

School breakfast economics add up

Written by [Rebecca Jones](#) on Nov 9th, 2011. | Copyright © EdNewsColorado.org

Members of the Adams City High School Student Council earned \$200 to help defray Homecoming expenses last fall, and they did it during school hours without having to sell a single candy bar.



Fruit and yogurt baskets are one of the classroom breakfast options in Denver.

They earned the money by spending a few minutes before class each morning for two weeks delivering breakfast to their classmates.

What's more, ROTC has done it. The football team has done it. The cheerleaders have done it.

Delivering healthy breakfasts – as opposed to selling junk food – has become a valued fundraising activity at the school, thanks to some out-of-the-box thinking by school officials.

It's not just student clubs who are benefiting from the Adams 14 School District's decision last year to make breakfast universally available to all students, for free, during their first class of the day.

Increasing numbers of school officials throughout Colorado are concluding that free breakfast-in-the-classroom programs not only make good sense nutritionally, they make good sense financially and academically as well.

Weighing the costs of free breakfast for all

The financial benefits of universal free breakfast outweigh the costs if at least 40 percent of students at a given school qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, officials say.

The key is getting students to actually eat breakfast, which is difficult – even when it's free – when it's served in the cafeteria before classes begin.

Schools who have moved breakfast from the cafeteria to the classroom have seen sales triple to quadruple to quintuple. They've gone from serving a handful of hungry kids willing to confront the social stigma of eating in the cafeteria before class to making breakfast a part of the school culture, enjoyed by all, including the adults.

Kate Adamick, co-founder of Cook for America and a consultant to school districts trying to healthfully transform their meal programs, encourages school officials to do the math. She's created a "Breakfast Bucks" worksheet to help schools determine if this is a financial winner for them.

Schools with significant numbers of low-income students are reimbursed \$1.80 per meal for students who qualify for free lunch, \$1.50 per meal for students who qualify for reduced-price lunch, and 27 cents for all other students. With an average per plate food-cost of 80 cents, there's money to be made by pushing breakfast.

"Significant enhancement to a food service department's revenue can be generated by breakfast-in-the-classroom programs," she said. "It's simple, it's affordable and it doesn't make a mess."

Colorado still lags behind other states, despite progress

Katherine Moos, executive director of Hunger Free Colorado, says that organization's goal is to see 130,000 Colorado youngsters eating school breakfast by 2015.

"We are 44th in the number of students who qualify for free breakfast who actually eat it."

Last year, following a concerted effort to boost school breakfasts, it was up 29 percent over the year before, to 108,000.

But Colorado continues to lag behind most states.

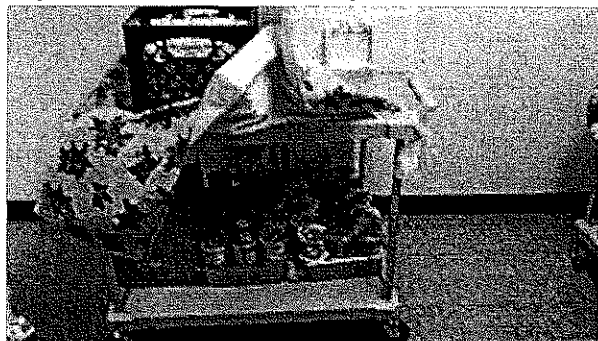
"We are 44th in the number of students who qualify for free breakfast who actually eat it," Moos said.

Yet she believes the benefits to schools who do increase the number of breakfasts served can be astounding.

"One school in Aurora who implemented a breakfast-in-the-classroom program in April reported their school nurse visits dropped 50 percent. Another Aurora school reported many less behavior problems," Moos said.

Trend now toward serving high schools

One trend in particular that Moos is seeing is implementing breakfast-in-the-classroom at the high school level. Feeding teenagers – especially in the morning – brings its own particular set of challenges not faced by elementary schools, but Moos and others are convinced it's a path most high schools will eventually travel.



Wheeled breakfast carts make it possible to serve breakfast to 950 students at Pueblo's Centennial High School in less than 10 minutes.

Pueblo's Centennial High School has become a national model for breakfast-in-the-classroom. After it launched its program last August, the number of students eating breakfast went from 50 to 950, practically overnight.

At Centennial, food service workers load up a fleet of breakfast carts, which become mobile serving lines. Each cart serves four to five classes.

"We push the cart to the door and say 'Breakfast!' and the students come out, circle the cart, and pick up their items," said Jill Kidd, director of food services for Pueblo City Schools. "As they do, we count them. It only takes a minute or two, and they go right on with the learning process."

The entire school gets fed in about 10 minutes, she said. Kidd feels that's an incredibly smart way to invest 10 minutes out of the day.

"About 50 percent of all kids on any given day haven't eaten," she said. "You can offer them the best curriculum and the best teaching techniques and they won't learn a thing because they're asleep, their stomach hurts, and their attention span is shorter. The principal at Centennial understands the benefits of that 10 minutes, to let the students eat while they continue to teach."

Experience has taught Kidd not to try serving breakfast to teenagers before 8:30 a.m.

"Before then, the kids aren't awake, and they're just not into breakfast," she said. "If we try to serve before 8:30, participation will be about 50 percent lower, even when we take breakfast to them."

After 14 years, breakfast in Adams 14 finally takes off

The Adams 14 School District, which includes Commerce City, has offered free breakfast to all for the past 14 years. But only when it began offering breakfast in every classroom in all its schools, beginning last year, did the district see significant numbers of students partaking.

"We were serving maybe 20 percent of our kids, and now we're serving 95 percent," said Cindy Veney, manager of nutrition services for the district. "It really has financially benefited the district. I see it as a win/win situation all the way around."

The district's nutrition services department has gone from being a break-even operation to running about \$600,000 in the black. The extra cash has allowed Veney to pay students to deliver the breakfasts to the classrooms.

Student clubs sign up for breakfast delivery duty for up to two weeks at a time. Club members come early, meet in the cafeteria, and pick up breakfast coolers to distribute to every classroom. In exchange, they're paid \$20 a day. They complete their delivery rounds before the first bell sounds, so they don't miss class.

With this easy money-making option, clubs no longer have to sell candy bars to raise funds for projects.

“Obviously, it takes the football team less time to deliver the breakfasts than it takes the six-member student council, but they know that in advance,” said Veney.

In addition, students from the high schools’ Like Skills classes for developmentally challenged students earn money retrieving the coolers and washing them out.

“Yes, we’ve had some waste,” Veney said. “We’ve had to purchase some different foods to find something everyone likes, and we’ve worked with our custodial staff and teachers to appease everyone. But it’s working well.”

Veney, too, has seen impacts other than simply financial.

“There have been days the nurses have come out and said ‘Do we have kids in school today?’ Because they no longer have a line of kids out the door with tummy aches and headaches. They don’t see that anymore. Kids are starting their days much more smoothly. And discipline problems are down.”

Experts says breakfast in the classroom also increases attendance and decreases tardiness.

“It’s fascinating to me when principals say they don’t have time to serve breakfast in the classroom every day, but they certainly make sure kids get fed on CSAP day,” Adamick said. “Does that make sense? Kids are happy when we feed them.”