

**Focus Group Discussions with
Elementary School Foodservice Directors,
Teachers, and Parents Regarding the
School Breakfast Program**



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Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

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**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOODSERVICE
DIRECTORS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS REGARDING THE SCHOOL
BREAKFAST PROGRAM**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1966, the federally sponsored School Breakfast Program (SBP) has been operating in public and nonprofit private schools, providing nutritious and healthy morning meals for school-aged children. Even though the benefits of the SBP are well documented, many of America's neediest children are not participating. During the 2003-2004 school year, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) served 28.4 million children daily with 16.5 million receiving free or reduced price lunch. During the same school year, the SBP served 8.4 million children daily with 6.9 receiving free or reduced price breakfasts. Far fewer students are taking advantage of the SBP as compared to the NSLP. Previously conducted research has provided some insights into the many issues of why so many children are not taking advantage of the SBP. However, for programmatic changes to be effectively undertaken so that more children participate, a thorough understanding of stakeholders' (foodservice directors, teachers, and parents) perceptions of the SBP must be obtained. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school foodservice directors, teachers, and parents of elementary school students in Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois as to advantages, disadvantages, and barriers to children participating in the SBP.

Focus group discussions were conducted with three separate groups of participants: school foodservice directors who were responsible for foodservice in elementary schools,

elementary school teachers, and parents of elementary school children. Participants were recruited from three elementary schools, one in each of the states of Utah, New Jersey, and Illinois. These three states were selected from a list of 10 states identified in the *Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) 2004 School Breakfast Scorecard* as reaching 34 or fewer low-income students with school breakfast per 100 students reached with school lunch.

In addition to focus group discussions, a short questionnaire was developed for each of the groups (directors, teachers, parents) to obtain their opinions regarding the SBP and demographic information. The questionnaires were completed by participants prior to beginning focus group discussions.

Questionnaire Results

Directors (n=24) were asked, “*What would you say is the number one barrier to student participation in your school’s breakfast program?*” Answers were classified into four main barriers. Tied for the number one barrier was lack of time given for students to eat (29%) and lack of parental support for/or understanding of the breakfast program (29%). Tied for the number two barrier was the busing schedule (21%) and lack of support from school administration (21%).

Of the teachers (n=31) who completed the questionnaire, ninety percent had never participated in the SBP. Eighty-four percent of teachers rated the breakfast program as fair to good. Forty-two percent rated the food as 'okay,' 29% rated the food as good, and 16% stated they didn't know. The majority of teachers (77%) rated the location and atmosphere of the breakfast program as good to very good with 81% stating the school foodservice staff is nice and very friendly. According to 55% of teachers, adequate time is allowed for students to complete

their meal and 19% stated that too much time was given. Sixty-eight percent of teachers, seldom to never, encourage their students to eat the school breakfast.

A total of 16 (94%) of the 17 parents who participated in the discussion groups completed the questionnaire. Seventy-five percent of parents reported that their child never eats breakfast at school. The majority of parents (63%) affirmed that it is very important to have a school breakfast program with 25% stating it was somewhat important. Sixty-eight percent of parents responded that they never encourage their child to participate in the breakfast program. Parents rated the breakfast program as great (6%), good (25%), fair (13%), poor (13%), and I don't know (43%). A large percentage of parents also indicated that they could not evaluate the food (43%) or the location and atmosphere (44%) in which the breakfast program was offered.

Results of Focus Group Discussions

During focus group discussions, participants were asked, “*What are the advantages to students participating in their school's breakfast program?*” Parents believe the greatest advantage is that the SBP simply provides breakfast to those students who need it. This is reflected in statements such as “*I think another advantage too, kind of goes in what's better than nothing*” and “*It puts food in their stomachs.*”

Directors and teachers were very positive regarding the eating environment and made statements such as “*It gives a chance for the kids to see a warm heart and happy face with those lunch personnel,*” “*Socializing. They get to sit down and talk a little bit before school. You know it's not an academic situation, they can just sit and socialize,*” and “*It provides a calmer atmosphere when they're at school.*”

Participants were asked, “*What are the disadvantages to students participating in their school's breakfast program?*” The majority of discussion from teachers and parents referred to

poor meal quality and nutritional content of breakfast foods offered in the SBP. They identified high sugar content of cereals and fruit juices, high carbohydrate and fat content of breakfast foods in general, and the low quality of food items used for the breakfast meal as disadvantages to participating in the SBP. Foodservice directors identified concern with meal quality due to their inability to offer a wide variety of food items on the breakfast menu, due to limited budgets.

Participants were asked, “*What are the barriers to students participating in their school’s breakfast program?*” Teachers and parents believe the low socioeconomic stigma of the program that is attached to students who participate in the SBP is a barrier to the SBP. Foodservice directors did not identify stigma as a barrier, but identified stigma as a disadvantage. The primary barrier discussed by foodservice directors was lack of school staff support for the SBP. Directors are faced with the challenge of implementing and/or operating a SBP with opposition from school principals, school administration, teachers, and custodians. Statements such as “*Until the mandate came, there was no way I was going to push a breakfast program without the cooperation from the principal and the staff;*” “*I would say an active discouragement (to participation in the SBP) of pay children in two of my elementary schools*” were viewed as a barriers by FSD.

Foodservice directors were asked what resources would assist and support their efforts in operating an SBP. All three director groups identified the need for legislative support in mandating breakfast programs, assistance from food manufacturers in supplying nutritious breakfast food items that meet breakfast program food based meal patterns, and access to “In-Class-Breakfast” program material such as that developed by the National Dairy Council.

Results reported here from focused discussions with foodservice directors, teachers, and parents confirm many previous findings from research involving the SBP, and provide some new

insights. All groups were well aware of research showing that children perform better academically and on tests when they eat breakfast. However, only teachers discussed in-depth other benefits for children eating breakfast such as decreased risks of childhood obesity, improved nutritional intake, and better physical health.

Many parents stated that they did not realize their child could participate in the SBP since he/she did not qualify for free or reduced-price meals. SBP marketing materials should emphasize that the SBP is available to all students regardless of socioeconomic status. Parents should be viewed as one of the SBP's primary customers. Positive aspects of the SBP need to be marketed directly to parents with efforts made to have parents occasionally observe and/or participate with their child in the SBP. Talking points about the positive aspects of the SBP should be developed and distributed to teachers and other school staff to assist them in promoting the SBP to students and parents for the purpose of improving participation.

Other aspects of the SBP that need to be addressed are disadvantages identified by teachers and parents that foods offered in the SBP are of low quality and poor nutritional value. Involving teachers, parents, and students in menu planning and product taste tests are approaches to help address this issue. Also, directors need to capitalize on opportunities to communicate and demonstrate to teachers and parents how school breakfast menus comply with nutritional guidelines mandated by the federal government. Providing samples of breakfast food items to students and teachers and offering food samples to parents at school open houses or parent-teacher conferences are other avenues to expose them to different breakfast food items that are served.

A barrier to the SBP is its reputation for being a program that services only the low-income and disadvantaged students. If participation from all socioeconomic groups is going to

improve, efforts must be made to promote the SBP as a program that benefits and welcomes all students. In addressing concerns of the breakfast meal period being scheduled too early and before school starts, some schools have begun offering breakfast as a packaged ready-to-go meal to be eaten in the classroom.

Finally, in order for SBPs to reach their full potential, support from school administrators, local and state officials, and federal decision makers is important. Support must also be garnered from food manufacturers to produce healthy, convenient, and packaged breakfast foods that students enjoy.