

Lessons Learned



Improving School Success Through a Quality School Food Service Program

*The link between nutrition and learning is well documented. Healthy eating patterns are essential for students to achieve their full academic potential, full physical and mental growth, and lifelong health and well-being...Schools have a responsibility to help students and staff establish and maintain lifelong, healthy eating patterns. Well-planned and well-implemented school nutrition programs have been shown to positively influence students eating habits.*¹

The School Food Service Program has the potential to contribute to children's current health and academic achievement as well as their future health status as adults. Children who are well nourished learn better. Children who eat breakfast learn better. Schools that use the cafeteria to provide practice in helping children choose healthy foods help youth establish habits that pay health dividends as adults. Children who continue to eat a well balanced diet into their adult years will be less likely to experience heart disease, cancer and diabetes than those students whose diet is high in fat, salt and calories.

Children who are well nourished learn better.

It has been estimated that approximately eight percent of the children under the age of 12 - four million American children - experience prolonged periods of food insufficiency or hunger.²



- Chronically undernourished students score lower on achievement tests.^{3,4}
- Hungry children have more behavioral, emotional and academic problems.²
- Students receiving the least amount of protein in their diet have the lowest achievement scores.⁵
- Even though many students in a New York study experienced malnutrition too slight for clinical signs, their academic performance was impaired.⁶
- Elementary students from food-insufficient families had significantly lower arithmetic scores and were more likely to repeat a grade.⁷

Children who eat breakfast learn better.

Schools that provide a breakfast program for all students have noted academic dividends. Studies comparing students who eat breakfast at school with those who do not eat breakfast have noted that those who eat breakfast at school:



- Score higher on standardized tests⁸
- Have improved math scores⁸⁻¹⁴
- Have improved reading,^{8,13} verbal fluency,¹³ and vocabulary scores⁸

References

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For more information contact:



1655 Tullie Circle, NE
Atlanta, GA 30329
Phone: (404)785-7251
Fax: (404)785-7259

www.healthmpowers.org

Children who eat breakfast behave better.

Participation in a breakfast program has also improved classroom climate. Studies have shown:



- Reduced hyperactivity, depression, and anxiety¹⁵
- Improved behavior^{14, 15}
- Improved emotional functioning¹⁶

The school lunch and breakfast program can improve a child's health status.

Studies comparing students who eat breakfast at school with those who do not eat breakfast found that students that ate breakfast:



- Had reduced rates of absenteeism^{8, 12-14} and tardiness^{8, 13}
- Improved nutritional status¹²
- Increased intake of food energy, calcium, phosphorous and vitamin C¹⁴

Helping students establish healthy eating habits promotes well-nourished adults who are less susceptible to the chronic diseases associated with poor dietary choices such as obesity, diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Successful school nutrition programs “are guided by nutrition policies that link nutrition education, child nutrition services, healthy school environment, and community partnerships.”¹⁸

Policies to encourage healthy eating recommended by the National Association of State Boards of Education include the following:

- Create a food service program that employs well-prepared staff who serve appealing choices of nutritious foods.
- Have pleasant eating areas for students and staff with adequate time for unhurried eating.
- Provide a sequential program of nutrition instruction that is integrated with the health education curriculum and coordinated with the food service program.
- Promote an overall school environment that encourages students to make wise food choices.
- Provide opportunities and encouragement for staff to model healthy eating.
- Provide services to ensure that students and staff with nutrition-related problems are referred to appropriate services for counseling or treatment.
- Involve family members in program development and implementation.

For information on quality school nutrition programs see:

- www.fns.usda.gov/fns/
- www.nasbe.org/healthyschools/Sample_Policies/healthy_eating.html
- www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/cnak.html