

Case Study: School Breakfast and Chicago Public Schools

How Breakfast in the Classroom Can Change Program Participation

By taking a strategic approach to expanding school breakfast participation, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was able to dramatically expand participation in school breakfast and help ensure that thousands of low-income students in the district got a healthy start to their day. Recognizing that their poor participation rates needed to improve, CPS began with testing a Breakfast in the Classroom model, and when that proved successful, slowly expanding through voluntary adoption and, ultimately, by instituting a district-wide policy for Breakfast in the Classroom in all elementary schools.

BACKGROUND: SCHOOL BREAKFAST IN CHICAGO

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest school district in the country with 675 schools and a pre-K - 12th grade student enrollment of more than 404,000 students. Among the CPS student enrollment, 87 percent of students come from low-income families.

According to an annual report produced by the Food Research and Action Center ranking big city school districts on their effectiveness to reach low-income students with school breakfast, in the 2005-06 school year, CPS ranked last among the 23 big city school districts surveyed with only 28.7 low-income students eating school breakfast for every 100 who eat school lunch. Yet, by the 2010-11 school year, CPS improved their school breakfast participation rate to 47.5 thanks to district efforts to promote school breakfast as a part of the school day.

STEPS TO INCREASING PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

The district gradually implemented strategies designed to expand school breakfast participation. Prior to 2007, even with CPS offering a universal breakfast program, in which all breakfasts were served at no cost to students, participation was very low because it was offered in the cafeteria before the start of the school day. For a variety of reasons, including busy morning schedules and social stigma, many children do not take advantage of breakfast served in the cafeteria before the bell rings. Yet, experience with school breakfast across the country demonstrates that once a school makes breakfast a part of the school day, participation soars. One of the best strategies for doing this is to implement a Breakfast in the Classroom program.

In 2007, CPS started a successful Breakfast in the Classroom pilot at McAuliffe Elementary school. After implementing Breakfast in the Classroom, the school experienced higher test scores and better attendance. Over the next two years, 200 schools voluntarily adopted Breakfast in the Classroom, providing breakfast to about 40,000 students. In 2010, CPS worked to improve the nutritional quality of school breakfast by adopting the gold standard of USDA's "HealthierUS School Challenge" and implementing the Harvard School of Public Health's breakfast recommendations.

In January 2011, the CPS board enacted a policy that required all elementary schools to implement a universal Breakfast in the Classroom program by the end of that school year. Advocacy efforts—a combination of an opportunity at the district, pressure from anti-hunger organizations and support from the superintendent who wanted to leave this as his legacy—enabled the district to pass this policy.

From January to June 2011, schools worked to get the program launched with the ultimate goal of reaching all 473 elementary schools in the district. While this goal was not accomplished by the end of the academic year, by March 2012, 440 elementary schools were implementing Breakfast in the Classroom. Many of the early adopters were schools with high numbers of free and reduced-price eligible students.

■ ADDRESSING BARRIERS AND OPPOSITION

As with most major changes to a school system, the Breakfast in the Classroom policy was not without concern or controversy and some media articles helped fuel opposition to the policy. While many schools and principals have had a positive experience with Breakfast in the Classroom, there were concerns around instructional time, food waste and the top down approach of mandating Breakfast in the Classroom. Yet, this type of opposition is not unique to CPS and the district was prepared with responses to each issue.

Because many schools were already implementing Breakfast in the Classroom prior to the passage of the board policy, the district had a base of experience to draw upon. Many teachers were already productively using the time when breakfast was being served and eaten in the classroom by taking attendance, working on homework, doing quiet reading or conducting a short nutrition education lesson related to the food being served. In addition, anti-hunger advocates believe that CPS' policy of expanding the school day for the 2012-13 school year should help alleviate those concerns.

On the issue of waste, CPS received a grant from Action for Healthy Kids to conduct waste audits. They developed four models of how schools can be more proactive to reduce waste and used webinars and videos to share this information.

Finally, responding to concerns about the top down mandate, CPS developed guidelines with flexibility on how to comply with the requirement with different models of Breakfast in the Classroom. For example, some schools have developed a modified model that is a hybrid of Breakfast in the Classroom and breakfast in the cafeteria.