Wisconsin School Breakfast Survey
Final Report
2007

UW – Extension, Cooperative Extension
Family Living Program

Heather Harvey, MHSc

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Executive Summary

Almost 200 public and private school food service directors across the state of Wisconsin completed an online survey in September of 2006. The survey consisted of questions about school breakfast programs. Since the state of Wisconsin serves school breakfast to less than three out of every ten low-income students who eat school lunch, and foregoes nearly 15 million in Federal funds, as a result, each year (Food Research and Action Center, 2005), both the state of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and nutritionists with the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension’s Family Living Program were interested in finding out why Wisconsin schools seem to be slow to implement school breakfast programs. This is the second study conducted jointly by Wisconsin DPI and UW-Extension to document any changes in findings from last year’s report. The attached report focuses on the findings from this year’s survey and highlights any similarities or differences from last year’s survey.

Of the schools that offer breakfast, approximately 75%, serve breakfast before school and in the cafeteria. Breakfast in the classroom is more popular at the elementary level, while other alternate serving methods are used at a similar rate among the different school levels. Approximately 10% of elementary and middle schools used non-traditional models exclusively, however, many schools appeared to use a combination of both types of service models. Findings are similar to last year, with over 35% using at least some non-traditional service method. There appears to be interest in alternate serving models for breakfast, with over a quarter trying grab n’ go breakfasts at some point during the school year.

The three main challenges to serving breakfast were similar across the three school levels; they include low participation, labor and benefits costs and busing. These are similar to the challenges expressed by schools last year. There were some differences noted between school levels, with busing schedules seemed to be more of a challenge at the younger grade levels, along with supervision and parental support. Stigma and student menu preference became larger issues with older students.

Overwhelmingly, all respondents perceived that principals, teachers and the school board were supportive of serving breakfast at school. At the elementary level, over 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these individuals were supportive of serving breakfast at school. It appears that most respondents felt principals were the most supportive group, while parents were the least supportive group.

Respondents tried a variety of initiatives to increase participation in their breakfast program including promotion within their school through menus, newsletters, posters etc., changing their menu, applying for a Kohl School Breakfast grant or educating students, parents or school personnel on the benefits of breakfast. These ideas and any resources needed were obtained mostly from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction or other food service directors. Few ideas or resources were obtained from online sources.

Recommendations based on the survey results to address the low School Breakfast Program participation rates are offered on page 13.
Wisconsin School Breakfast Survey Analyses

I. Introduction

Children who eat breakfast have a healthier overall diet compared to children who do not eat breakfast (Basiotis, 1999; Dwyer 1998). Whether it is at home or at school, children who eat breakfast have higher intakes of vitamins and minerals and a lower percentage of calories from fat in their diet compared to children who do not eat breakfast (Basiotis, 1999).

Children who participate in the School Breakfast Program (SBP), compared to children who eat breakfast at home or elsewhere, are more likely to meet minimal nutritional standards for magnesium, calcium, vitamin A, vitamin D, Thiamine (vitamin B1), Riboflavin (vitamin B2) and zinc (Nicklas, 1998). Furthermore, children who eat their morning meal at school are more likely to consume milk, fruit or fruit juice, grains and protein foods at breakfast (Nicklas, 1998; Gordon, 1995). Specifically when low-income children are considered, children who eat breakfast at school compared to those who eat at home or elsewhere, have overall healthier diets, increased intakes of fruit and milk, and a greater variety of food in their diet (Basiotis, 1999).

Wisconsin has had notoriously low participation by both school and students in the breakfast program for a number of years. For the 2005-2006 school year, out of every 100 low income students eating school lunch, 29 ate school breakfast, ranking Wisconsin last in the United States for low income student participation in the School Breakfast Program. In addition, only 58% of schools participate in the School Breakfast Program, compared to 83% nationally. While significant gains in participation have been noted in recent years, there is still room for improvement.

A number of barriers are presumed to exist that prevent both schools and students from participating in the SBP. Unfortunately, little data exists as to the extent that these barriers affect students’ or schools’ decision to participate in the SBP. In September 2005, to address this lack of information on why schools do not participate in the program, the UW-Extension, Cooperative Extension, Family Living Programs and the WI Department of Public Instruction, created a survey for food service directors to comment on how they currently offer breakfast, challenges to offering breakfast, and perceived support to offer breakfast at school. Findings revealed that the most schools cited that there was not enough time to serve breakfast, labor and benefits costs and busing schedules were challenges to serving breakfast. A full report is available online at http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/food/schoolbreakfast/general/research.cfm.

As a follow up to this preliminary survey, and as a means of tracking service methods, challenges to offering breakfast, and schools’ use of new resources, Wisconsin DPI and UW-Extension implemented a second survey in September 2006. The 2006 survey was based on the 2005 survey and contained 22 questions. It was made available online using Zoomerang software and services (Copyright 1999-2006 MarketTools, Inc.) to food service directors (FSD) across the state of WI. This report contains the findings and a comparison, where possible, to the 2005 results.
II. Sample and Methods

Eight hundred and ninety-six (896) food service authorities across the state of WI were contacted through electronic mail to participate in an online survey. The survey was sent out in early September 2006 and was completed during the following month. About 6.5% of emails were invalid, resulting in a total of 838 potential respondents. The FSD for each food service authority was asked to fill out the survey. Questions regarding the School Breakfast Program and morning nutrition focused on the preceding school year (2005-2006). Two reminder emails were sent out all food service authorities. Potential respondents were asked to click on or go to a link leading them to an online survey administered by Zoomerang. The survey consisted of 22 items. Most items asked for closed-ended responses, while a handful asked for comments, clarifications, or an opportunity to share personal contact information in an open-ended format.

One hundred and ninety-eight (198) FSDs responded to the survey, representing 24% of the original sample. FSDs for public schools (59% of respondents) tended to work for an entire school district while FSDs for private schools (35% of respondents) tended to work for a single school. We can assume that FSDs who represented an entire district responded to survey questions based on the experiences of multiple elementary, middle, and/or high schools. A total of 12 respondents were dropped from the analyses because they were Residential Child Care Institutions (RCCIs) and are mandated to offer breakfast to residents. This left 186 respondents, 22% of the initial sample contacted.

III. Results

Respondents were asked about the elementary, middle and high schools in their food service authority independently. As such, results are reported independently for each school level, allowing for comparison between school levels. Those respondents without an elementary, middle or high school in their food service authority were removed from analysis. This reduced the same size to elementary n=186, middle n=161, high n=132.

**How breakfast is served**

When only respondents with a particular level of school are considered, over 50% of schools have a school breakfast program in all of their schools. All high schools in a food service authority appear more likely to have breakfast than all the elementary schools; however, this may be due to there being fewer high schools than elementary schools in most food service authorities. A small percentage of districts offer the SBP in only some of their schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary n=186</th>
<th>Middle n=161</th>
<th>High n=132</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: The percent of schools serving breakfast**

Of the schools that offer breakfast, approximately 75%, serve breakfast before school and in the cafeteria. Breakfast in the classroom is more popular at the elementary level, while other alternate
serving methods are used at a similar rate among the different school levels. Almost a third of all respondents have tried to make their menus healthier, a potential outcome of the federally mandated School Wellness Policy legislation. Compared to last school year (2004-05) there has been a slight shift away from serving breakfast before school and in the cafeteria.

If you consider whether or not a school uses traditional breakfast serving methods, such as before school and in the cafeteria, to non-traditional breakfast service methods, it is easier to compare changes from year to year. Schools were categorized as either using a tradition or non-traditional service model or both, as defined in Table 2.

Table 2: Traditional and Non-traditional serving models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Non-Traditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast before school</td>
<td>Breakfast in Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast in Cafeteria</td>
<td>Universal Free Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elimination of Reduced Price meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grab and Go breakfast/Breakfast in a Bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid-morning Nutrition Break (serving a reimbursable breakfast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breakfast Cart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There appears to be small differences in the serving models offered in elementary, middle and high schools (Figure 1). Traditional models were still the most popular way to serve breakfast, with approximately two-thirds of each grade level using traditional serving models. Approximately 10% of elementary and middle schools used non-traditional models exclusively, which was higher than in high schools (4%). However, high schools appeared to be slightly more likely to use a combination of both types of service models compared to middle and elementary schools. Findings are similar to last year, with over 35% using at least some non-traditional service method.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents serving breakfast via traditional and non-traditional serving methods by school level

![Figure 1: Percentage of respondents serving breakfast via traditional and non-traditional serving methods by school level](image)
Challenges to serving breakfast

Schools were asked to select all of the challenges that they face from a list of choices. The three main challenges to serving breakfast were similar across the three school levels; they include low participation, labor and benefits costs and busing. Low participation was the greatest challenge with 45% of high schools expressing this as a challenge. Over 40% of all school levels cited labor and benefits costs as a challenge. While busing schedules were the number one and number two challenge of elementary and middle schools, with 46% and 41% selecting this option, respectively. These are similar to the challenges expressed by schools last year.

There were small differences in the percentage of respondents who indicated certain challenges. The following small differences existed between elementary, middle, and high school respondents (Figure 2):

- Busing schedules seemed to be more of a challenge at the younger grade levels. In fact, it appears there may be a trend toward busing being cited less often as a challenge when comparing elementary to middle to high school responses. This is similar to last year’s findings.
- Middle and high school respondents expressed slightly more often that “Not enough time” was a challenge for them compared to elementary school respondents.
- Elementary school respondents were slightly more likely to indicate “parent support” as a challenge compared to middle and high school respondents.
- The percentage of respondents indicating “Student menu preferences” as a challenge increased from elementary to middle to high school.
- Similarly, the percentage of respondents indicating “Stigma” as a challenge increased slightly from elementary to middle to high school.
- Supervision became less of a challenge as students became older as reported by high school respondents.

While the differences in the challenges expressed by elementary, middle, and high school respondents may not be statistically significant, they do point to trends that could be helpful when tailoring breakfast programs to specific grade levels.
Figure 2: Challenges faced by respondents to serving school breakfast by level of school

Perceived Support for the School Breakfast Program

Respondents were asked to respond to the statement “In my school/agency, I feel the following people are supportive of serving breakfast at school” with their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale. “Strongly agree” and “agree” are reported together as “agree” and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” are reported as “disagree”. Figure 3a-c.

Overwhelmingly, all respondents perceived that principals, teachers and the school board were supportive of serving breakfast at school. At the elementary level, over 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these individuals were supportive of serving breakfast at school. Perceived support appeared to decline as students aged, however, this was not due to more respondents disagreeing with the statement, but rather indicating they did not know individuals level of support. It appears that most respondents felt principals were the most supportive group, while parents were the least supportive group Figure 3a-c.
Figure 3: The percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed that they felt people were supportive of serving breakfast, at different school levels.

a. Teachers

b. Principals

c. Parents
Interest in alternate breakfast serving methods
Interest in alternative serving methods for breakfast is high, with over 30% of respondents interested in universal free breakfast and grab n’ go breakfast (Figure 4). These percentages are similar to last year or a slight bit higher, indicating an increase in awareness and acceptance of these alternative serving models. Approximately a quarter of respondents were not interested in any of the alternative serving models listed.

Figure 4: Percent of schools interested in alternative methods to serve breakfast.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Breakfast</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Free</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elimination of Red. Price</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grab n' Go</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-morning break</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast Cart</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthier items</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Efforts to increase participation
In the past school year, over half (54%) of respondents promoted the breakfast program within their school through menus, newsletters, posters etc. in an effort to increase participation. A slightly lower percentage (45%) changed their menu while, just over a quarter applied for a Kohl School Breakfast grant from DPI (27%) or educated students, parents or school personnel on the benefits of breakfast (26%). A very small percentage made alterations to the structure of the school day, such as changing the bus schedule or the amount of time for breakfast, to better accommodate breakfast, suggesting that these changes, albeit more effective, are more difficult to accomplish.

When asked if they had tried an alternate way to serve breakfast, even just temporarily, a quarter of respondents (26%) indicated that they had tried serving grab n’ go breakfasts at their school. Other alternative serving methods were not tried very often.
Schools were asked where they got the ideas and/or resources to increase participation in the breakfast program and the most common method was through talking to another school (41%), followed by print materials (33%), talking to a DPI staff (29%) or in-person training by DPI (28%). Answers to this question indicate schools reliance on DPI for technical expertise and support in the area of school breakfast. Online resources also were not the most popular way of finding resources or getting ideas.

During the 2005-2006 school year, a website specific to the Wisconsin School Breakfast Program was launched and promoted at various events. One third of respondents had visited the website during the 2005-2006 school year. Of these, the most popular features were fact sheets on the breakfast program, links to other websites and promotional resources.

Support needed
Only 6% of respondents felt that they did not need any help to increase participation in their breakfast program, indicating a great need for support for schools. Respondents felt that menu ideas and promotional resources for parents, students and school personnel would be most helpful to increasing their SBP participation. Respondents were also interested in student surveys regarding the SBP.

Limitations
- **Response rate**
  24% of persons initially contacted provided useable data, which is a reasonable response rate for this survey format. However, those respondents who completed the survey may have been biased in one way or another or more interested in the issue than non-respondents.

- **“Some” responses to items addressing the availability of School Breakfast Programs**
  Respondents who indicated “some” of their elementary, middle schools or high schools had a SBP were not given the opportunity to indicate exactly how many or what percentage of schools in their districts offered these options. Thus, there is no way to gauge the magnitude of a “some” response (i.e., Does it mean most or only one school in the district?)

V. Conclusions
- Few schools used non-traditional serving models exclusively to serve breakfast, though a quarter to a third used a combination of traditional and non-traditional models.
- Schools seem interested in alternative serving methods however.
- The main challenges to serving breakfast are low participation, labor and benefits costs and busing.
- There are some differences in challenges to offering breakfast in elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Schools felt that principals and school boards were the most supportive of serving breakfast at school.
- Schools have tried a number of things to increase participation in their SBP, the most common being promotional, educational or changing menu items. Few were able to alter the structural barriers they listed as challenges to serving breakfast.
- DPI is seen as a primary resource for support, technical assistance and resources regarding the School Breakfast Program.
VI. Recommendations

- Because low participation was one of the main challenges to serving breakfast, it would seem to be reasonable to talk to or survey students as to why or why they do not participate in the School Breakfast Programs. Schools, UW-Extension and DPI should partner on this initiative.

- Schools should continue to explore alternatives to the traditional sit down, cafeteria school breakfast program. DPI and UW-Extension should build on the support for grab n’ go breakfasts and universally free breakfasts and help schools to learn more about, pilot test, and administer these options. Other alternative methods should still be promoted, but with more emphasis on the grab n’ go and universal free options.

- Similar to last year, different marketing and problem-solving strategies must be used at different grade levels to increase SBP participation in those schools.
  - Involve the parents of elementary school-aged children in the planning and decision-making of a SBP.
  - Focus on addressing the busing schedule challenges for elementary and middle school-aged children. If changes to busing schedules are impossible, consider offering breakfast in the classroom.
  - As children get older, it is more important to focus on reducing or obliterating any stigma of participating in a SBP. Offering universal free breakfast is one solution to reducing stigma.
  - As children get older, there should be greater focus on their menu preferences in a SBP. Involving older students in the menu selection may help to increase their buy-in and participation in a school breakfast program.

- Emphasis should be on helping schools remove or deal with the structural barriers to serving breakfast such as busing, lack of time and lack of supervision at the elementary level. Alternative serving methods, such as grab n’ go and classroom breakfast are one way to address these, but there are other solutions as well.

- Training, support and technical assistance should promote face to face and phone learning opportunities. DPI and UW-Extension should look at ways to bring schools together where they can share ideas and learn from one another.
VII. References


VIII. GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

FSD – Food Service Directors

RCCI – Residential Childcare Institution

SBP – School Breakfast Program