

Case Study: School Breakfast and Houston Independent School District

How Houston Creatively Overcame Barriers to Implementing Breakfast in the Classroom

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) has seen tremendous success in increasing school breakfast participation by implementing a Breakfast in the Classroom program called “First Class Breakfast”. According to HISD, the key to their success has been obtaining the support of the board of education. Centralized support from the board of education and superintendent helped the district implement their program and achieve validation across the district. HISD also benefited from implementing a thoughtful roll-out plan based on an efficient delivery system that ensured that breakfasts were served in the classroom as quickly and cleanly as possible while maximizing instructional time and minimizing classroom disruption.

BACKGROUND: SCHOOL BREAKFAST IN HOUSTON

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) has operated a universal free breakfast program in a portion of its schools for many years and expanded this program district wide during the 2006-07 academic year. Yet, despite the fact that the district served all breakfasts at no cost to its students, participation in school breakfast remained stubbornly low at approximately 30 percent, despite the fact that 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Given the size of this needy population at the seventh largest school district in the country, district officials knew that many more children should be benefiting from the School Breakfast Program.

STEPS TO INCREASING PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

To respond to this low participation, HISD began a voluntary program that allowed schools to choose to implement a Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) program in order to increase participation in school breakfast. As a result, approximately 30 schools out of the over 200 in the district began implementing BIC. Most of these schools were high-need and participation in breakfast usually rose to 80 percent or more. Although local school officials knew the benefits of breakfast, it was difficult to convince the majority of schools to voluntarily switch to serving BIC.

In September 2009, Superintendent Terry Grier began working at HISD, coming from San Diego where he was a proponent of their successful BIC program. In order to advocate for expanded BIC at all HISD elementary schools, Superintendent Grier requested that HISD Food Services present on the benefits of BIC to the school board. After this presentation, the school board was so convinced of the benefits of classroom breakfast that they approved expansion to all 217 elementary and middle schools.

Starting in February 2010, HISD began their First Class Breakfast program. The program rolled out to a set number of schools per week so that all 217 schools would be implementing BIC by November 2010. The district first focused on high-need schools. School breakfast participation rates rose to nearly 90 percent in many of the elementary schools with slightly lower rates in middle schools. Overall, HISD doubled breakfast participation. Based on survey responses from principals, schools saw a decrease in nurse visits, absenteeism, and tardiness after implementing BIC. When the district compared the 2009-10 academic year with the 2010-11 academic year, they found that elementary and middle school attendance and passing rates rose while disciplinary actions fell. HISD received some external funding to help implement their First Class Breakfast program from Share Our Strength and Dairy MAX, a non-profit affiliated with the National Dairy Council.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS AND OPPOSITION

While the First Class Breakfast program has been a success in terms of increasing participation in school breakfast, it was not universally accepted at first. Principals raised some concerns about impact on instruction, but approval by the board of education and the board's mandate helped eliminate that barrier. In addition, a study by HISD's Business Services Department found that students who ate school breakfast scored higher on math and reading tests. Teachers were also concerned with sanitation and impact on classroom time. In response, HISD developed a process called the "Guaranteed Delivery Method" with a standard operating procedure to ensure that food services delivered the breakfast to the classroom as efficiently as possible. This method employs barcoded ID cards for each student, two compartment delivery carts to keep foods hot and cold and materials to train kitchen and school staff.

To help facilitate efficient breakfast delivery in each school, HISD requested evacuation maps for each school and used these to chart out the best delivery routes to bring food from the kitchens to the classrooms. A roleplay dry-run was done on a Monday with the program actually starting on a Tuesday. HISD guarantees that a whole school can be serviced in approximately 15 to 20 minutes with service taking approximately 3 to 5 minutes per classroom. Parents have the option to opt-out if they do not want their child participating in the First Class Breakfast program.

During the first year, the district operated a "straight serve" model in which students received whatever was served. However, they have now changed a majority of schools to an "offer versus serve" model in which students get more choice. This has cut waste by up to 50 percent and helped improve the school food services balance sheet.

RESULTS FROM HISD'S FIRST CLASS BREAKFAST PROGRAM

As a result of HISD's First Class Breakfast program, school breakfast participation has soared. The average daily breakfast participation among low-income students¹ was 66,425 in the 2009-10 academic year. One year later, with the First Class Breakfast program implemented district-wide, average daily participation increased by 45 percent to 96,202 students. In fact, from the 2005-06 academic year to the 2010-11 academic year, average daily participation rose from 44,760 students to 96,202 students. In addition, in 2005-06, less than half (45.4 percent) of low-income students who ate school lunch also ate school breakfast. By 2010-11, this percentage reached almost 80 percent making HISD among the most successful big city school districts in the nation in participation in school breakfast, based on data from the Food Research and Action Center².

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¹ Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

² "School Breakfast in America's Big Cities: School Year 2010-2011". Food Research and Action Center. http://frac.org/pdf/urban_school_breakfast_report_2012.pdf