

Exploring the Parents' Attitudes and Perceptions About School Breakfast to Understand Why Participation Is Low in a Rural Midwest State

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore parental attitudes and perceptions about the school breakfast program in a state with low school breakfast participation.

Design: A cross-sectional study design that used an online survey completed by parents supplemented with district data from a state department of education. The survey included quantitative and qualitative components.

Setting: A rural Midwestern state with low school breakfast participation.

Participants: Parents and caregivers of children in grades 1–12 were recruited through schools to complete a survey (n = 7,209).

Main Outcome Measures: Participation in a school breakfast program.

Analysis: A generalized estimating equation model was used to analyze the data and account for the possible correlation among students from the same school district. Open-end survey items were coded.

Results: Parents identified several structural and logistic barriers in response to open-ended survey items. Factors associated with breakfast participation include perceived benefits, stigma related to those for whom breakfast is intended, and the importance of breakfast.

Conclusions and Implications: Interventions should be designed to test whether changing parent perceptions and decreasing stigma will lead to increased breakfast participation. Policy, systems, and environment changes addressing the structural and logistic barriers also may have the potential to increase participation.

Key Words: children, nutrition, rural, school meals (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2016; ■:1-10.)

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INTRODUCTION

Importance of School Breakfast

The school environment is an important setting for focused public health efforts because schools offer relatively consistent and extensive contact with

a large number of youth in the US. The food environment of a school has a powerful influence on students' eating behaviors, including those related to breakfast.¹ Many children and adolescents do not eat breakfast on a regular basis despite evidence that breakfast is

associated with lower risks of obesity and chronic disease and is correlated with improved cognitive and motor function and better achievement in school.^{2,3} Estimates of youth skipping breakfast ranged from about 10% to 30%, depending on the definition and methodology used to collect data.² The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (1999–2006) found that approximately 20% of children and 31.5% of adolescents in the US regularly skipped breakfast.³

Both the *National School Lunch Program* (NSLP) and the *National School Breakfast Program* (SBP) support the health and well-being of youth by providing millions of children with 1–2 nutritious meals/d. In its current state, the SBP serves mainly as a safety net for the nation's most economically vulnerable students. The program helps offset the burden faced by many families experiencing food insecurity by providing a low-cost or free nutritious meal each

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morning. Of more than 12.1 million children who participated in the SBP during financial year 2011, over 10.1 million were eligible for free or reduced-price meals; the threshold for these meals is a household income <185% of the federal poverty level.⁴

The SBP has the potential to enhance health and academic achievement among students and was shown to improve nutrition outcomes in children in low-income households, a group with historically high rates of participation in the program.⁵ The program reduces the chance that a student will skip at least 1 breakfast/wk and increases the probability that low-income children will eat breakfast in the morning.⁶ Children who eat breakfast at school consume more fruit and milk and a wider variety of foods than do children who do not eat breakfast or who eat breakfast at home.⁵ A pilot program in Maryland, in which schools offered in-classroom breakfast to all students, resulted in significantly higher rates of breakfast eating, lower rates of tardiness, and fewer suspensions for disciplinary incidents compared with schools without the universal breakfast program.⁷

Participation in SBP

Participation rates in SBP are relatively low throughout the US, particularly in the Midwest and West regions, and children are not eating breakfast at home. One study indicated that rural adolescents reported eating breakfast with their families only 1–3 times/wk.⁸ Even with its potential to enhance students' health and academic achievement, the SBP is widely underused compared with the NSLP. Approximately 90% of schools that offer school lunch also offer school breakfast⁹; however, the SBP serves only about one third of children served by the NSLP.¹⁰ Among low-income children, the proportion jumps to about half.⁹ Participation in the SBP is almost completely limited to the subset of students who already eat school lunch regularly.⁶ Unlike the NSLP, participation in the SBP is heavily skewed toward students who are eligible for subsidized meals. On average, 39% of students who are eligible for free meals eat breakfast at school, compared with 20% of students who are eligible for reduced-price meals and only 8% of students who pay full price.⁶ Never-

theless, a significant proportion of low-income children who have access to the program still do not participate, including 35% of children who are food insecure.⁶ These figures point to extensive room for improvement in SBP implementation nationwide.

For the 2013–2014 school year (SY), 5 of the states with lowest SBP participation were rural states in the Midwest and West, including the state of Iowa.¹¹ Although the vast majority of schools in Iowa offer the SBP, participation rates are significantly lower than in other states.⁹ Only 40.1% of low-income students in Iowa who eat lunch at school also eat school breakfast, compared with 53.2% nationally.⁹

Factors in Low SBP Participation

In general, little is known about why school breakfast participation rates are low, and even less is known about the factors related to low participation in the lowest-performing states. Possible factors that have been identified have not been substantiated in a quantitative study or examined in a rural, low-participation state. For example, bus schedules were identified as a major obstacle to SBP participation,¹² which is an issue that may be exacerbated in rural school districts, with their wider geographic reach. Other identified barriers to SBP participation included inadequate time provided by schools, resistance from teachers and administrators to alternative serving models (eg, breakfast in the classroom), the stigma attached to eating breakfast at school, and costs associated with the program.¹² Focus groups with administrators, school food service directors, parents, and students in both rural and urban school settings¹³ revealed these concerns, as well as the opinion that breakfast is first and foremost a parental responsibility. Attitudinal barriers¹⁴ and policy, systems, and environmental barriers from the perspective of high school students were examined.¹⁵

Previous studies did not examine SBP perceptions in depth or from a rural perspective. They either focused broadly on national data or on a small sample of qualitative data. In addition, research on school meals in general and breakfast in particular is lacking in the wake of the Healthy, Hunger-Free

Kids Act of 2010, which mandated dramatic reforms to school nutrition guidelines.⁴ No research that postdates the reforms is available on SBP changes unrolled during SY 2013–2014 and parent perceptions of SBP. It is therefore valuable to investigate more rigorously factors related to low SBP participation. Rural schools in particular may benefit from this research, because they may face unique structural and attitudinal barriers to raising SBP participation.

This study was part of a larger, state-wide study examining school breakfast participation that included data collections with high school students and school administrators. The study explored factors related to low school breakfast participation in 1 rural Midwest state. Previous published studies did not measure the relationship quantitatively between parental factors (knowledge, perceptions, and attitude) and SBP participation. In addition this study examined these relationships with a focus on rurality. Specifically, the study set out to understand parents' knowledge and perceptions about school breakfast, including reasons for participation and ideas for improving participation, and to identify family- and district-level characteristics significantly associated with school breakfast participation.

METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

The study sample consisted of parents of school-aged children (grades pre-kindergarten through 12) in a midsized, rural, Midwest state (Iowa). The state department of education encouraged school districts and schools to distribute a link to an online survey via e-mail and the school or district Web site, and as part of regular communications sent home to parents. Respondents were also encouraged to share the survey link with their social networks after they completed the survey. A total of 8,983 parents completed the survey, representing 231 of the state's 338 school districts. After eliminating parents who reported on a child younger than first grade, there were 8,228 parents from 222 districts. Parents who did not identify a school district were also deleted, which left 7,209 parents for the analysis.

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