

Fighting Hunger a Key to Academic Success

Grab and go breakfast and other initiatives are getting food to students

SESSION *How Nutrition Programs Affect Hunger, Performance and Revenue*

Presenter Hunger Task Force: Matt Stienstra, advocacy campaign manager; Ariana Stillman, organizer; Beloit: Janelle Marotz, assistant superintendent of business services

In their efforts to improve academic achievement, Beloit school officials discovered a win-win proposition. Students are ensured healthy meals and the district benefits financially thanks to the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Janelle Marotz, Beloit's business manager, maintains there are several benefits to participation, but being "cash-free" paid important, immediate dividends.

"We were excited about the opportunity to increase access for students but we also removed the stigma (that can come with poverty) by giving all students that go through the line the opportunity to be treated equally," Marotz said. "We are cash-free, so we no longer have to turn students away (if there is no money in their account). We make sure they get food and we don't have to have a conversation about collecting money."

CEP eligibility requires at least a 40 percent poverty rate (all of Beloit's schools are eligible, with a 78 percent district-wide poverty rate) and reimbursement increases with the number of low-income families participating. Wisconsin's school poverty rate exceeds 50 percent and the presenters stressed poverty is both urban and rural.

Beloit's experience demonstrated that simply offering breakfast wasn't enough; the model to deliver the breakfast was equally important. In some schools, breakfast was in the cafeteria before school; in other locations, breakfast was the beginning of the school day and provided in the classroom as students worked on simple assignments and teachers conducted administrative tasks.

Participation was much higher at the schools using the classroom delivery model, or the "grab and go" model where students grabbed the breakfast and took it to class, compared to elementary schools offering breakfast before school in the cafeteria. More importantly, it was noted there were twice as many students visiting the school nurse with headache and stomach complaints in the schools where breakfast was only offered in the cafeteria. Using this and other data, school administrators determined all elementary schools would have breakfast delivered to the classroom.

In high schools, "breakfast after first" (period) are offered at school kiosks in busy locations and students can eat wherever they want, providing another way for students to get important nutrition.



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"Providing breakfast after the bell is when you see schools double and triple their participation and reap financial benefits," said Ariana Stillman, organizer with the Hunger Task Force.

Districts interested in CEP, information about the different meal programs and a list of Frequently Asked Questions should refer to the Hunger Task Force website: hungertaskforce.org.

"We have a lot of data that shows participation in the breakfast program is really beneficial for the family and the student," Marotz said. "Our principals report there are less behavior concerns and better academic performance, and our teachers say the students focus more in class." ■