Breakfast: The Most Important Lesson of the School Day

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If students could have access to an easy, inexpensive way that makes an immediate difference in their ability to perform in the classroom with lifelong health benefits, wouldn’t school administrators and teachers jump at this opportunity? The good news? This benefit is readily available—breakfast—and many Southeast school systems are taking advantage of it. Eating breakfast is one of the most powerful tools that ensure all students are on the right track both physically and academically. Let’s review the three “W’s” of breakfast: Why, when and what?

**Why** should all students be encouraged to eat breakfast and more importantly have this meal offered at school? Research has repeatedly shown that “consuming breakfast, particularly school breakfast, as part of a healthful lifestyle, is positively associated with children’s health and academic performance.” (1) The health benefits alone are worth the effort to safeguard every child has access to a breakfast meal, especially on a school day. A review of nine studies examining the connection between breakfast consumption and nutritional adequacy in children and adolescents found that those who ate breakfast had higher daily intakes of vitamins A and C, riboflavin, calcium, zinc and iron and were more likely to meet overall nutrient recommendations compared to breakfast skippers. (2) Other studies show that children who skip breakfast rarely make up missed nutrients throughout the rest of the day. (3) Equally important are the cognitive and academic benefits of breakfast consumption. Studies report that breakfast is positively associated with children’s memory, academic performance, school attendance, psychosocial function and mood. (4,5) Other factors such as family and social dynamics outside of the school environment affect school performance; however, the breakfast meal is one simple, practical habit that can enhance emotional, behavioral and academic functioning in children by simply alleviating hunger or lessening food insufficiency. (6) Sheri Stephens, RN with Burke County Schools, GA states, “When kids eat breakfast, they have fewer stomach aches and headaches, they are more alert and do better in class. I always tell parents about the importance of eating a good breakfast.”

**When** should your students consume the first meal of the day? Blood sugar is “known to rise and fall in 3-hour periods, so the concept of timing food ingestion relies on time frames of 2 to 4 hours to ensure that blood sugar does not maintain a sustained drop at any point throughout the day.” (7) Since students slept 6 to 8 hours with no food, eating within an hour or two of waking up is imperative to reap the full health and cognitive benefits of fueling the body and brain. Frequent meals throughout the day, starting with breakfast, help “not only maintain stable blood sugar and insulin levels but also results in greater energy and a higher metabolic rate”. (8) Stable blood sugar controls mood swings and thinking clarity, greater energy ensures students will be more alert and engaged in the classroom, and higher metabolic rates helps protect against the risk of obesity. However, in a recent survey of 23 large school districts, only 2 districts served at least 2/3 as many low income students at breakfast as they did at lunch. (9) To address this problem, two innovative programs to increase school breakfast participation are now available: “grab-n-go” from a cart or kiosk and “breakfast in the classroom”. At Bonnabel High
School in Kenner, LA the new “grab-n-go” breakfast kiosk, stationed in the campus quadrangle, is up and running with the help of school nutrition managers, their high school principal and the Student Wellness Council. Nancy Tigert, School Nurse Coordinator states “the Student Wellness Council selected the foods served, which includes yogurt, fresh fruit, cheese and breakfast bars. Thus far, the responses have been very positive”.

Norma Bergey, Intermediate School Nurse for G.W. Carver School, a Title 1 school in Chesapeake, VA confirms “serving breakfast in the classroom to our students has significantly reduced visits to the clinic for stomach aches and headaches secondary to not eating breakfast. As a nurse, this allows me to focus on students who have real medical issues as compared to those with symptoms of being hungry”.

**What** is the best breakfast meal for students? A nutrient-rich balanced meal that includes non-fat and low-fat dairy, whole grain carbohydrate, fruit or vegetable and lean protein provide the best combination of body and brain fuel. The USDA’s new Myplate ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) illustrates this balance of nutrients with color graphics. Dairy foods like non-fat or low-fat milk, yogurt or cheese are represented by a blue circle and suggested at every meal. It’s important to remember dairy foods provide protein, carbohydrates and essential vitamins and minerals (10). However, breakfast contributes only 10% of the daily calories in the average American diet, according to the **NHANES 2003-2006 Survey** (11,12). Since low-fat dairy provides a unique combination of nutrients, including calcium, phosphorus, magnesium (bone health), zinc, selenium (antioxidant minerals), vitamins B12, thiamin, riboflavin (energy vitamins) and vitamin A (eye health and antioxidant properties), the school breakfast meal is an ideal time to include one serving of dairy to help make up the nutrient gap found in the typical American diet at home. (13) An extra benefit of low-fat dairy foods is its potential role in preventing childhood and adolescent obesity. “In children, consuming 3 servings of dairy products a day may help prevent the development of overweight and have a favorable effect on body composition. Although these dairy food or calcium-induced beneficial effects on body weight or body fat mass are likely to be modest, they may substantially contribute to weight change over time, leading to a significant decrease in the incidence of obesity.” (14, 15)

Breakfast is the first, most important lesson of the school day, as evidenced in its short term benefits of energy, mental clarity and concentration and its long term health benefits of strong bones and better weight management. Offering breakfast, either in the cafeteria, “grab-n-go” or in the classroom, is a powerful tool in making sure that all students have the foundation to perform to their best ability, today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

For more information visit: [www.southeastdairy.org](http://www.southeastdairy.org)

**References:**