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Schools bring breakfast into the classroom

October 27, 2011 | Joanna Lin



Joanna Lin/California Watch

A student eats breakfast in the classroom at Foster Elementary School in Compton.

Every morning in Sarah McKerr's third-grade class at Foster Elementary School in Compton, students turn in their homework and file back to their seats with something in hand: a free breakfast.

Over the past year, the Compton Unified School District has moved breakfast out of the cafeteria and into the classroom at 21 of its 22 elementary schools, including Foster. It's one of several districts in the state that is feeding more students by changing where and when they eat.

Compton Unified officials said full bellies have brought several benefits: More breakfast participation has allowed schools to maximize their resources and receive greater federal reimbursements. Student attendance and performance have improved, and school nurses are treating fewer students for stomachaches.

And because teachers must check off names of students participating, McKerr uses the time to multitask. She stations herself by the coolers of bananas and milk cartons, waiting to see who comes with a worksheet. "It makes it that much easier for me to figure out who did their homework," she said.

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Like most districts in the state, Compton Unified used to serve breakfast in school cafeterias before the start of class. Because its schools have large proportions of low-income students, the meal is universal – free to all students – regardless of whether they meet the **federal income standards** for free or reduced-price meals. Yet few students showed up.

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"You used to be very lucky if you had 15, 10, 30 (percent)" of students come to breakfast in the cafeteria, said Cheryl Johnson, the district's classroom breakfast coordinator.

Since implementing breakfast in the classroom at the start of class, however, participation has skyrocketed. At Foster, participation jumped from 19 percent to 73 percent; other schools in the district saw similar spikes.

Advocates hope more schools will follow Compton's lead.

About 56 percent of California students – more than 3.4 million – qualify for free or reduced-price meals, but less than one-third of those eligible take part in school breakfast. Difficulty getting to school early, social stigma and the timing of appetites can impede or discourage participation in traditional cafeteria breakfast programs.

Classroom breakfast is a **model that is gaining traction** in California – particularly at elementary schools. In a classroom breakfast, students spend the first 10 to 15 minutes of class eating at their desks while teachers

proceed with their usual instruction. The details of the program, such as who delivers the meals, what food is served and how teachers use the time, vary by school.

"What we'd like to do is teach the younger kids to eat breakfast. If we can teach young children, by the time they're in middle and high school, they'll already have that habit," said Nicola Edwards, a nutrition policy advocate at California Food Policy Advocates. "It's setting them up for healthy eating behavior later in life."



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Bio

My Priorities: Schools are charged with ensuring not only students' academic success but also, in many ways, their physical, emotional and overall well-being. I'm interested in how California's public schools are meeting these responsibilities as they grapple with shrinking budgets, and how they're serving their most vulnerable populations.

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Research has linked school breakfast programs with higher test scores and grades, improved attendance, and fewer referrals to school nurses. In California, districts so far have mostly anecdotal evidence, but some are beginning to document and quantify the changes that follow classroom breakfasts.

California Food Policy Advocates has hired a consultant to evaluate Compton Unified's classroom breakfast program. It's also [leading a campaign](#) to implement and expand breakfast programs at districts throughout the state – especially those where a large low-income student population means need is great and universal breakfast is feasible.

Next month, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the state's largest district, will launch a yearlong pilot program for universal classroom breakfast at three elementary schools. The district started pilot programs at one middle school and two high schools at the beginning of the school year.



Joanna Lin/California Watch

Foster Elementary School teacher Sarah McKerr collects homework from her third-graders as they pick up breakfast.

"If they can do it, LA Unified can do it," Laura Benavidez, the district's deputy director of food services operations, said of large urban districts that have created classroom breakfast programs. "We hope the enthusiasm catches."

The outcome of the pilot program could have tremendous consequences for Los Angeles Unified, where nearly 77 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals in 2009-10. More than 330,500 eligible students did not participate in breakfast that year. If the district's breakfast participation had matched its lunch participation, it would have received an additional \$28.8 million in federal reimbursements, according to a California Food Policy Advocates [analysis](#).

Statewide, California school districts could have gained more than \$351 million in federal reimbursements if breakfast participation were as high as lunch participation. For districts stretched thin by budget cuts, the reimbursements are critical.

Meals mean money

Finances were a major incentive when the Hawthorne School District began breakfast in the classroom at its 12 schools in 2002. The district's lunch program had pushed its food services budget into the red, so it needed to boost breakfast participation to increase its federal reimbursements.

Hawthorne went from serving about 1,875 breakfasts a day to 7,500 – a participation rate well above 80 percent. It's been able to cover its labor costs and grocery bills ever since, said Anna Apoian, the district's director of food services.

For most districts, there are startup costs for getting classroom breakfast programs off the ground. But with high participation, school meal programs can become self-sustaining, officials said.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Criss Atwell, director of nutrition services for Modesto City Schools. "If you're serving 700 students with the same amount of labor that you're serving 150 students, it's obviously beneficial financially."

Atwell used his department's budget to cover initial costs – including insulated containers and red wagons that students use to transport them to class, and additional refrigeration – at six elementary schools that run classroom breakfast programs. Each school's expenses were recovered within a couple of months, he said.

The same was true at Compton Unified. The district bought tilt trucks and spent about \$125 per classroom on coolers and trash cans. It recouped the costs "almost immediately," said Johnson, the district's classroom breakfast coordinator. "We could've never done it if we hadn't increased participation. It had to pay for itself."

The Lemon Grove School District in San Diego County, which began universal classroom breakfast at its seven elementary and middle schools in September, is on track to recoup its initial costs by the first quarter of 2012, said Robin McNulty, the district's director of nutrition services.

Los Angeles Unified hopes it won't have to pay out of pocket for its pilot program, Benavidez said. One of its food vendors has donated thermal bags, and the district has applied for state grants – the California Department of Education awards up to \$15,000 per school site for one-time expenses associated with starting or expanding breakfast and summer food services – to cover equipment.

Making classroom breakfast work

Switching to classroom breakfast results in a sharp increase in the number of meals schools serve. Districts

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must ensure that schools have the physical capacity and staff to handle the additional food. In the most successful programs, teachers, administrators, staff, students and families learn what the program means for them, said Edwards, of California Food Policy Advocates.

"It has to be planned out very well," she said. "It could be a logistical nightmare."

Oftentimes, the breakfast menu requires tweaking as well. Districts retire sticky items like syrup or oatmeal, which can be difficult to clean off desks and out of classroom carpets. They look for whole fruits and pre-wrapped muffins that keep crumbs to a minimum.



Joanna Lin/California Watch

Foster Elementary School students wheel insulated containers for breakfast items to and from classrooms.

Compton Unified tried to start classroom breakfasts in 2004 after receiving a breakfast expansion grant from the state, but its program never got off the ground. What was missing: buy-in from the administration, said Tracie Thomas, the district's director of student nutrition services.

Lemon Grove's governing board and community were **divided on classroom breakfasts** when the district considered the program in April. Opponents worried the meals would detract from instructional time and burden teachers.

"It was kind of contentious trying to get this in," McNulty said.

Depending on the school and grade, Lemon Grove has teachers, staff, students or parent volunteers bring breakfast to classrooms in insulated bags. Food services staff retrieve the bags after meals, which means the district spends more on labor than it would if, for instance, students shuttled the bags, as they do in Compton Unified.

But the arrangement was needed to assuage concerns, McNulty said.

"Because we are a needs-improvement district, it's important we go bell to bell for teaching," she said.

In a **letter** last year to counties, districts and school administrators, then-State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell and State Controller John Chiang tried to "dispel the myth" about lost instructional time: "Please be assured that you can provide students breakfast in the classroom while appropriate educational activities are taking place."

But those assurances have not been enough for some critics in Modesto, Atwell said.

"Without fail, it's a battle to keep it in every year," he said. "There are some teachers and people that just don't believe it's their job to feed the children."

The district launched classroom breakfasts in 1997, when Atwell started the red wagon system for students to carry meals, and long before others in the state followed suit. Nearly 68 percent of the district's students – 92.3 percent at its six schools with classroom breakfasts – are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

"You get really frustrated that you have to fight every year," he said. "You think, wow, 1997? I'm still fighting the fight? But you do."

If he had his way, Atwell said he would expand classroom breakfasts to another six schools tomorrow. When students have classroom breakfasts, he said, "you know they're going to get at least two meals a day. A lot of times, it's the only meals they get."

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