

Why You Should Support School Breakfast, Even If Your Kid Eats at Home

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It's back-to-school time across the USA and the buzz about breakfast seems louder than ever this year. Every parent has probably already uttered these words to an offspring or two: "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

If you recognize the multiple benefits of breakfast for strong bodies and smart brains, that's great. If you make certain that your children never leave home without a breakfast of whole grains, fresh fruit and Greek yogurt or backyard eggs, that's awesome for your kids. Their metabolism got a great kick-start and their brains have the fuel they need to focus on the teacher and learn new information -- until lunchtime -- every day.

But what about Jane, Johnny, Sam, Suzy and all the other students sitting around your child's desk or table at school? Did they have a balanced breakfast? Did they have breakfast at all? In fact, did they have anything nutritious since they ate lunch at school yesterday? And, why should you really care what your child's classmates have or have not eaten? Why should you support a breakfast program at your school even if your kids will never need it?

The answers are stark and, according to an August 27th article on this website, "shocking." Here are the facts:

- According to Share Our Strength's Teacher Report 2013, too many children are too hungry to learn. 87 percent of principals see hungry children in their schools at least once a week and 73 percent of teachers have students who regularly come to school hungry because there isn't enough food at home.
- Hungry children cannot listen to the teacher because they are listening to their stomachs. When children come to school without a morning meal, it impacts their ability to concentrate, their attention span, and their classroom behavior. In the Share Our Strength report, 90 percent of educators say breakfast is critical to academic achievement.
- Even if your family is blessed with a perfect breakfast every day, other inattentive, unfocused, under-nourished children can affect your child's ability to succeed at school. It happens directly when hungry children need more of the teacher's time -- and indirectly when your child is distracted from the lessons at hand.

The important connection between breakfast and school performance is well known to every school that tells students to "get a good night's sleep and eat good breakfast" before standardized achievement tests. Unfortunately, breakfast during test week is too little too late! Children need breakfast every day to get new information and skills into their brains, just to get them out on test day.

Here are three things that every parent can do to support breakfast, classroom performance and successful schools for every child -- including their own:

- **Digest the facts about breakfast and hungry children in America.** The 2013 and 2012 Teacher Reports are good places to start. You may also want to Map the Meal Gap in your state or county. A recently released USDA report estimates that 21.6 percent of American children live in food insecure homes. In my opinion, it is a moral imperative that we change this fact. Even if you do not agree, think of all the educational problems that hunger causes in classrooms from coast to coast.
- **Explore expert views on the power of school breakfast.** Many forward-thinking educational groups understand the breakfast research, which is why they are working hard to expand breakfast opportunities at school. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has an excellent report, *Improving Attendance, Health and Behavior: Moving Breakfast Out of the Cafeteria*, on the benefits and effective implementation of breakfast programs.
- **Advocate for breakfast in your community.** Students from every income level benefit from a balanced morning meal every day, whether they eat it at home or school. Fuel Up to Play 60, a national program to improve school nutrition and fitness, has made healthy breakfast choices and effective school breakfast programs a priority. Check out their breakfast "plays" and you'll find fun ways to get all students more excited about that "most important meal of the day."

While your child may be able to opt out of a school breakfast program, their friends and classmates may not have that luxury for a myriad of reasons. Breakfast is a simple, cost-effective way for high-performing schools to help every child be well nourished and ready to learn. That's a strategy that I support as a mom, a Registered Dietitian (RD) and a taxpayer.

If you need some basic breakfast info, here are my takes on *Make Time for Breakfast* and *4 Tips for Better Breakfasts* from Kids Eat Right and the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics.

Follow Dayle Hayes, MS, RD on Twitter: www.twitter.com/SchoolMealsRock

This blog post can be found online: www.huffingtonpost.com/dayle-hayes-ms-rd/why-every-parent-should-s_b_3874737.html