

Bound Brook Nurse Boosts Breakfast After the Bell

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School nurse Sally Hoben had a nagging feeling she just couldn't shake off. Kids were coming to school hungry and she knew she had to do something about it.

Far too few students were taking advantage of the district's school breakfast program. In a town where 71 percent of students lived in low-income households, only 16 percent ate breakfast at school during the 2012-2013 school year.

"Kids would come in complaining of stomach aches and I would give them graham crackers paid out of my own pocket," she recalls.

Concerned by the number of hungry students visiting her office and armed with data from Advocates for Children of New Jersey's (ACNJ) Annual School Breakfast report, Hoben decided to discuss the issue with school leaders.

"We were the only town in Somerset County on [ACNJ's school breakfast underachievers'] list and the numbers were pretty startling," she says. Not only was the district failing to feed roughly 965 eligible students, it was also losing out on roughly \$300,000 in federal meal reimbursement funds.

"We had this opportunity to feed kids, be reimbursed for it and not leave money on the table. I said, let me start by asking some questions, find out what the feasibility was in doing breakfast in the classroom," she said.

By changing the way breakfast had traditionally been served from before school when students



Sally Hoben, school nurse at Bound Brook High School with Superintendent Daniel Gallagher.

have not yet arrived to the first few minutes of the school day, student participation soars in this federally-funded program. After meeting with key staff members and making a strong case about the benefits of feeding students during school hours, she hit a roadblock.

"I was given the message to cease and desist," Hoben laughed. Loss of instructional time, clean up and cost were the most common concerns.

Still, through her advocacy, the school nurse managed to find supporters, including Superintendent Daniel Gallagher, who at the time was the principal at Bound Brook High School.

"Sally came to me and said, we have a lot of students who are hungry and studies show, if you feed kids before school, their academics are going

to rise, their attendance is going to be better and they're not going to be late to school," he recalls.

Gallagher was sold. The following year, he became assistant superintendent and "it became much easier to get [breakfast after the bell] done," Hoben says.

The key was addressing concerns from staff members and creating a well-thought-out plan. They determined that breakfast in the classroom was the best approach across all schools in the district. Every morning, food service staff pack breakfasts into insulated containers and deliver them to each classroom. When students arrive to class, they grab their breakfast, get seated and usually finish eating within the first 10 minutes of school. At Bound Brook, clean-up is simple. When children are finished eating, the waste is put into garbage bags, which are then left in the hallway for the custodial staff to pick up.

Hoben's persistence has paid off. Now, more than 1,000 children are eating breakfast on any given school day - that's about 82 percent of eligible students. In addition, because of the high percentage of kids eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch, Bound Brook is able to provide morning meals to all students without incurring additional costs.

Last year, the school district even won first prize in New Jersey's Food for Thought School Breakfast Challenge, beating out 60 districts for significantly boosting its participation rate by 564 percent between September and May of the 2013-2014 school year.

According to Hoben, the biggest reward is knowing that all students now have to the opportunity to have a nutritious start to their day. Attendance has improved and the rate of kids arriving late to school

has been cut in half. "I even had one teacher comment, 'I've never seen so many students wide awake and ready to work.' It's been very positive," the school nurse added.

As the eyes and ears of student wellness at the school, Hoben encourages her peers to join the breakfast after the bell campaign.

"Nurses know the need. They hear what students ate for breakfast, who's hungry, how many come in office with abdominal pain when it's really hunger," she said. "Breakfast after the bell is do-able and school nurses can play a key role in selling the idea to their administration."

Fresh Ways to Serve Breakfast

Breakfast in the Classroom

Food services staff members pack meals into insulated containers for each classroom and deliver to the classrooms before the first bell rings. Students come into the class, grab their meal and sit down to eat. After, they dispose of their trash for custodial staff to collect.

Grab-and-Go Breakfast

Breakfast carts are stationed at the entrance of the school or in other high traffic areas. Upon entering the building, children "grab" a nutritious breakfast and "go" to their first period class.

Second Chance Breakfast

Often, teenagers are not hungry when they arrive to school. Sometimes before lunch, though, their stomachs start to rumble. Serving breakfast after the first period, commonly known as "Second Chance Breakfast," allows more kids to eat when they are hungry. Meals are usually offered in "grab and go" style in between classes.