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Experts Issue Challenge to Schools: Make Breakfast Priority

Breakfast is the meal most likely skipped by students, which is often linked to lower test scores, higher absence rates

(COLUMBUS, Ohio) - As students prepare to head back to class this fall, several groups are challenging Ohio schools to make breakfast available to more students. "We know that kids who eat breakfast consistently perform better academically, they have increased attendance, they're not tardy as often and they make fewer trips to the school nurse's office," said Karen Bakies, a registered dietitian with the [American Dairy Association Mideast](#), one of the groups calling for more schools to offer breakfast programs to students.

In fact, studies have also shown that students who eat breakfast on a regular basis score more than 17 percent higher on math tests, on average, and are 20 percent more likely to graduate than students who don't eat breakfast.

"The evidence is very compelling," said Bakies, "and when kids *don't* eat breakfast the opposite is often true; they are distracted, their grades can suffer and they are more likely to miss class," she said.

Which is why the [Children's Hunger Alliance](#), the [Ohio Action for Healthy Kids](#) and the [Ohio School Nutrition Association](#) are joining the American Dairy Association Mideast in issuing the Ohio School Breakfast Challenge to Ohio schools.

Nationally, the number of children who eat breakfast at school has risen, slowly but steadily. In 2000, seven and a half million students in the U.S. took part in school breakfast programs. In 2012, that number had risen to just under 13 million. Still, that's less than half of those who take advantage of school lunch programs.

Part of the challenge of serving breakfast at school is that students arrive at different times. Latchkey students, for example, often arrive earlier than other children. Teenagers, on the other hand, the group that skips breakfast more than any other, frequently get to school just before classes start.

Still, experts say with some flexibility, all students could get a nutritious breakfast. "There are a lot different ways to feed kids breakfast, we just need to make it happen," said Bakies.

Here are three proven strategies that can increase the number of students that eat breakfast:

Breakfast in the Classroom - When breakfast is served in the classroom, more students eat breakfast, classrooms are familiar to them and offer a comfortable environment for eating. Easy-to-eat

foods, like whole-grain cereal, fruit and milk or breakfast sandwiches with milk, are served to children in the classroom as the day gets underway. “It’s a very popular approach,” said Bakies, “as the kids finish up breakfast, the teachers can take attendance and get the class focused on assignments for that day.”

Grab-and-Go – Popular with older students, the idea behind this approach is for students to pick up a bagged breakfast on the way to class and eat at their desks or where the school designates, allowing students to eat their own pace. Paper bags are filled with items such as fruit, a cheese stick, milk and whole grain cereal or bagels that make breakfast on the go easy and convenient. It is served in a variety of high-traffic areas such as the cafeteria, hall or entry ways making it easy for students to pick up on their way to class.

2nd Chance - “Some students simply aren’t hungry when they wake up,” said Bakies, “but they still need to eat breakfast.” Second chance breakfasts, which are served after first period, can be a great way to reach these students or those students who ate very early in the morning. Much like the grab-no-go bags, these meals are designed to be easy to carry and easy to eat on the run.

A newer option that is being tried in some schools are vending machines that feature healthy breakfast choices. The vending machines are located on different floors and in various locations throughout the school. The more convenient the school makes eating breakfast, the more likely children are to participate.

New federal guidelines have focused on making sure school breakfasts include nutrient-rich foods. “Children are now getting more fruits, protein, dairy and whole grains in their school meals - food that jump start their energy and help them feel fuller, longer,” said Bakies.

If your child’s school doesn’t offer a breakfast program, experts suggest reaching out to the principal or the food service director to see how you can help get one started.

“Just eating breakfast won’t make kids smarter, necessarily” said Bakies, “but it will put healthier, more engaged students in those desks every morning.”

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The American Dairy Association Mideast is the Ohio affiliate of the National Dairy Council (NDC), a leader in dairy nutrition research, education and communication since 1915. On behalf of dairy farmers, ADA Mideast provides timely, science-based nutrition information to, and in collaboration with, a variety of stakeholders committed to fostering a healthier society, including educators, school nutrition directors, health professionals, academia, industry, consumers and media. For more information, visit www.drink-milk.com and www.ohiodairyfarmers.com