

Study Shows Link Between School Breakfast and Academic Achievement

School breakfast makes a difference for learning. Drs. Michael Murphy and Ronald Kleinman, researchers from Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), in collaboration with Project Bread and Boston Public Schools, have found that increasing school breakfast participation is associated with a reduction in child hunger and with improved nutrition, school attendance, emotional functioning, and math grades.

These findings, released in November 2000, are from a two-year evaluation of the universal free breakfast pilot program (all students are eligible for free breakfast regardless of family income) in 16 Boston schools.

Hunger and Nutritional Status of Students Before the Pilot Program

Based on interviews with students and their parents, researchers found that prior to the start of the pilot program about one quarter of the students in these Boston public schools were classified as hungry or at risk for hunger and about one third of all students were classified as having a low intake of one or more critically important nutrients in their diets.

Similar to the results from prior research conducted by the research team in Philadelphia, hungry students and students at nutritional risk were found to have poorer grades and more symptoms of emotional/ behavior problems.

At the same time, more than one third of all students interviewed reported that they rarely ate breakfast at school or home.

After the Free Breakfast Program Started: Increased School Breakfast Participation, Improved Nutrition and Decreases in Hunger

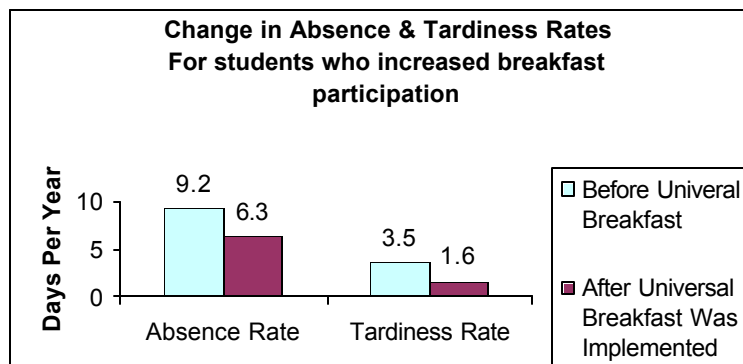
Follow-up interviews conducted six months after the program started showed that:

- More than half of the students who were nutritionally at risk and more than two thirds of the children classified as hungry or at risk for hunger before the program increased their school breakfast participation; and
- Students who increased their school breakfast participation the most not only reported a decrease in indicators of hunger, but also were two to three times more likely to show improved nutrition than students whose school breakfast participation did not increase.

Increased School Breakfast Impacts Academic Achievement

Participating in school breakfast was also shown to be associated with academic achievement. Students who increased their breakfast participation rates:

- Increased their math grades;
- Decreased their school absence and tardiness rates; and
- Were shown to have decreased emotional/behavioral problems



Improved Student Behavior and High Satisfaction with Program Reported

Another part of the study was a survey of more than 1000 students, school staff and parents. Results showed that school staff believed that the new school breakfast program benefited the students.

- Nearly 60 percent of the staff reported a positive change in student behavior.
- 63 percent reported an improvement in student attentiveness.

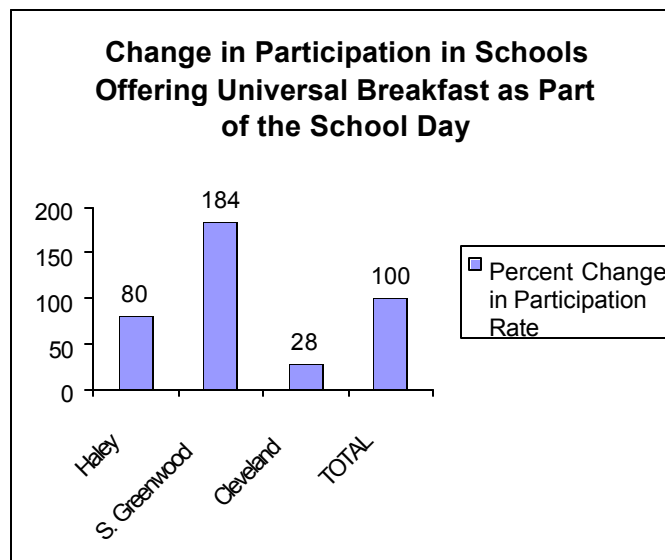
Not surprisingly, a significant majority of the respondents reported a high level of overall satisfaction with the universal free breakfast program.

- 73 percent of all respondents stated that they liked the program.
- 100 percent of the parents said that the program had a positive impact on their family life.
- 94 percent of staff recommended the pilot program be continued.

A Proven Model for Sustaining Increased School Breakfast Participation

High satisfaction with UBP was also reflected in the positive change in school breakfast participation. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of offering school breakfast universally free as a way to sustain high program participation rates.

- After nearly two years, school breakfast participation rates in the schools remained more than 30 percent higher than they had been prior to the start of the pilot program.
- In three schools that tried making school breakfast a part of the official school day by serving breakfast in the classroom or by starting school earlier, the participation rate increased much more – exactly 100 percent – suggesting that even greater gains in participation are possible when breakfast is incorporated into the regular school day rather than making it a before school option. The overall student participation rate in these three schools rose from 27 to 54 percent.



Conclusion

Universal free school breakfast programs can make a significant difference for children who are hungry and at nutritional risk. Students in this study who increased their school breakfast participation reported fewer indicators of hunger and improved nutrition, academic performance and emotional functioning. In addition, the research showed that universal breakfast offered during the school day may be an effective way to reach the students who need it most. These findings confirm and extend the findings of this continuum of research on the effects of universal free school breakfast programs being conducted in other major cities in the US.