Wisconsin School Teachers’ Perceptions About Breakfast in the Classroom Survey Findings 2009

University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension
Family Living Programs
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Executive Summary

Less than 62% of Wisconsin schools offer school breakfast programs (SBP) and less than 40% of Wisconsin’s low-income students participate in the program. Efforts to increase both school and student participation in the program include implementing best practices, such as serving breakfast in the classroom (BIC) which has shown to be highly successful in elementary schools and some middle schools.

Serving breakfast in the classroom requires the joint collaboration between school food service staff and school teaching staff. How teachers feel about this particular breakfast model and how they implement it in their classrooms are key issues to consider for breakfast in the classroom to be successful.

Little was known about Wisconsin teachers’ perceptions about breakfast in the classroom. As such, the University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX), Cooperative Extension’s Family Living Programs and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), School Nutrition Team were interested in learning more about teachers’ perceptions regarding BIC. A brief, informal questionnaire was developed and administered to over 500 school staff, mostly teachers, across the state of Wisconsin in late October 2008 during the Wisconsin Educational Association Council (WEAC) state convention held in Madison, WI.

The survey asked respondents about their thoughts and perceptions about school breakfast programs and more specifically about breakfast in the classroom.

There were two categories of respondents: 1. those that worked in schools with a breakfast program in place (79%) and 2. those that worked in schools without a breakfast program (21%). Respondents from schools with a breakfast program fell into two groups: those in which their school offered breakfast in the classroom (31%) and those in which their school served breakfast elsewhere in the school (69%).

Information was collected about teachers’ perceptions of the benefits of breakfast in the classroom as well as perceived barriers to this type of breakfast service model. Perceptions about barriers differed between teachers from schools that had a breakfast program and from teachers from schools without a breakfast program. Perceived barriers about breakfast in the classroom also differed between teachers who were already serving breakfast in their classroom and those that were not.

Human Subjects Protection Review was sought out and approved by the University of Wisconsin Extension, Cooperative Extension.
Introduction

Much is known about the benefits of breakfast and its association with positive academic outcomes in school age children, such as improved test scores, greater attention span, improved behavior, etc. Yet many school age children in Wisconsin do not start their school day with breakfast. Time constraints, conflicting schedules, lack of food and/or resources and children’s ever changing appetites, contribute to the low percentage of breakfast consumption among school children. School breakfast programs are one alternative that enables school age children to have a morning meal at school when eating at home is not possible.

However, many schools do not offer school breakfast programs. In Wisconsin roughly 63% of schools offer the program, and less than 40% of low income children participate in school breakfast programs.

Schools often cite labor and start up costs as barriers to starting a school breakfast program. Lack of support for the program is also frequently mentioned as a challenge in starting a school breakfast program. Support for the program is important for its success, especially if breakfast will be served in the classroom, which is a model that is very successful, especially in elementary schools. Breakfast in the classroom (BIC) requires support not only from school administration but also from classroom teachers. After all, it is the teachers that will be supervising the meal in their classroom every school day. Breakfast in the classroom has been shown to be a successful way of increasing student participation in the breakfast program especially in elementary and middle schools.

Anecdotal comments about how teachers perceive breakfast in the classroom in Wisconsin schools were mixed. Some comments suggested teachers would not be supportive of having breakfast in their classrooms while others mentioned they would support breakfast served in classrooms. However, little was known about actual data regarding teachers’ perception about school breakfast programs overall and about their views on breakfast in the classroom.

As a result, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension and the Department of Public Instruction set out to collect information on teachers’ perceptions about breakfast programs and breakfast in the classroom.

In October of 2008, the Wisconsin Educational Association Council held their annual state convention in Madison, Wisconsin. The University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension in partnership with the Department of Public Instruction, was staffing educational booths about Wisconsin school breakfast programs. Booth visitors were given an opportunity to complete a brief questionnaire about school breakfast. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The goal was to collect information about
school teachers’ perceptions about school breakfast programs and in particular, breakfast in the classroom.

This report describes the findings from the questionnaires.

Sample and Methods

Visitors to the school breakfast informational booths at the WEAC convention were asked to complete a one-page written questionnaire. Survey participation was voluntary. Most respondents completed the questionnaire in a minute or less. Human subjects’ protection review was requested and approved by the University of Wisconsin Extension.

Respondents represented school districts from across the state, and included elementary, middle and high school staff and teachers from both public and private schools.

Respondents fell into two categories: those that worked in a school that offered a school breakfast program (SBP), and those that worked in schools that did not have a school breakfast program. Two different questionnaires were administered depending on the presence of a SBP in their school.

Respondents from schools with a SBP were further subdivided into two groups, those that offered breakfast in the classroom and those that did not.

Of the 553 total surveys returned, 79% of the respondents indicated they worked in a school with a breakfast program. 21% worked in schools that did not have a breakfast program in place.
Results

Schools with a School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Of the 435 surveys from respondents working in schools with a school breakfast program 97% indicated they had observed hungry students coming to school. Almost everyone (99%) reported support for the school breakfast program.

Approximately a third of respondents (31%) working in schools with a breakfast program served breakfast in the classroom (BIC) while 69% worked in schools in which breakfast was served in another location (not in the classroom) within the school.

Respondents stated benefits of a SBP, (with or without a BIC) included students’ increased ability to learn and academic performance (47%), improved student health (30%) and better behavior (24%).

Almost three quarters (71%) of respondents from schools with a SBP, regardless of the presence of BIC in their school, indicated loss of instructional time was not a main barrier associated with breakfast in the classroom.

Survey responses from schools with a SBP were then subdivided into two groups: those that served breakfast in the classroom and those that did not.

Schools with a School Breakfast Program serving Breakfast in the Classroom

Survey respondents from schools with a school breakfast program and BIC were asked to indicate if they had any concerns associated with breakfast in the classroom. More than half (64%) stated loss of instructional time was not a main barrier associated with BIC. Mess was also not a main barrier to BIC according to 69% of the respondents from schools serving breakfast in the classroom. Approximately 6% indicated there were no barriers what so ever associated with serving breakfast in the classroom.

In order to capture even more detailed information regarding teachers’ perceptions about breakfast in the classroom, the survey asked respondents to answer five questions specifically related to breakfast in the classroom.

Among respondents who served breakfast in the classroom, 77% of the respondents indicated that they had seen an improvement in student academic performance since serving breakfast in their classroom.

Sixty eight percent (68%) of the respondents noted they had seen an improvement in student behavior since BIC was implemented. Student mood was notably improved since BIC was implemented, as indicated by 85% of the respondents. Only 15% of
respondents noted no change in students’ moods. No one indicated a worsening of these issues.

Interestingly, the majority of responses (82%) indicated there had been no change in teachers’ workload and 15% of responses reflected an improvement in teachers’ workload since serving breakfast in the classroom. Only 3% of the responses to that question indicated teachers’ workload had increased since breakfast in the classroom was implemented.

More than half (52%) of respondents noted a decrease in absenteeism associated with breakfast in the classroom, while 47% indicated no change in absenteeism and only 1% noted an increase.

**Schools with School breakfast program without Breakfast in the Classroom**

Sixty nine percent (69%) of respondents cited working in a school with a breakfast program in which meals were not served in the classroom. Of these, 46% cited loss of instructional time as the main perceived barrier to serving breakfast in their classroom, and another 35% indicated mess a perceived barrier.

When respondents from schools with a SBP but no BIC were asked if they would be supportive of BIC, 55% indicated they would be supportive while 45% responded they would not.

Respondents supportive of BIC were asked what they perceived as a barrier for implementing BIC and 38% cited loss of instructional time and 26% cited mess.

Among respondents who would not support BIC 50% indicated loss of instructional time as a perceived barrier for implementation of BIC while 38% indicated mess as a stumbling block to serving breakfast in the classroom.

A summary of the responses are located in Table 1 and 2.
Table 1: Schools with a School Breakfast Program with and without BIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seen students hungry?</td>
<td>Yes: 97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you support SBP*?</td>
<td>Yes: 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you serve BIC*?</td>
<td>Yes: 31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, are you supportive of BIC?</td>
<td>Yes: 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main barrier to BIC</td>
<td>Loss of teachable time: 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mess: 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of support: 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost: 3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Schools with a School Breakfast Program with BIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main barrier to BIC</td>
<td>Loss of instructional time: 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mess: 33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No barrier: 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student academic performance</td>
<td>Improved: 77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change: 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior</td>
<td>Improved: 68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change: 32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student mood</td>
<td>Improved: 85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change: 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ work load</td>
<td>Improved: 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change: 82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worse: 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>Less: 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change: 47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More: 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* SBP= School Breakfast Program; BIC= Breakfast in the Classroom
Schools that do not offer a breakfast program

Almost all survey responders from schools that did not have a school breakfast program indicated they had seen students coming to school feeling hungry (94%). The majority (94%) would support a school breakfast program in their schools and an equal number indicated they would support breakfast in the classroom.

When respondents from schools with no SBP were asked about perceived barriers associated with BIC, 39% cited loss of instructional time as the main stumbling block to serving breakfast in the classroom. A third cited mess as a barrier and 10% of respondents indicated lack of support for the program as barriers. Other reasons cited included staff scheduling changes and cost of running the program.

Table 3: Schools with no breakfast program (no SBP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentages *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seen students hungry?</td>
<td>Yes: 94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you support SBP*?</td>
<td>Yes: 94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Would you support BIC*?| Yes: 94%  
                          | No: 6%               |
| Main barrier to BIC?   | Loss of teachable time: 39%  
                          | Mess: 33%            
                          | Lack of support: 10%  |

* SBP = School Breakfast Programs; BIC= Breakfast in the Classroom.
Summary

Teachers from schools with and without a school breakfast program are witnessing hungry children coming to school. Almost everyone who completed the survey regardless of the presence of a SBP in their school was supportive of school breakfast programs.

Opinions about breakfast in the classroom differed.

- Among respondents from schools that do not offer a school breakfast programs (no SBP), 94% indicated strong support for breakfast in the classroom.
- Slightly more than half of the respondents from schools with a SBP but no BIC would be supportive of breakfast in the classroom.

A widely held perception about breakfast in the classroom is that it will contribute to loss of instructional time and/or create too much food waste and be messy. This survey compared responses from respondents from schools with a SBP and without a SBP and furthermore, compared responses from schools with BIC and without BIC.

The survey findings reveal a correlation between teachers’ main perceived barriers to BIC and the presence of a breakfast program or breakfast served in the classroom in their schools.

- Loss of instruction time was cited as less of a barrier by respondents from schools with a SBP, compared to respondents from schools that did not offer a SBP.

- Loss of instructional time was cited as less of a barrier by respondents from schools that offered breakfast in the classroom, compared to respondents from schools that did not serve breakfast in the classroom.

These findings seem to indicate that while instructional time is an issue to consider when implementing BIC, teachers from schools with a SBP or teachers who are actively involved in offering breakfast in their classroom view loss of instructional time as less of a barrier than teachers who do not have breakfast in their classroom. The perception that breakfast in the classroom will negatively affect instructional time seems to be greater among respondents from schools with either no SBP or no BIC. Conversely, the perception that breakfast in the classroom will interfere with instructional time seems to be less of a concern to teachers who serve breakfast in their classrooms.

Other benefits associated with offering breakfast to school-age children are evident to teachers according to survey findings. Results indicate an overwhelming majority have experienced improvement in certain aspects of the school environment in part due to
school breakfast, such as improved academic performance, better behavior, better mood and less class disruptions. Furthermore, absenteeism which has the potential to affect the quality of instruction was shown to improve when breakfast was served in the classroom. Interestingly, survey responses indicate that teachers’ workload has either improved or not changed in association with breakfast served in the classroom.

**Recommendations**

These survey findings demonstrate a gap between perceived and real barriers related to breakfast in the classroom among school staff. From this survey, results indicated that in the presence of a breakfast program (regardless of where it is served), teachers’ perceptions about breakfast in the classroom are more favorable compared to teachers from schools without a school breakfast program. This is particularly true as it relates to the potential issue of loss of instructional time related to offering breakfast in the classroom.

To minimize the gap between perceived and real barriers associated with BIC among teachers and other school staff, it might be helpful to:

- create a network or a directory of schools with BIC as a resource for schools without BIC to foster sharing of experiences
- collect BIC success stories and share them with schools across the state
- disseminate other BIC resources to schools across the state.
- collect details about how teachers in schools that have BIC minimize loss of instructional time
- collect information about how teachers use the time when breakfast is being served and eaten
- collect information about how classrooms deal with food waste, etc.
School Breakfast Program (SBP) in School?

- **YES SBP (79%)**
  - What do you *perceive* as the main stumbling block to serving breakfast in the classroom?
    - 29% loss of instructional time
    - 55% mess

- **NO SBP (21%)**
  - Supportive of BIC?
    - 94% YES
  - 39% loss of instructional time
  - 33% mess

**Teachers Working in School with a SBP**

Do you currently serve breakfast in your classroom?

- **YES (31%)**
  - What do you *perceive* as the main stumbling block to serving breakfast in the classroom?
    - 36% loss of instructional time
    - 33% mess
    - ~6% no barrier

- **NO (69%)**
  - Would you support breakfast in the classroom?
    - **YES (55%)**
      - What do you *perceive* as the main stumbling block to serving breakfast in the classroom?
        - 38% loss of instructional time
        - 26% mess
    - **NO (45%)**
      - 50% loss of instructional time
      - 38% mess
# Glossary of acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>Breakfast in the Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPI</td>
<td>Department of Public Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBP</td>
<td>School Breakfast Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UWEX</td>
<td>University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEAC</td>
<td>Wisconsin Educational Association Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>