



TOO HUNGRY TO LEARN?

Utah Teachers' Perspectives
On Hunger in the Classroom



UTAHNS AGAINST HUNGER

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Introduction

The importance of eating a complete and balanced breakfast every morning cannot be overstated, especially in regard to student wellness and classroom performance. Children who regularly eat breakfast are generally more healthy and attentive in the classroom. Moreover, studies have shown again and again that students participating in school breakfast programs are linked to numerous benefits including improved nutritional intakeⁱ, a lower probability of obesityⁱⁱ, and a diminished rate of food insecurityⁱⁱⁱ. Students also show improved attendance^{iv}, behavior^v, and standardized test scores^{vi} while participating in school breakfast programs.

Despite these positive outcomes, Utah has the lowest rates of school breakfast participation in the country. According to the Food Research and Action Center's 2013 School Breakfast Scorecard, only 33.9% of children who participate in free or reduced priced school lunch also participate in the school breakfast program. This number pales in comparison with states such as New Mexico, where the rate is a towering 70.2%. If Utah were to increase participation to 70% the state could drawdown an additional \$15,553,801 in federal dollars.

Considering the positive benefits associated, specifically with students participating in school breakfast programs across the country, coupled with the increase in federal funding gained by enrolling more students, Utah schools,

policy makers, parents and advocates should be doing more to increase the number of students participating in the National School Breakfast Program.

At Utahns Against Hunger, we set out to understand the experience teachers have with hunger in their classrooms. We also wanted to get a sense about what teachers think about school breakfast and the role it plays in learning. The following report outlines a survey conducted in the Fall of 2013 that was designed to ascertain the ideas and perspectives held by Utah teachers in relation to school breakfast participation in Utah.

-Michael Young
UAH

Survey Methods

This study used a convenience sample of teachers to assess teacher's attitudes and experiences regarding hunger and school breakfast in Utah. The Utah Education Association, a membership organization of Utah K-12 professionals, agreed to distribute the survey through their monthly newsletter. The newsletter was sent to 16,000 educational professionals throughout Utah during October and November 2013. Respondents were incentivized by a chance to receive a \$25 gift card. Two hundred and twenty three individuals completed the survey for a 1% response rate.



Key Findings

The average respondent was a Caucasian female age 40-49 and the average number of years taught was 14 years. Teachers from 28 school districts responded, with Salt Lake, Iron and Granite school districts having the most respondents.

Hunger in the Classroom

- When asked what problems teachers see in the classroom today, over half responded with hunger in the classroom.
- 4 out of 10 teachers reported that hunger is a very serious problem in their school.

- 3 out of 5 teachers say there are children that regularly come to class hungry.
- 56 percent of teachers responded that more than five students come to class hungry each week.



Addressing Hunger in the Classroom

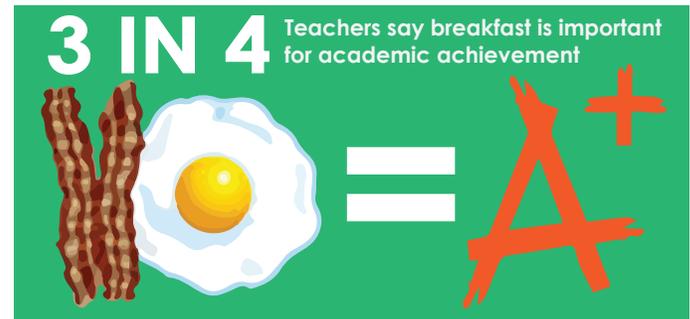
- To address the needs of their students, teachers report buying food for the classroom, helping to sign

them up for free or reduced price meals and referring students to resources at school.

- Roughly 1 in 5 teachers report buying food every week to a few times a month, while about 50 percent report buying food every once in a while.
- 2 in 5 teachers report spending more than five dollars on food for children in the classroom.
- 65 percent of teachers report buying food for their classroom at some point.
- While only 39 of the respondents have had experience with breakfast in the classroom, 97 percent (all but 1) said it was a positive experience, and 50 percent of respondents favor trying breakfast in the classroom.

Teachers' Perspectives on Hunger

- Teachers cite an unstable home environment as the major reason why kids are coming to school hungry.
- 3 out of 4 say breakfast is important for academic achievement.

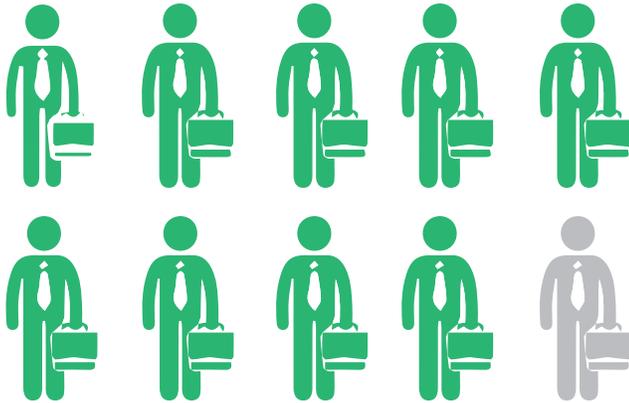


- 86 percent of teachers agree that there is a strong connection between a healthy breakfast and a child's ability to succeed in the classroom.

- 9 out of 10 teachers say focusing on hunger would make significant impacts on education.

9 IN 10

Teachers agree that focusing on hunger would make significant impacts on education



- 3 in 4 teachers think hunger should be a high priority or a very high priority for schools in Utah as well as nationwide.

- Teachers cite several barriers preventing a higher participation in the School Breakfast Program. The top three they identified were: parents do not sign their children up for the program, student tardiness, and transportation issues.



For a more detailed look at the survey results, visit the Utahns Against Hunger website at www.UAH.org.

Teachers Speak Out

"A hungry child cannot focus on academics. It is not a matter of WILL, they physically cannot until this need is met. How can we punish a child whose parents are unable to provide this basic need for them?"

"Hunger is a serious problem in Utah. Many families who do receive food stamps do not receive an adequate amount to adequately feed their families with healthy, well balanced meals. Utah has this, "holier than thou" attitude that we take care of everyone, when we really do not. I would like to see people in our legislature live on what we expect our

"poor" to live on -- both monetarily and food wise."

"When my students are hungry they can't learn! I usually buy food for my students but when I have to buy SO



many other items it's hard to find the money!!! I have taken several students to dinner...some for the experience and some so I know they are getting a nice dinner!"

“Children coming to school hungry is real. I have students whose only meals are breakfast and lunch at school. There are kids who don’t like school breaks and weekends because they know they will be hungry.”

“Students learn better in school if they have eaten a nutritious meal. It is important that all children get the opportunity to learn what they need to to be successful adults. Students won’t learn much if they are thinking about how hungry they are.”

“Since we have free breakfast and lunch at school children are getting

fed. However, what many don’t know is that is the only food they eat all day. When some of these students go home they don’t have food to eat. A lot will ask other students at breakfast and lunch if they are going to finish all their food.”

“Hungry in our classrooms is a pervasive problem that affects all students in the class. When children come to school hungry, they are not ready to learn, they act out and emotionally struggle. This behavior is NOT the child’s fault, but DOES affect the classroom environment and all students.”

Discussion

HUNGER IN THE CLASSROOM

According to the data, teachers cited “hunger in the classroom” as one of the biggest problems in schools today, second only to “discipline and lack of focus.” 4 out of 10 teachers stated that hunger was a serious problem and 6 out of 10 reported children coming to their classroom hungry. From this data, it is clear that Utah teachers view hunger as a real and present problem in classrooms today as well as a barrier for learning. The teachers attribute the problem of hunger to deficiencies and food insecurity at home.

ADDRESSING HUNGER IN THE CLASSROOM / SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

The majority of teachers in Utah state that they have bought food for hungry students at some point in their career. To increase school breakfast participation, several reported helping students enroll in school breakfast themselves, as well as referring the students to other resources offered in the school. Research has demonstrated that one of the most effective ways to increase participation in school breakfast is by serving breakfast in the classroom^{vii}, and for older students offering other alternatives that de-stigmatize school breakfast and adapts to their schedules. When asked which teachers would approve or disap-

prove of an alternative (in class) method for school breakfast, about 50 percent responded that they would favor the program and the other 50 cited opposition. Of the 39 teachers who have participated in breakfast in the classroom, only 1 teacher reported it as a negative experience. The problem then seems to be a lack education on the alternative serving options and the benefits they offer to increase program participation. The barriers to school breakfast the teachers mentioned (tardiness, transportation delays, and difficulty signing up) could be addressed and overcome with the introduction of alternative school breakfast options such as grab and go, or breakfast in the classroom. These options make school breakfast

more accessible to students and receive great praise from those teachers who have participated in them.

TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVES ON HUNGER IN THE CLASSROOM & SCHOOL BREAKFAST

Teachers overwhelmingly agree that school breakfast is a crucial component for student's overall academic achievement. Teacher's en masse reported that school breakfast is extremely important and that community focus on the subject would greatly impact education. The vast majority of teachers said that hunger in the classroom should be one of the top, if not the top priority in classrooms nationwide.

Recommendations

Considering the fundamental role nutrition plays in children's ability to learn Utah should do more to ensure kids are accessing federal nutrition programs. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as the Food Stamp Program in Utah, provide families with resources to purchase groceries. SNAP has proven to move children and families out of poverty. According to the Census Bureau, when counted as income, 4 million Americans were moved out of poverty, including 2 million children^{viii}. School Breakfast, School Lunch and Summer Food provide a safety net for families ex-

periencing food insecurity. These programs can help ease the pressure on working poor families and provide stability in family budgets.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

1. Promote and support alternatives schools have for serving breakfast.
2. Study the impact of federal nutrition programs on student achievement.
3. Implement Community Eligibility in school districts that are eligible.

4. Develop community strategies for ending child hunger with many local level groups.

OUTREACH AND EXPANSION OF PROGRAMS

5. Strengthen outreach efforts to increase food stamp participation for the neediest communities.

6. Expand Summer Food in underserved communities.

7. Increase efforts in schools to identify students who are eligible for free or reduced meals and are not participating.

EDUCATION

8. Consider parent education programs on strategies for breakfast (quick breakfast idea handouts, relative health-fulness of school breakfast) to accommodate those who consider it a parental responsibility

9. Continue awareness in the media and with educators on the important role of SNAP/food stamps for many families.

10. In order to get teachers to accept and support alternative breakfast approaches, school nutrition directors need to answer questions and address the concerns of teach-

ers opposed to expanding breakfast in the classroom.

11. Create awareness of results among state stakeholders interested in achieving excellence in employable skills to attract businesses to Utah. Hunger = reduced educational achievement = bad for business.

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