



AASA Superintendents' Survey – Walmart School Breakfast Project Summary of Results

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Background

In summer 2012, AASA surveyed superintendents and deputy superintendents around the country about alternative school breakfast. The purpose of the survey was threefold: 1) to explore superintendents' views about school breakfast in general, 2) to better understand respondents' views of and familiarity and experiences with alternative school breakfast and 3) to examine alternative school breakfast practices in their districts. Funded by the Walmart Foundation, the survey is part of a larger project designed to raise awareness about alternative school breakfast among school leaders in general and to increase the use of alternative models in four pilot districts (Cincinnati, OH; Brentwood, NY; Syracuse, NY; Riverside, CA).

Methods

AASA utilized its constituent data base to draw a sample for the study and specifically requested that superintendents complete the survey. Emails were sent to 5311 superintendents of which 938 completed the survey representing a response rate of 17.7%. The survey, a mixed method design composed primarily of closed but also several open ended items, launched on 8/16/12 and closed two weeks later on 8/30/12.

Results

Of the 938 respondents, 92% were superintendents and the remaining 8% were associate or deputy superintendents. Roughly nine of out ten (89%) reported that their districts participated in the National School Breakfast Program and seven in ten (69%) said their food service budgets were self-sustaining. The superintendents represented a range of districts from around the country with the highest number from Missouri (n=52), Wisconsin (n=43), Illinois (n=43), and Michigan (n=43); and the lowest from Delaware (n=1) and West Virginia, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Mississippi (all with 2). In addition to geographic variation, the respondents' districts varied economically. See table below for FARM rate, an indicator of students' socio-economic status (FARM signifies eligibility for 'free and reduced meals'). Seventy percent of superintendents came from districts with mid-range FARM rates (25-74%).

District FARM rate	(%)
• 0-24%	17.2
• 25-49%	38.3
• 50-74%	31.5
• 75-100%	13.1

The first set of questions examined respondents' perceptions of school breakfast. When given a list of seven reasons why students should eat breakfast at school and asked to check their TOP 3, the following emerged as the #1 reason – *'Students are more attentive which positively impacts learning and may result in improved academic test scores.'* In fact, superintendents whose districts participated in the national school breakfast program were significantly more likely ($p < .000$) to check this item than those whose districts did not participate (92% vs 68%).

Moreover, compared to low FARM districts (0-49% FARM), superintendents from high FARM districts (50-100%) were significantly more likely to indicate the following as their top reasons for serving school breakfast: 'students more attentive...may improve test scores' ($p < .01$), 'helps low income families...' ($p < .05$), and 'exhibit fewer behavior issues in class' ($p < .05$). A final note, the last item on the list, "none of the above / I don't believe children should eat breakfast at school," was checked by just 1% of respondents and suggests that the superintendents who completed this survey are strong proponents of school breakfast.

In general, what are the Top 3 reasons you believe students should eat breakfast at school? (Choose no more than 3.)

School breakfast impact on students and families	%
1. Students more attentive,...positively impacts learning,...may improve test scores	89.0
2. Helps low-income families by providing a no-cost meal	79.3
3. Exhibit fewer behavior issues in class	45.0
4. Likely to be healthier than the breakfast children receive at home	31.0
5. Reduces tardiness	14.2
6. Fewer visits to the nurses' office	10.6
7. Saves time in the morning	9.5
8. None of the above/I don't believe children should eat breakfast at school	1.1

Implication: Districts with a high rate of FARM students understand the 'best sellers' for school breakfast. When reaching out to high FARM districts to increase participation in alternative school breakfast models, emphasize these selling points.

The next series of items assessed respondents' familiarity with and district practices related to traditional versus alternative school breakfast. For clarification,

- Traditional breakfast is breakfast served in the cafeteria for all students at the same time or in shifts.
- For the purposes of this study, three alternative breakfast models were explored: Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC), Grab 'N' Go (GNG), and Second Chance.
 - BIC, most common in elementary and middle school, is breakfast delivered to the classroom and eaten at the start of school.
 - GNG, favored in high schools, is breakfast packaged in bags and available at sites throughout the school for pick up on the go.
 - Second Chance, most common in middle and high schools, is a type of GNG served later than the usual breakfast time (after first period or bell).

The following table illustrates superintendent's familiarity with and district practices related to traditional and alternative school breakfast.

Please indicate the types of school breakfast models with which you are familiar / which your district offers. (Check all that apply):

School breakfast type	Familiar	District Offers
1. Traditional	94.6	86.2
2. Breakfast in the Classroom	51.8	23.8
3. Grab 'n' Go	45.9	25.8
4. Second Chance	19.3	7.6

Not surprisingly, nearly every respondent reported familiarity with traditional school breakfast and, of those, 86% reported that their districts offered it. In contrast, just over half of the superintendents were familiar with alternative school breakfast, with the greatest familiarity reported for BIC and GNG. Further analysis revealed that among respondents whose districts participated in the national school breakfast program, 55% served traditional breakfast only, while 45% served some type of alternative school breakfast. Among those that served alternative breakfast, 39% served it in combination with traditional breakfast and 6% as a stand alone.

Significance testing revealed that high FARM districts were significantly more likely than low FARM districts to serve both traditional ($p < .000$) and alternative breakfast ($p < .05$). Regarding the latter, high FARM districts were twice as likely as low FARM districts (33 vs 16%) to offer BIC ($P < .000$). Additional significance testing, this time looking at self-sustaining budgets, found that superintendents from districts that offered traditional breakfast, BIC, or GNG were significantly more likely ($P < .000$, $P < .000$, $P < .001$, respectively) to report that their districts had self-sustaining food budgets. Moreover, those that offered alternative breakfast,

independent of or in addition to traditional breakfast, were more likely than those that served traditional breakfast only to report self-sustaining budgets ($p < .001$).

Implication: *Though high FARM schools on the whole report higher rates of participation in both traditional and alternative breakfast, participation rates drop off for the highest FARM group (75-100%). It is important to understand the reasons behind this drop-off and to target outreach efforts to these districts. Key messages could include ‘students more attentive...may improve test scores,’ ‘helps low income families...,’ and ‘exhibit fewer behavior issues in class.’ As you will see later, another key message could be – ‘it’s easier than you think.’*

In the next set of items, respondents were asked about support for alternative school breakfast in their districts and schools. The questions were framed in two ways - actual vs. hypothetical - one for those whose schools DID serve alternative breakfast and the other for those whose schools DID NOT. The table below illustrates perceptions of support they did (actual) or would (hypothetical) receive from various stakeholder groups for alternative school breakfast.

To what extent did / would the following groups support the alternative school breakfast program in your schools? (A lot of resistance, A little resistance, A lot of support, Complete support)

Support* of School Breakfast Programs	Did offer support**	Would offer support***
1. District administrators (superintendents)	97.1	65.1
2. Building-level administrators (principals)	80.6	42.3
3. Union leaders	71.7	38.6
4. Food service workers	83.7	39.1
5. Teachers	64.3	26.5
6. Janitors	60.6	21.2
7. Students	96.3	87.5
8. Parents	94.3	77.9
9. Community at large	91.8	66.0

*Support = combination of ‘a lot of support’ and ‘complete support;’ non-applicable removed from analysis

**Percent drawn from respondents whose districts DO offer alternative school breakfast (Q1=1 & Subtype>1)

***Percent drawn from respondents whose districts DO NOT offer alternative school breakfast (Subtype = 1)

Across the board, superintendents representing districts that served alternative school breakfast were significantly more likely ($p < .000$) than those that did not to report higher levels of support (actual vs. anticipated) from every stakeholder group. In other words, those that actually offered school breakfast DID receive a far higher level of support than those that did not yet offer alternative breakfast believed they WOULD receive.

Implication: Districts will receive support from a range of stakeholder groups! Superintendents' concerns that they won't receive support are not validated by this study. Indeed, across every stakeholder group, superintendents whose districts were implementing alternative school breakfast were significantly more likely to report high levels of support than those who were not. AASA should definitely highlight this finding in future outreach efforts in order to help quell fears about a general lack of support.

A similar 'actual vs. hypothetical' item addressed the question of what DID or WOULD catalyze movement toward alternative school breakfast. The results indicate a fairly sharp distinction between viewpoints. For instance, the primary catalyst for superintendents whose districts serve alternative school breakfast was 'right thing to do for my community' (44%) whereas for superintendents from districts that do not serve alternative school breakfast the primary catalyst was 'district/school receives a grant' (34%).

What was / would be a catalyst to alternative school breakfast in your districts? (check no more than 2)

Catalyst to offer Breakfast Programs	Was a Catalyst*	Would be a catalyst**
1. District/school received a grant	8.7	33.8
2. Food service director wanted to do it	34.0	12.8
3. Parents requested it	1.9	20.5
4. It was the right thing to do for my community	43.8	30.6
5. Made the most financial sense	9.8	15.4
6. Teachers or principals requested it	18.5	19.9
7. Heard about the AASA grant	1.1	4.3
8. Heard about another district doing it	6.5	6.0

*Percent drawn from respondents whose districts DO offer alternative school breakfast (Q1=1 & Subtype>1)

**Percent drawn from respondents whose districts DO NOT offer alternative school breakfast (Subtype = 1)

Implication: Hindsight is 20/20! What one views as a catalyst through the lens of experience with alternative school breakfast vs. no experience can be quite different. The key catalyst for the "actuals" was 'It was the right thing to do for my community' and for the "hypotheticals" it was 'District/school received a grant.' While most districts would appreciate a grant to get the alternative school breakfast ball rolling, it is clear from the "actuals" that such a grant served as a catalyst less than 10% of the time. The implication? Get the word out about the real catalysts from those with experience.

Respondents were then asked about their perceptions of BIC and GNG, the two most common types of alternative school breakfast. These questions were asked to all respondents, not framed in the 'actual-hypothetical' scenario described above. The first four items addressed favorable attributes of these breakfast models, while the last five items examined unfavorable characteristics. On the whole, respondents were more likely to check

favorable items, particularly ‘an efficient way to feed children’ and ‘children start their day ready to learn.’

Even if you have never heard of them before what are your top 3 thoughts about BIC and GNG. (check no more than 3)

Top thoughts about BIC and GNG	BIC	GNG
1. An efficient way to feed children	48.0***	19.5
2. Teachers can easily adapt to this serving method	23.2***	11.2
3. Something parents like	12.3**	4.8*
4. Children start their day ready to learn	58.0***	15.1
5. Fewer visits to the nurses office due to hunger	10.7***	2.5**
6. Hard to manage logistically	31.9***	7.6***
7. Need additional staff to run	26.2***	6.2***
8. Costly to implement	11.4***	2.7*
9. This serving method creates pest problems	21.6***	5.8***

* Significant at the p<.05 level; **p<.001 level; ***p<.000 level

While respondents were generally favorable, significant difference arose between groups for both BIC and GNG. For BIC, compared to superintendents whose districts served only traditional breakfast, those who served alternative breakfast were significantly more likely to check favorable items (1-4) and significantly less likely to check the unfavorable items (5-9). Though GNG did not have the same degree of significant findings, the pattern of significance was that same as BIC. Namely, superintendents whose districts offered alternative school breakfast had more positive views and fewer negative views about GNG.

Implication: *As with the ‘support’ and the ‘catalyst’ items, superintendents who had experience with alternative school breakfast were significantly more positive about BIC and GNG. In short, perceptions of alternative school breakfast improve dramatically with experience with alternative school breakfast – “it’s not as bad as we feared” – seems to be the running theme. AASA will want to utilize testimonials, interviews, case studies, and video clips with districts that have successfully implemented alternative school breakfast to compel others to follow suit. There is a huge perception gap that carefully crafted messages could start to bridge.*

The survey closed with a set of questions assessing awareness of AASAs school breakfast initiative, a desire for follow up assistance and respondents’ closing thoughts. With regard to familiarity with AASA’s school breakfast initiative, one in four superintendents reported that they had heard of it. AASA will want to continue to promote this project in targeted communications, especially the work in the four pilot districts. In terms of follow-up assistance to implement alternative school breakfast programs, help was requested by 140 respondents (15%). AASA will want to contact them and offer tailored support as needed.

Finally, 72 (8%) superintendents wrote closing thoughts about their own school breakfast programs. While their thoughts covered a wide range of ideas, one comment made by several rural districts was that their schools are so small that the traditional breakfast model works just fine. That may explain why there is a drop in participation with alternative school breakfast at the highest FARM rate (75-100%), as many of these small rural schools fall in that category.

Discussion

The key takeaway from this survey is that implementing alternative school breakfast is easier than it seems. That is what AASA needs to communicate. There is a yawning perception gap between superintendents whose districts have implemented alternative school breakfast and those who have not, with those who have reporting far more favorable views. AASA has a great opportunity to address this perception gap and dispel concerns among districts that have yet to try alternative school breakfast. In future communications, including the Leadership and Governance Issue devoted to school breakfast, AASA could utilize these findings to show that implementing alternative school breakfast is not as hard as they think.