

Alternative School Breakfast

AS PUBLIC SCHOOLS today address societal issues with ever-greater regularity, AASA is finding its work supporting school-age children tied directly to alleviating hunger.

The AASA alternative school breakfast initiative, directed by Kayla Jackson (who assumed the reins in August from Kelly Beckwith), has been funded by the Walmart Foundation since 2011. Its goal is to remove the stigma around school breakfast by making the meal more accessible and convenient for all students, in turn raising participation and reducing the hunger that can interfere with their learning. The participating districts nationwide range in size from 1,500 to 400,000 students.

The following interview with Jackson and Beckwith by AASA staffer Rebecca Shaw has been edited for length and clarity.

How does AASA support districts' school breakfast programs?

The funding we provide to districts is to be used for infrastructure, rather than for food or salaries, so they can sustain the program, after their partnership with AASA ends. This includes, for example, bags to deliver breakfast to the classroom, vending machines, software updates for mobile payments, shelving units, walk-in freezers and refrigerated delivery trucks.



What's happening in the participating districts?

When I go on site visits, I see a more familial atmosphere in the classrooms. Teachers who didn't think they would like breakfast served in the classroom now don't want to be without the program. One teacher told us she'd be "devastated" if it were taken away. It just starts the day off on the right foot. Some teachers have puzzles and thinking games on the screen for students to do while eating their breakfasts. Others play music.

How about at the secondary grade levels?

Middle and high schools have great opportunities for students to grab a breakfast and go straight to class. In Liberty County, Ga., student-designed kiosks with hot and cold meals are inside the main entrance to each high school. One high school principal thought the kiosks would be a nightmare but was willing to give it a try. That school went from serving breakfast to 15 percent of the students to 43 percent. There was very little trash lying around and no chaos in the cafeteria, classrooms and hallways. Not a nightmare scenario at all!

How do you know if the project is successful?

We monitor monthly progress of school breakfast participation. If we see a number starting to trend downward, we ask the food service director what's happening in that school or we might make a site visit to talk to the principal, teachers and even students. We've also conducted focus groups with key stakeholders to hear what they think of the program. In well-implemented programs,

participation explodes and nearly everyone is happy with the results.

Tell us about the school breakfast initiative's Community of Practice.

These have taken place several times, and they are more than a meeting. It's a place where our 22 participating districts come together to share in their successes and find solutions to their challenges. It's a place where they realize they are not alone in their struggles. We encourage relationships to develop between our current and former grantees. When someone has a question, we know someone with the answer. There's a lot of institutional knowledge.

Why should this matter to superintendents?

A simple school breakfast has the power to truly impact the education and lives of students. There is a connection between hunger and learning. When breakfast is served in the cafeteria only, students who arrive late to school won't have time to grab a breakfast. Alternative school breakfast methods help make the meal more widely accessible to students. As a result, the barriers to learning around hunger, tummy aches and distractions before lunch are lessened. It comes back to better attendance and ensuring that students are ready to learn when instruction begins.

Inside AASA is a new monthly feature about AASA services and products and the staff members behind them. Read full versions of the interviews at www.aasa.org/SALinside.aspx.