

Universal Breakfast in the Classroom - A Simple Solution

Universal classroom breakfast (UCB) is catching on. This innovative model, which brings the academic and health benefits of breakfast to every child, provides a real educational boost to the classroom. That is why it's winning rave reviews from school administrators, teachers, food service staff, parents and children in established programs across the country. California school districts, like Cutler-Orosi, Folsom-Cordova, Modesto, Santa Rosa, and West Contra Costa, as well as districts in Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Oregon, have adopted UCB and are seeing excellent results, nutritionally and academically.

Why UCB? Classroom breakfast is a simple solution to a serious problem – too many children in California start their school day without a nutritious breakfast. Only a fraction of the low-income students who receive a free lunch every day is currently taking advantage of school breakfast. Many children, regardless of family income, come to school hungry, the result of such factors as parents' job demands and long commutes to school. Reasons for this low breakfast participation include: buses that arrive too late for breakfast, overcrowded cafeterias, tardiness, stigma and insufficient time to eat before class begins. All of these factors cause a problem: hungry children can't learn. UCB overcomes these barriers, and participation levels approach 100%. Thus, in California, **where more than a million low-income children don't get school breakfast**, UCB provides an opportunity that simply can't be ignored.

How does it work? The simplicity of the UCB model is key to its success - all children are offered a breakfast, at no charge, at their desks at the start of the school day. Meals are nutritious but simple, for example: milk, fresh California fruit or juice, and a bagged fortified muffin or breakfast sandwich. All children are eating, often along with their teacher, knitting into a tight classroom community, so there is no stigma. Classroom breakfast doesn't upset complicated busing schedules and leaves the cafeteria/multipurpose room free for other activities.

How will UCB impact the district's food service budget? Most districts use Provision 2 or 3 to offer universal free breakfast, eliminating the need to collect different payments, which simplifies things for children, families, and food service staff. Other districts have decided that the benefits of UCB easily justify the district's own investment. With such high participation, some districts find that UCB can pay for new equipment or more nutritious food.

What are the benefits? Research has firmly established the link between breakfast and academic achievement, so it is not surprising that when more students eat breakfast, the educational benefits mount. Evaluations have found that school breakfast dramatically improves student attentiveness, motivation and test scores. School breakfast also significantly reduces morning behavior problems and nurse visits, as well as tardiness and absences. Principals describe a "sense of calm" that permeates the morning. We've known for decades that school breakfast works – now, with UCB and other innovative models, we can be assured that many more children will start their school day ready to learn...all the way to lunch.

Are there other options? Definitely. Grab-n-go, second chance, and breakfast on the bus are other innovative models for boosting breakfast participation. Although classroom breakfast achieves the highest participation, other models may work better in particular schools.