bell in January. Principal Ashley Martin said that moving the breakfast time from 8 to 8:30 a.m. has meant that many kids take the earlier time slot to play if they are in school ahead of the bell and then are ready to eat in their classrooms.

Hoover has enough funding for its Breakfast After the Bell program through a grant from No Kid Hungry, an initiative of **Share Our Strength**, a DC based non-profit that focuses on ending childhood hunger in the U.S. Hoover did not apply for a CDE grant but Martin said she's glad to know of the Education Department's support.

Cesar Escalante, a parent whose children were in transitional kindergarten and fifth grade this year at Hoover said one added benefit of Breakfast After the Bell is that his children's teachers encourage their students to eat their whole breakfast. The pre-bell breakfasts, said Escalante, had only minimal supervision and those teachers had the responsibility of making sure the kids were safe, not that they ate.

Nora Barich, a kindergarten teacher at Hoover Elementary said that in past years many teachers gave out morning snacks every day, which they bought with their own money, "but I haven't had to provide morning snacks since we started the [new] breakfast program." Students no longer tell her they are hungry, Barich said. She has noticed that when students eat breakfast in the classroom, they are more focused and ready to learn.

Implementing Breakfast After the Bell has not been easy in all schools and districts. Many principals and teachers expressed concern about lost class time, greater teacher responsibility and dirty classrooms.

Many principals have worked with staff to create programming such as class meetings, reading aloud to younger grades or culture discussions with older grades so that eating time is still teaching time.

"I see it as family breakfast time," said Ashley Martin, Hoover's principal. "Many valuable and important conversations happen at meal time and that can happen at school as well."

At many schools plans for Breakfast After the Bell were met with resistance by custodians who worried about more work without compensation, increased garbage and the possibility of roaches and rodents.

Case studies compiled by California Food Policy Advocates found that problem solving specific to each school has helped school staff embrace the program, Patterson said.

One high school in Sacramento, for example, gives students in the school's independent living program course credit for delivering meals to students at a local middle school. At public schools in Manteca, in the Central Valley, no raisins or sunflower seeds are served, at the request of the custodial staff, to help reduce the cleanup time.

The new Department of Education grants will also help. They're intended for extra staff and materials to help run the programs such as new garbage cans, cleaning supplies, rolling carts for food presentation and delivery and storage containers.

Each school determines its own food options together with the district's nutrition staff and they can range from a buffet in the cafeteria that kids choose from and then take to class, "grab n' go" carts in the hallway before class or before a morning break and meals served directly to the classroom, often the preferred choice for younger grades.

Food selections can be a challenge said LeBarre in Oakland, because you want the largest number of kids eating most to all of what is served. Pre-bell breakfast is often hot which is much harder to do for Breakfast After the Bell programs even at schools that have cooking facilities.

Jacqueline Garcia, whose son was a second grader at Hoover Elementary School this year, said she wishes hot breakfast could be served regularly but knows her son loves yogurt days.

The nutrition services department at the Lemon Grove School District, outside San Diego, has a Breakfast After the Bell program for its students that includes hot choices one or more days a week including a breakfast sandwich and mini pancakes. Cold choices can include cereal and milk, banana bread, yogurt and a breakfast bar. All breakfasts include low-fat and nonfat milk and a fruit, such as raisins, apple slices or orange juice.

There are some menu complaints at Hoover, said Escalante, who is an assistant community relations manager at the school, in addition to being a parent. "But I tell them it's a process. We're lucky to have this program and we can work together on suggesting changes."