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Research Brief

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Using Social Marketing to Promote a Universal Free Breakfast Program

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Social marketing, with its emphasis on the target audience's needs and desires, offers an effective approach in increasing participation.

Background

Eating school breakfast is associated with significant improvements in nutritional status, academic performance, and school attendance.^{1,2,3} Improving nutritional status through school breakfast supports primary prevention of nutrition related diseases among children, including diabetes and obesity. Despite the benefits associated with eating breakfast, the federally funded School Breakfast Program (SBP) is underutilized.⁴ Only 42.3 students received free or reduced priced breakfast for every 100 students receiving free lunch during the school year 2002-2003, according to the Food Action Research Center (FRAC) school breakfast scorecard. FRAC recommends a modest goal of 55 students eating breakfast for every 100 lunches served.⁵

Studies and pilot programs show that providing a universal free (UF) breakfast (free to all regardless of income) significantly increases breakfast participation. In addition, studies show that the UF breakfast provides added academic benefits to students, including increases in math scores, lower tardiness and absence rates, and a more positive attitude toward breakfast.^{6,7,8}

Despite breakfast being free to all, the program is still underutilized. To further boost participation in the UF breakfast, some schools have experimented with making breakfast part of the school day. For instance, a program conducted during the 2003-2004 school year

reported an increase in participation from 22 to 65% when students were offered breakfast in the classroom.⁹ The cost of classroom breakfast is not different from serving breakfast in the cafeteria.

However, it is necessary to have cooperation from teachers, staff, and school administration in order to implement this program. In cases where breakfast in the classroom is not possible, a social marketing approach could be used to increase participation rates of UF. Social marketing, with its emphasis on the target audience's needs and desires, offers an effective approach in increasing participation.

The purpose of this project was to test low-cost social marketing methods tailored to low-income students and their parents attending elementary schools offering a UF breakfast program.

Methods

Formative research was conducted with students, parents, teachers, and school staff to guide development of the social marketing program. This research revealed that children were generally satisfied with the breakfast food, and gave the following promotional activities high ratings: breakfast with a teacher, breakfast with parents, sticker contest, art contest. Formative research also found that parents were not well informed about the free breakfast or breakfast menus; and, teachers regularly observed students with headaches and other side effects from

¹ Schools offer meal programs in one of two formats. One format is the free, reduced-price, or full-price meal in which meal applications collect family income information which determines the amount the student pays for school meals. Alternatively, schools may opt to offer a universal free (UF) meal program in which meals are provided to all students free of charge. This can be done by taking advantage of Provisions 2 and 3 of the National School Lunch Act. Under these Provisions, meals are provided free of charge at schools with a high percentage of low-income students without collecting meal applications.

skipping breakfast. Universal breakfast in the classroom was not supported by school staff for a variety of reasons, including garbage and logistical problems.

Six schools in the greater Sacramento, California, area agreed to participate in the program. All schools offered a universal free meal program. Participation rates in breakfast varied from 23 to 55%, while participation in the lunch program was close to 100% in all schools.

The promotion period ranged from 20-25 days. For one week, each of the following low-cost promotion events were implemented in succession: 1) during each lunch period, food service staff invited the children to breakfast the next morning; 2) stickers were placed randomly on 10 meal trays to redeem for prizes; 3) the cafeteria was decorated with tablecloths, paper flowers, and posters from a breakfast art contest; 4) breakfast with the teacher was offered. Also, for one day during cafeteria beautification, the school hosted a free parent breakfast. Throughout the 25 day intervention period, a banner was hung outside of the school announcing the time the free breakfast was offered, and breakfast menus (translated when needed) were sent home each week.

Data from all six schools were combined, and changes in the ratio of breakfast to lunch attendance was tested to detect relative changes during the promotion using a t-test. The ratio was compared to a time period in the previous month during which the menu was the same or mostly the same as during the promotion to control for participation by breakfast item. The previous month was chosen for comparison instead of the entire year because participation differs significantly in some months but not in the previous month.

Results

Each of the one-week promotional activities was generally well received by students and staff, but showed no significant difference in breakfast participation rates (Table 1). Only the parent breakfast raised the breakfast to lunch ratio above the 55/100 standard, and approached a significant increase in participation. This result underscores the importance parents play in elementary school children's lives, and the potential for targeting future school breakfast promotions to parents.

Discussion

Out of the five social marketing strategies, only the parent breakfast, a simple one-day event that cost less than \$100 per school, was the most effective in increasing participation in the UF breakfast. A longer intervention period for the other social marketing strategies may have produced more dramatic results, particularly since we did not advertise the promotions, but instead relied on word of mouth. One limitation to this study was that while we tried to control the integrity of the intervention, Center staff couldn't be at all of the schools and had to rely on research aides to implement as designed. In addition, there were cases where the intervention was not fully implemented. For instance, the rush of the lunch line made it difficult for food service staff to invite each child to breakfast the following day. And in some of the schools, less than half the teachers ate breakfast with their students even though the project provided the teachers free breakfasts for the week.

Future social marketing strategies also could be directed primarily at school staff and parents. Because school employees are often over-burdened, social marketing efforts may be needed in order to inform teachers and administrators of academic and behavioral

Table 1. Ratio of Breakfast to Lunch Participation during Promotions

Promotion Type	Number of days promotion took place	Average breakfast to lunch ratio during promotions*	Sig. of difference between ratio during promotion compared to previous month
Foodservice staff prompt	12	42.08	.932
Sticker contest	24	45.21	.274
Cafeteria beautification	18	47.28	.767
Teacher breakfast	19	48.26	.506
Parent Breakfast	6	56.00	.088

* The average breakfast to lunch ratio before promotions took place was 47.14

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benefits of eating school meals. Once the importance of eating breakfast is recognized by adults, students are more likely to be receptive to promotion efforts.

In conjunction with social marketing campaigns, supportive policies may be needed at the district and state level to make school breakfast part of the school day. Previous studies have illustrated that breakfast in the classroom is a successful way to incorporate breakfast into the school day. Such policies make a clear statement to staff, faculty, and parents about the importance of school breakfast and acknowledge the associated academic and nutritional benefits.

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