

The State of School Breakfast

By Dana Woldow

Co-sponsored by Maryann Rainey, RN; Dr. Patricia Gray; Holley Wysong, RD; Janet Wojcicki, Ph.D, MPH; Laura Brainin-Rodriguez, MPH, MS, RD; Caroline Grannan, SOTA parent; Stacey Bartlett, Webster ES parent; Karen Gehrman, Harvey Milk CRA parent; Marcia Zorilla Fairmount ES, Giannini MS and Independence HS parent

January 10th, 2011

Every day, too many students come to school without having eaten a proper breakfast, or any breakfast, at home. Late buses or family chaos can result in students arriving at school too late to participate in the before school breakfast program, but still needing something to fill their stomachs until lunch. It is well known that hungry children can't learn, and many studies link better nutrition with higher academic achievement. Higher participation in the school breakfast program, especially by those students qualified for free or reduced price meals, would not only help these students achieve their full academic potential, but also help drive down the Student Nutrition Services deficit.

Participation in school breakfast has traditionally been far lower than lunch; this low participation is one of the single largest contributors to the SNS deficit. Over 32,000 SFUSD students are qualified for free and reduced price meals in 2010-11, but only about 5270 students are choosing school breakfast on an average day; thus millions of dollars in federal reimbursement money are being left on the table, enough to reduce or even completely eliminate the SNS encroachment on the general fund, enabling better quality food to be offered to all students.

With the introduction of Grab n Go breakfast at 7 high schools (Balboa, Galileo, Mission, Lowell, Burton, O'Connell, Wallenberg), participation at that level has increased over the past few years; breakfast expansion grants have been applied for which would allow more schools to offer a Grab n Go right at the front door as students enter on their way to class in the morning. However, participation at the elementary school level has been steadily dropping, with nearly 600 fewer students choosing breakfast this year than just a year ago. A pilot conducted in 10 elementary schools several years ago, which focused on luring more students into the cafeteria in the morning with the introduction of a hot breakfast, demonstrated that with support at the school site, participation can easily be increased to between 60-100 students a day per site, even at schools currently serving only a handful of students. However, when the pilot was expanded district wide, lack of support at many school sites resulted in lackluster participation. School sites which were unwilling or unable to provide required adult supervision in the cafeteria during the 20 minute morning breakfast period failed to promote the program to families, and hot breakfast was scaled back to just two days a week at the elementary level.

Student Nutrition Services generated a deficit of over \$3 million in the 09-10 school year, money which must be made up out of the General Fund, leaving less for teachers, textbooks, and other classroom needs. The new reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act (Healthy Hunger-Free Kids

Act of 2010) will not significantly increase revenue for SNS, as the 6 cent increase in reimbursement is not expected to take effect until the start of the 2012-13 school year, and will be insufficient to cover the cost of new nutritional requirements for school meals. SNS has taken significant steps to reduce their deficit this school year, rebidding the milk contract to save \$300,000 annually, using computerized meal tracking to reduce the number of wasted meals by 75%, and identifying more students for free meals through better use of direct certification. However, the high cost of the healthier food offered to SFUSD students (meals achieved the Gold Standard under the USDA's Healthier US Schools Challenge) and the school board's Feeding Every Hungry Child resolution, which mandates that children with no money in their online cafeteria account be fed at district expense, continue to drive a deficit which could exceed \$2 million this year.

The issue of increasing participation in school breakfast has been discussed for years at countless meetings of many organizations whose aim it is to address hunger in the city. After listening to more than 5 years of discussion, all the while watching breakfast participation declining at the elementary level, I am proposing the following solution: that all elementary schools should be required to increase their breakfast participation to achieve at least the break even point for SNS, beginning with the 2011-12 school year. Schools which are already breaking even should increase their participation by 20%. A pilot program can be started in the 20 Nutrition Education Project schools during the second semester of the current school year. School can choose one of three models to increase participation:

1) Increase participation through the use of a Grab n Go style packaged meal which students obtain from the cafeteria and take to the classroom to eat during the first 15 minutes of class time. The state allows this practice (ie – minutes spent eating breakfast while teacher takes attendance, collects homework etc. may be counted as instructional minutes) and many schools around the country are already using a "breakfast in the classroom" model, dispelling myths that it is too messy or too disruptive. With Grab n Go, teachers are not asked to distribute meals, or keep track of who is eating, or whether the meal they have chosen is suitable for reimbursement; the sole job of the teacher is to help the students understand that they must dispose of their trash properly at the end of the meal and clean their desk if necessary. Trash can be removed by custodians during the morning recess, or put outside the classroom door immediately after breakfast for prompt removal.

Break even participation for this option is 100 students.

2) Increase participation by replacing the current before school program with a "second chance" breakfast for those students who arrive at school late. These students are able to stop by the cafeteria up to 45 minutes after the start of school to pick up a meal and take it to the classroom; schools with a morning "nutrition break" may send students to the caf at that time to get their meal.

Break even participation for this option is 60 students.

3) Increase participation in the existing school breakfast program. Through the use of extensive outreach to students and families, it has already been demonstrated that more students can be attracted to the cafeteria for a before school meal. Many families remain unaware that there is a

free breakfast available to students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch; others may not know that the school breakfast is highly nutritious, featuring fresh fruit and only low sugar cereal (no more than 6g sugar per serving), as well as student favorites such as waffles, pancakes or French toast twice weekly. SNS can provide promotional material to be sent home to families to inform them of what is available and how their student can benefit from choosing school breakfast.

Break even participation for this option is 60 students.

Allowing each school site to choose the model which best suits their students' needs and staffing levels promotes community involvement with the program. There is no "one size fits all" solution to the problem of low breakfast attendance, and our school communities are in the best position to know which option is most appropriate for their own site.

Nutrition Education Project coordinator Mark Elkin has agreed that his NEP schools would be a good place to start increasing breakfast participation. The UESF has indicated that they support increasing breakfast participation, both as a means of ensuring that low income students are not going hungry during the important morning instruction period, and also as a way of reducing General Fund encroachment and freeing up scarce district funds for classrooms.

Timeline:

SNS is prepared to move forward with the pilot by the end of January 2011; NEP schools should review the options during January and make their choice by the end of that month, with pilots to commence no later than mid February. This would allow a full three months of participation data to be collected by mid-May, when an analysis of the data would be performed by SNS to determine how best to roll out the project to all elementary schools in 2011-12. Schools not in the pilot should be alerted to the proposed changes for next year during the spring semester of the current year, so that they can begin discussion within their own community about which option is best suited to their own site. An additional 25 elementary schools would begin increasing their breakfast participation at the start of the 2011-12 school year, with all remaining elementaries beginning by the start of the second semester of 2011-12.

Recommended: that the Board of Education ask staff to make higher breakfast participation, especially among students qualified for free/reduced meals, a high priority, and direct the NEP schools to choose one of the three models outlined above, with the expectation that all elementary schools will choose a model by the start of the 2011-12 school year.

Nutrition Education Project schools

Bessie Carmichael
El Dorado
E.R. Taylor
Francis Scott Key
George Moscone
Hillcrest

John Muir
Jose Ortega
Junipero Serra
Leonard Flynn
Longfellow
Malcolm X Academy
Mission Education Center
Sheridan
Sherman
Starr King
Sutro
Tenderloin

Federal reimbursement for free breakfast: \$1.76 (severe need – includes almost all ES)

Federal reimbursement for reduced price breakfast: \$1.46 (severe need)

State reimbursement for free/reduced breakfast: \$0.219

% of elementary students currently eating breakfast who qualify for free: 81%

% of elementary students currently eating breakfast who qualify for reduced: 9%

Break even point for participation in combined before school breakfast followed immediately by half hour Grab n Go breakfast – 100 students

Break even point for second chance breakfast (no before school breakfast) – 60 students

Break even point for participation in existing before school breakfast – 60 students

Number of elementary schools (includes K-8) currently reaching break even point - 16