

# The Need to Increase Participation in Delaware's School Breakfast Program

By Sonya Davis

## SUMMARY

- Delaware is one of only 12 states in which food insecurity increased the last few years, from 6 percent in 2003 - 2005 to 9.4 percent in 2006-2008.<sup>1</sup> This means that 9.4 percent of Delawareans do not have access to adequate food because of their lack of resources.<sup>2</sup>
- Children in food insecure households are at higher risk for health and developmental problems than children in otherwise similar food-secure households.<sup>3</sup>
- Increasing participation in Delaware's school breakfast program would be an effective way to reduce hunger, improve health and also improve the academic performance of children in the state. Universal breakfast, available to all students in a school at no cost, is the most effective strategy to increase participation.
- Delaware policy makers should conduct outreach on school breakfast and expand the successful universal breakfast approach in a number of Delaware school districts so that more children can benefit from a healthy breakfast before school.

## The School Breakfast Program

The school breakfast program was established as a pilot program through the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 and was permanently authorized in 1975. Schools are not federally mandated to participate in the school breakfast program. Any public school, nonprofit private school, charter school, or residential child care institution may choose to participate in the school breakfast program, which is funded and administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The further regulation and administration of the school breakfast program is left to the states.

Delaware is one of only nine states that does not specifically provide a level of breakfast funding or have a breakfast mandate for schools.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, a large number of Delaware's schools are participating in the school breakfast program, with 100 percent of public schools and 75 percent of public charter schools offering school breakfast.<sup>5</sup> Any student attending a school that offers the program can purchase breakfast. Some children, however, are unable to afford even a reduced-price meal and do not qualify for a free meal. Some who qualify for assistance will go without a free breakfast because they are afraid of being perceived as poor. Breakfast for all children in school at no cost solves both of these problems.

## Some Children Cannot Afford Breakfast

A healthy breakfast is essential for all children. School breakfast provides at least a quarter of the daily recommended levels for key nutrients that children need and is required to provide no more than one-third of calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. The sidebox explains eligibility and costs for low-income families; it is important to note that some families who are eligible for a reduced cost breakfast still cannot afford to pay.



## About Nemours Health & Prevention Services

Nemours Health & Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida. The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. One of our initial areas of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* prescription for a healthy lifestyle:

- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Spend no more than two hours per day in front of a screen (TV, video games, recreational computer time).
- Get at least one hour of physical activity per day.
- Drink almost no sugary beverages like soda and sports drinks.

# The Need to Increase Delaware's School



## Eligibility and Funding for the School Breakfast Program

All children are able to purchase breakfast in schools participating in the school breakfast program. Based on family income, children fall into one of three groups for the 2011-2012 school year:

1. Free, children eat at no cost: children qualify from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG), or \$28,665 for a family of four;
2. Reduced, children are charged no more than 30 cents per breakfast: children qualify from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the FPG, or less than \$40,793 for a family of four; and
3. Paid, children eat at a cost determined by the school: in Delaware it is an average of \$0.77 for elementary children and \$0.87 for middle and high school students in those schools that charge for breakfast.<sup>5</sup>

For the 2010-2011 school year, schools were reimbursed \$1.46 per free breakfast served, \$1.16 per reduced priced breakfast, and \$0.26 per paid breakfast. Schools where at least 40 percent of the lunches served were free or at a reduced price may qualify for extra "severe need" reimbursements of \$0.28 per free or reduced price breakfast served.

## Benefits of Eating Breakfast Go Beyond Nutrition

Although eating a nutritious breakfast is clearly important for children's health, the benefits of breakfast for school children extend beyond good nutrition. According to the USDA, low-income school aged children who eat school breakfast have a better overall diet quality than those who eat breakfast elsewhere or do not eat breakfast at all.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, breakfast impacts academic performance and students' behavior:

- Eating breakfast helps math, reading, and standardized test scores.<sup>7</sup>
- Breakfast helps students pay attention in class, have better cognitive function, and improves memory.<sup>8</sup>
- Consuming breakfast improves children's performance on demanding mental tasks and improves their reaction to frustration.<sup>9</sup>
- Serving breakfast in the classroom can help reduce tardiness and absences and helps children behave better.<sup>10</sup>

Breakfast eating may also reduce a child's risk of overweight and obesity. Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health crises facing the nation. In Delaware, 37 percent of children are overweight or obese. Recent findings on the relationship between breakfast and overweight suggest that Delaware policy makers could help address the childhood obesity problem by ensuring a nutritious breakfast in school.

- A national study of U.S. school students found that school breakfast participation was associated with a significantly lower BMI.<sup>11</sup>
- Food-insecure girls participating in federally funded school meal programs have a lower risk of overweight.<sup>12</sup>
- The school breakfast program is shown to establish improved eating habits in children, reducing the percentage of calories consumed from fat.<sup>13</sup>

## Universal Breakfast: An Effective Strategy to Reach Children in Need

Over 46 percent of Delaware's public school children qualify for free or reduced priced meals.<sup>14</sup> Some of these children are not able to eat breakfast, either because of the cost or the stigma of participating in a program perceived as being solely for low-income children. On average, Delaware has 40 percent eligible free participation in school breakfast, 28 percent eligible reduced participation, and 16 percent paid participation.<sup>15</sup>

A universal school breakfast program that offers meals to all children regardless of income is an effective strategy that states and districts across the country have used to improve access to breakfast for hungry children. Current average participation in school breakfast in Delaware is much higher in schools or districts in which a universal breakfast program is available. Woodbridge School District—with a highly successful universal school breakfast program—leads the state in participation with 57 percent of its poorest students receiving

# ase Participation in Breakfast Program



breakfast on an average day.<sup>15</sup> Woodbridge, Capital, Laurel, and Milford districts currently provide breakfast to all students. A number of districts also provide universal breakfast in certain schools, either in elementary schools or in schools with high poverty rates. Caesar Rodney, Christina, Colonial, Red Clay, and Lake Forest districts have taken this step.

## Legislative Action in Delaware

House Resolution 24 of 2009 required the Department of Education to convene a committee to study the implementation of a statewide universal breakfast program in all Delaware's public schools. As a result, the Universal Breakfast Study committee submitted a feasibility study to the General Assembly in May of 2010.

The committee proposed the following recommendations:

1. Provide districts and schools with guidelines for schools on ways to enhance breakfast participation;
2. Address conditions, other than finances, that create barriers to school breakfast participation;
3. Increase awareness of current breakfast programs to families and community members;
4. Identify a sustainable funding mechanism for universal breakfast.

House Bill 401 passed out of the Education Committee during the 2010 legislative session. The bill created the Delaware Universal Breakfast Fund, with the intent of providing "a secure ongoing funding source for universal school breakfast in Delaware in order to

provide a healthy breakfast to all students in public and charter schools, regardless of family income." The bill required all schools to offer free breakfast to all students. The bill did not pass before the end of the legislative session in June 2010.

## Best Practices and Policies in Other States and Localities

### Maryland Meals for Achievement Breakfast Pilot Program (MMFA)

The MMFA is a research-based pilot program that provides a classroom breakfast for all students in a given school, with currently 29 schools participating. The program, studied by Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School has reported impressive findings from Year 3 (2001) of the program: Composite Index scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program improved significantly more in the MMFA schools than in a matched group of comparison schools. Tardiness decreased by 8 percent; Suspensions decreased by 36 percent; and approximately 96 percent of staff said the program should continue in their school.<sup>18</sup>

### Cincinnati Public Schools

In August 2010, the Cincinnati public school system started offering universal school breakfast in all schools. The Cincinnati elementary schools have had a universal breakfast program for the past six years, this year the program was expanded to high school students. On the first day of the program, students showed up an hour early for school to get breakfast. The program garnered immediate good reviews from parents, teachers, and administrators.<sup>19</sup> In the first month of operation, Cincinnati schools increased breakfast participation by 1,000 students.<sup>20</sup>

## The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 updates the school breakfast program, including a requirement that schools inform families about the breakfast program. In addition, there are new grants for school breakfast programs. Grants to state educational agencies shall not exceed \$2 million per year and sub-grants to schools shall not exceed \$10,000 per year (each school is allowed only two years of funding). Grants can be used to (a) establish, promote or expand a school breakfast program which shall include a nutritional education component (b) extend the period of the school day during which breakfast is available at school (c) provide school breakfast to students during the school day or (d) for other appropriate purposes related to school breakfast.

The Act also creates a new universal meal option called "Community Eligibility." This option will allow schools in which at least 40 percent of students are directly certified for free meals to offer free meals to all students without collecting paper applications. The option would begin in three states chosen by the USDA in the 2011-2012 school year, with four additional states added in each of the subsequent two years, for a total of 11 states by 2014. In addition, the Act creates a demonstration project to use community survey data to establish eligibility rates in schools instead of paper applications.

Statewide universal breakfast is estimated to cost the state \$4.2 to \$4.7 million. If funds are not available for a statewide program, a pilot program in a targeted district or schools would permit Delaware to serve more of the neediest children and to determine the impact of universal breakfast on student participation and achievement.

252 Chapman Road  
 Christiana Building, Suite 200  
 Newark, Delaware 19702  
 302-444-9100 • 888-494-5252  
 email: nhps\_info@nemours.org  
 Nemours.org/growuphealthy

### Recommended Action Steps

- Delaware should launch a school breakfast outreach program, which should be developed, funded, and evaluated.
- The state should provide guidelines to districts and schools to eliminate non-financial barriers to breakfast participation, such as administrative support and transportation mandates.
- A universal school breakfast program should be piloted in a district with a high percentage of children eligible for free or reduced price meals.
- The pilot program should be evaluated, measuring both the impact on participation and the impact on student performance.
- If the pilot program outcomes are favorable, a universal school breakfast program should be phased in district by district, with the districts with the highest proportion of low-income children phased in first.



Printed on recycled paper

### Notes

1. United States Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service. (2009). Prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security by State, average 2006-08. Retrieved August 28, 2010 from the United States Department of Agriculture Web site: [http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/stats\\_graphs.htm#food\\_secure](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/stats_graphs.htm#food_secure).
2. Nord, M., Andrews, M., Carlson, S. (2009). Household Food Security in the United States, 2008. (Economic Research Report No.83). Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture.
3. Nord, M. (2009). ERS Report Summary: Food Insecurity in Households with Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics. (Economic Information Bulletin 56). Economic Research Service: United States Department of Agriculture.
4. Food Research and Action Center. (2009). School Breakfast Scorecard: School Year 2008-2009. Retrieved April 13, 2010 from the Food Research and Action Center Web site: <http://www.frac.org/pdf/breakfast09.pdf>.
5. Delaware Department of Education. (2010). Delaware School Lunch & Breakfast Prices – Full Price Meals: School Year 2009-2010 [Data File].
6. Basiotis, P.P., Lino, M., Anand, R.S. (2009). Eating breakfast greatly improves school children’s diet quality. (Nutrition Insight, 15). Center for Nutrition and Policy Promotion: United States Department of Agriculture.
7. Rampersaud, G.C., Pereira, M.A., Girard, B.L., Adams, J., Metzler, J.D. (2005). Breakfast habits, nutritional status, body weight, and academic performance in children and adolescents. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 105(5), 743-60.
8. Wesnes, K.A., Pincock, C., Richardson, D., Helm, G., Hails, S. (2003). Breakfast reduces declines in attention and memory over the morning in schoolchildren. *Appetite*, 41(3), 329-31. As cited in Food Research Action Center, Child Nutrition Fact Sheet: Breakfast for Learning. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from the Food Research Action Center Web site: <http://frac.org/pdf/breakfastforlearning.PDF>.
9. Bellisle, F. (2004). Effects of diets on behavior and cognition in children. *British Journal of Nutrition*, 92 (Suppl. 2), S227-S232. As cited in Food Research Action Center, Child Nutrition Fact Sheet: Breakfast for Learning. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from the Food Research Action Center Web site: <http://frac.org/pdf/breakfastforlearning.PDF>.
10. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2010). School Breakfast 101. Retrieved April 13, 2010 from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School Breakfast Program Web site: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/wischoolbreakfast/quick-hits/school-breakfast-101/>.
11. Gleason, P.M. & Dodd, A.H. (2009). School breakfast program but not school lunch program participation is associated with lower body mass index. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109 (2 Suppl. 1), S118-S128. As cited in Food Research Action Center, Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization/Number 1 (2010): How Improving Federal Nutrition Program Access and Quality Work Together to Reduce Hunger and Promote Healthy Eating. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from [http://frac.org/pdf/CNR01\\_qualityandaccess.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/CNR01_qualityandaccess.pdf).
12. Jones, S.J., Jahns, L., Laraia, B.A., & Haughton, B. (2003). Lower risk of overweight in school-aged food insecure girls who participate in food assistance: results from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 157(8), 780-784. As cited in Food Research Action Center, Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization/Number 1 (2010): How Improving Federal Nutrition Program Access and Quality Work Together to Reduce Hunger and Promote Healthy Eating. Retrieved August 27, 2010 from [http://frac.org/pdf/CNR01\\_qualityandaccess.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/CNR01_qualityandaccess.pdf).
13. Bhattacharya, J., Currie, J., & Haider, S.J. (2006). Breakfast of Champions?: The School Breakfast Program and the Nutrition of Children and Families. *Journal of Human Resources*, 41(3):445-466.
14. Delaware Department of Education. (2010). School District Student Eligibility Totals by Free, Reduced, Paid [Data File].
15. Delaware Department of Education. (2010). School District Student Participation Totals for October 2009 by Free, Reduced, Paid [Data File].
16. This estimate relies on a number of forecast assumptions.
17. These calculations were completed for the Seaford School District, which has the highest percentage of eligible children not currently served by a universal breakfast program. Delaware Department of Education, Universal School Breakfast Committee, Feasibility Study, May 28, 2010, 16-17.
18. Montgomery County Public Schools. (2010). Maryland Meals for Achievement. Retrieved September 1, 2010, from the Montgomery County Public Schools Web site: [http://www.msde.maryland.gov/MSDE/programs/schoolnutrition/meals\\_achieve.htm](http://www.msde.maryland.gov/MSDE/programs/schoolnutrition/meals_achieve.htm).
19. Price, B. (2010). Breakfast for everyone an early hit at CPS schools. Retrieved August 19, 2010 from [http://www.wcpo.com/dpp/news/region\\_central\\_cincinnati/downtown/breakfast-for-everyone-an-early-hit-at-cps-schools](http://www.wcpo.com/dpp/news/region_central_cincinnati/downtown/breakfast-for-everyone-an-early-hit-at-cps-schools).
20. Children’s Hunger Alliance & Cincinnati Public Schools. (2010). Expansion of School Breakfast for all Cincinnati Public School Students. Retrieved on September 21, 2010, from the Cincinnati Public Schools Web site: <http://www.cps-k12.org/media/releases/Sept10BrkExpand.pdf>.