

Helping More Students Get School Breakfast

ideas

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Leveraging behavioral insights to generate higher program participation

Serving breakfast to all students during the school day has been shown to help more children eat breakfast. We designed communications to encourage more school leaders to offer Breakfast After the Bell.

Summary

Starting the day with a healthy breakfast has been shown to improve academic achievement for students.¹ So that all students can gain from this benefit, the national School Breakfast Program (SBP) provides free and reduced-price breakfasts to nearly 12 million students, based on their parents' income or participation in other federally funded programs.²

Yet many eligible students are missing out: in 2017 the SBP served roughly half the number of meals as the National School Lunch Program. There are many reasons students may not use the program—they may not arrive at school early enough, or may experience stigma if the breakfast served in the cafeteria is perceived as being for low-income students only.

Serving breakfast to all students as part of the regular school day—known as Breakfast After the Bell—has been shown to increase participation rates.³ However, most schools have not yet transitioned to serving breakfast in this way. In a phone survey that we conducted of over 2,500 schools in six states, only 22% were using the program. ideas42 applied a behavioral lens in an effort to encourage more school leaders to adopt Breakfast After the Bell for their school.

Framing the program

We partnered with University of Virginia researchers and No Kid Hungry, a national nonprofit, to pilot an intervention aimed at encouraging school leaders to adopt Breakfast After the Bell.⁴ The pilot was run as a randomized controlled trial.

Highlights

- ▶ The National School Breakfast Program provides free and reduced-price breakfasts to eligible students
- ▶ in 2017, the School Breakfast Program served half the number of meals as the School Lunch Program
- ▶ Serving breakfast during, not before, the school day improves participation rates

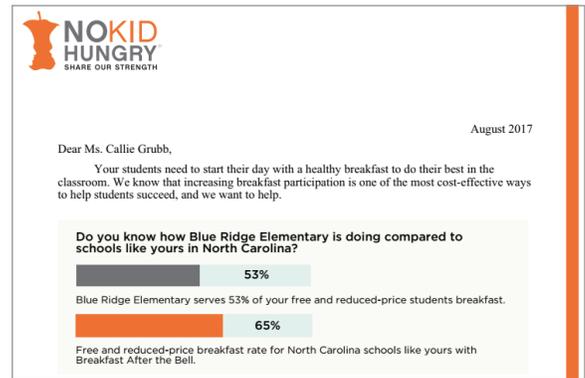
¹ J. Murphy, "Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review," *Current Nutrition & Food Science* 3, no. 1 (2007): 3–36.

² For participation data for NSLP and NSBP, see: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

³ See feeding data at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

⁴ Partners at UVA included Benjamin Castleman and Zachary Sullivan. Our partner at No Kid Hungry was Wendy Bolger.

In August of 2017, behaviorally informed letters and emails were sent to school- and district-leaders across six states: California, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas. These letters leveraged either an informational framing, telling leaders about their students' participation rate in SBP, or a social-norms framing, telling them about their schools' breakfast participation rate relative to their peers.⁵ All treatment schools and districts were also offered the opportunity to apply for a grant to cover the cost of materials associated with transitioning their breakfast program.



Example of Social Norms Letter

A total of 2,516 schools in 808 districts were randomized to receive either the information letter, the social-norms letter, or no outreach.

Results

Preliminary analyses indicate that neither the informational nor the social norms comparison was more likely to generate a response to our outreach materials or an application for a school breakfast startup grant. We plan to evaluate treatment impacts on actual school breakfast participation rates, and compare our treatment groups to a no-outreach control, once data for the 2017–2018 school year becomes available in 2019.

Early insights

Full takeaways from this trial are pending final data. However, the lack of difference between treatment groups indicates that informational messages may be as effective as social comparisons. They are also operationally easier to send at scale, so they may be a useful tool for future efforts to increase the adoption of Breakfast After the Bell.

Employing and refining new strategies to increase the number of students who can enjoy a health breakfast every day is important for children's growth, development, and learning. Insights from this initial pilot can be used to inform innovative solutions that help more students start the day with a nutritious meal.

⁵ Allcott, H. "Social Norms and Energy Conservation." *Journal of Public Economics*, 95(5) (2011), 1982-2095.