

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

To narrow the achievement gap, principals across the country are using creative approaches to feed students' bodies and minds. BY MEREDITH BARNETT





It's 7:45 a.m. at Sedgefield Elementary School, and according to the schedule posted on Debra Hufschmitt's classroom door, it's Feed Your Brain time. Inside, her third graders read at their desks, eating sausage biscuits and sipping chocolate milk. Until 7:50, when Hufschmitt announces that it's time for art, the only sounds are pages turning.

This is how Sedgefield and other schools in Greensboro, North Carolina's Guilford County—where 57 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals—has begun to handle breakfast. Last year, the school offered a traditional cafeteria breakfast. But moving it to the classroom, delivered daily on carts by student “breakfast monitors,” has facilitated a smoother start to the school day, along with improvements in attendance and behavior. Plus, hundreds more students are eating.

“It's changed the way we do business,” says principal Michele Meley. “When students get to the classroom, they hit the ground running.”

When students are hungry, they can't learn—and that presents a persistent challenge to educators working to close the achievement gap. But, as more evidence emerges tying nutrition to student performance, educators across the country are revamping nutrition programs, fundamentally rethinking the ways schools feed students' bodies and minds.

Closing Two Gaps

For over 16 million American children in households that struggle with hunger, school meals are a primary source of nutrition. These students, whose families hover at or below the poverty line,

are the same group of learners most at risk for low academic performance. The hunger gap mirrors the achievement gap—and remedying the former is a key step to improving the latter.

“It goes back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs,” says Mary Beth Harris, principal of Fuqua Elementary School in Terre Haute, Indiana. “When those needs aren't met and they're hungry, they're not able to concentrate.”

The impact of poor nutrition on students go beyond attentiveness. Studies have found that kindergartners from food-insecure homes enter school with lower math scores and learn less over the course of the school year than other students. By third grade, these children have lower reading and math scores, according to data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.

Good school nutrition and good grades go hand in hand, says Josh Wachs, chief strategy officer at Share Our Strength. This spring, the organization's No Kid Hungry campaign released “Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis,” which found that kids who eat school breakfast achieve 17.5 percent higher scores on standardized math tests. Children who eat breakfast are more attentive and attend school more regularly. Students with good attendance are 20 percent more likely to graduate from high

school and, to complete the education-nutrition cycle, are less likely to struggle with food insecurity as adults.

“[I]t is not only the right thing to do to make sure kids are getting the food they need to grow and thrive. It is [also] a vital thing to do for the future of our country’s economy, health care system, and educational system,” says Wachs.

Barriers to Access

Despite the benefits of school meals, there’s a disparity in the number of students who qualify and those who access the meals. According to *Breakfast in the Classroom*, less than half of children eligible for free or reduced-cost breakfast are eating it. (The NAESP Foundation is one of the Partners for Breakfast In the Classroom, a joint initiative of four leading hunger, nutrition and education nonprofit organizations to increase breakfast consumption among school-children and spark the academic and nutritional gains associated with the morning meal.)

Sandra Ford, director of food and nutrition for Florida’s Manatee County School District and president of the School Nutrition Association, says the barriers to access are myriad. One is the stigma attached to school meals.

“A parent doesn’t want their child to be seen as needy,” she says. “In some

school communities, [eating breakfast] is the cool thing to do, and in other school communities, half the battle is peer pressure: a student not wanting to be seen going to the cafeteria, even if they’re starving.”

Some students just can’t get to school early enough for breakfast, while others don’t want to be rushed. Families may struggle to complete the enrollment paperwork for the meal programs. Plus, even if all eligible children took advantage of school meals, many would still experience food insecurity in the evenings, on weekends, and during the summer.

That’s where school leaders come in. In recent years, schools and districts have examined these challenges and begun to craft innovative solutions to meet them.

Bolstering Breakfast

First up: breakfast, which, spurred by research confirming its benefits to students, is undergoing a makeover. Some schools, like Sedgefield, offer universal breakfast in classrooms, which can help expunge the notion that school breakfast is only for impoverished students.

“There’s no stigma attached to it because everybody gets it,” says Hufschmitt, who says her class feels “like a family” when they eat together in the mornings. For English-language learners, ordering in the cafeteria can be stressful, and the classroom offers a safer breakfast environment for them, says Meley.

Other schools have purchased grab-and-go carts, breakfast kiosks, or even breakfast-dispensing vending machines to eliminate the morning cafeteria rush. To bolster its breakfast offerings, Rolling Terrace Elementary School in Takoma Park, Maryland, secured a grant to hold a free community breakfast for families on Tuesdays and Thursdays (and every day during state testing).

“We’ve increased our breakfast participation a solid 100 students, and that’s also on non-community breakfast days,” says principal Jennifer Connors. “It’s wonderful.”

Solutions for Summer, Supper

Administrators and principals like Connors are also cooking up creative methods to meet students’ nutritional needs in the summer, on the weekends, and after school.

For instance, Connors says her school draws more students to their summer meals (funded there and at 39,000 sites nationwide through the Summer Food Service Program) if they hook them into a program, such as bringing in a volunteer to read to students. Some areas, including New York City, dispatch summer food trucks to meet students at locations like parks.

Other schools use another mode of transportation to deliver food: backpacks. Concerned for students’ well-being on the weekends, administrators in Terre Haute, Indiana’s Vigo County Schools Corporation initiated a “weekend backpack program” to send non-perishables home with the neediest students, modeled after similar programs at food banks.

“I don’t think we were really aware of the need when we started it,” says Harris, principal of Fuqua Elementary, which has 25 students using the program. “It speaks volumes when you see one of those kids get their bag on Friday.”

In addition to breakfast, snacks, and weekend meals, districts and schools have one more nutrition program to add to their plates in the future: supper. The school supper initiative, funded through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program, has spread in just a matter of years from six to 50 states.

For Ford, who says supper will be implemented in her district’s neediest schools, the project exemplifies how the discourse on the importance of school nutrition has evolved over the years.

“I never thought in my career that I’d be talking about offering a supper program,” she says. “I expected [principals] to say, ‘Not one more thing on my plate.’”

But when she met with the principals of two of her high-need schools, she was almost brought to tears. Offering supper, they said, would give them extra

Principal ONLINE

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Redesign your breakfast, summer, or after-school meals with resources from the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices, including **implementation guides, videos, and demonstrations.**

Learn more about the **Breakfast in the Classroom program** from the NAESP Foundation’s website.

Kick-start **new nutrition programs** with strategies from the Food Research and Action Center.

Implementing a New Nutrition Strategy

BRAINSTORM WITH STAFF ABOUT UNIQUE NUTRITION ISSUES YOUR SCHOOL MAY FACE.

Are too few students eating breakfast? Are your ELLs intimidated by the cafeteria line? Is your student population struggling with obesity?

CRAFT A STRATEGY WITH INPUT FROM STUDENTS. Maybe they'd prefer a grab-and-go breakfast to a cafeteria meal, or could benefit from an extra snack before after-school programs.

SUPPORT YOUR TEACHERS. A new strategy, such as moving breakfast to the classroom or offering a supper program, will require adjustment from your teachers. Be open to feedback from them on scheduling, trash or waste issues, or how the program should be organized.

EMPOWER YOUR PARENTS. Hold information sessions with parents to discuss not only your school's meal options, but also how they can—in an economical way—reinforce nutrition lessons at home.

INVOLVE YOUR WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY. Invite teachers to eat with students, or bring parents in for collaborative breakfast or supper meals. That way, meals are a community-building tool.

REACH OUT TO COMMUNITY PARTNERS. Local food banks can help you craft strategies to meet the needs of your population. Invite speakers from health organizations or hospitals to make presentations to parents on nutrition and exercise.

hours to work with the neediest students on reading and math. It's a cycle, demonstrating the symbiosis between nutrition and achievement: students will stay for the enrichment if they can have a meal. In turn, when students have enough to eat, they're more attentive and focused. They're fueled to learn.

Cooking Up School Strategies

Outside of classrooms and cafeterias, discussions about closing the achievement gap often boil down to testing data or rigorous curricula. But no student can do their best on a standardized test if their last meal was lunch the day before.

"You can't teach a hungry child," reiterates Ford. "It's important for [nutrition programs] to be seen as a part of the education process. It's about ... having everybody in that school building being a part of the family that helps to educate that child."

Principals are key in this process. The most successful schools, says Ford, are the ones that nourish open communication and partnership between principals, school nutrition professionals, and staff. Principals can team up with guidance counselors, nurses, and teachers to ensure that eligible students are signed up for meal programs, and discuss with

parents nutrition options at home and at school. Further, school leaders can work with districts and community organizations to craft strategies that fit their school community.

The key is advocating for meal options that help schools overcome their distinct challenges, says Wachs. "There are a series of proven methods, a sort of a 'menu' of options that can be matched up to what the school's particular needs are, the way the school is run," he says.

For instance, when she wanted to increase participation in breakfast, Connors, the principal of Rolling Terrace Elementary in Takoma Park, Maryland, called on students, parents, and staff to brainstorm with her. What she discovered was that her families wanted to eat together.

"It's not for every school, but it works for Rolling Terrace because we're a family-oriented school," she says. "It makes for a very relaxed start to the school day, and some of our families don't always have that."

Back at Sedgefield Elementary in Greensboro, students sip the last drops of chocolate milk and stand to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. They have a busy day of math worksheets and group

reading ahead of them, fueled by their morning Feed Your Brain routine.

Or, as one bespectacled student put it: "I get to have a little snack in the morning and it feeds my brain. It wakes me up a little and makes my tummy feel better."

With that, she heads to art class. ■

Meredith Barnett is associate editor/writer at NAESP.

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