

Free Breakfast for All

This New Jersey district ensures students focus on learning rather than hunger.

By Derek J. Jess, RSBA

During the administration of the spring semester tests in 2010, New Jersey's Perth Amboy School District implemented a free breakfast pilot program in one of its middle schools to help get the students in school earlier and to ensure that they had something to eat so they could concentrate better on the mandated state tests and therefore perform better.

The pilot program was a great success. Many students showed up early for breakfast, and teachers and administrators noticed that the students were more focused on the exam. During the program, participation steadily increased from 300 students to 1,100 students daily.

Traditionally, schools provide students with free meals through

a process that requires each student to complete a free and reduced-price meal application. Once verified, the students receive their meals in accordance with the verified application. Because 84% of the students in New Jersey's Perth Amboy School District are eligible for free and reduced-priced meals, many come to school hungry.

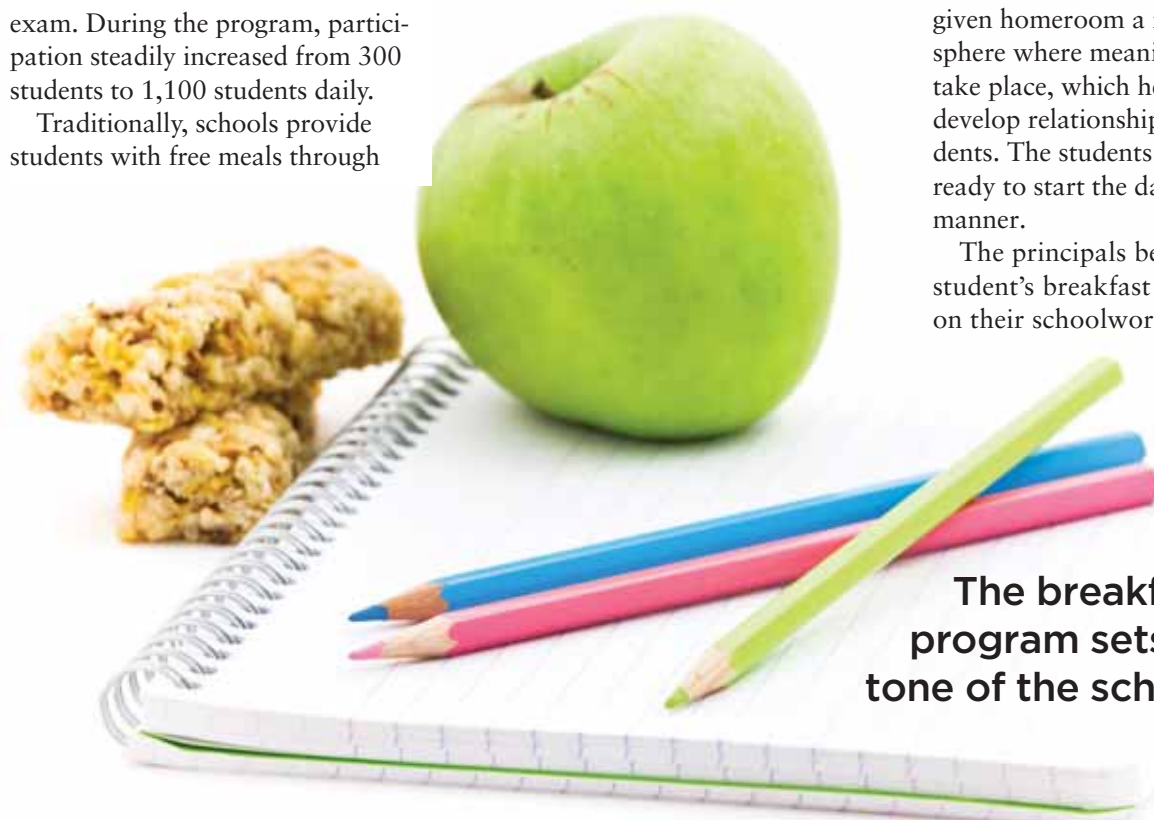
When our new food service director came on board, he immediately saw the need to provide our students with breakfast. Therefore, we decided to test the Free Breakfast for All program's success by providing

free breakfast to the district's almost 3,000 middle school students and preschool students as a pilot program during the 2010–2011 school year. The program could do nothing but benefit our students and their families.

Focus on Students

The project puts breakfast in every student's hands, regardless of their free and reduced status. The students eat in their classrooms during their homeroom period so they can interact with their teachers and classmates. Administrators and teachers believe that the breakfast program sets the tone of the school day. It has given homeroom a family-like atmosphere where meaningful discussions take place, which helps the teachers develop relationships with their students. The students are relaxed and ready to start the day in a positive manner.

The principals believe that giving student's breakfast helps them focus on their schoolwork. And because



The breakfast program sets the tone of the school day.

Table 1. Breakfast by the Numbers

Total Breakfasts Provided	Free Breakfasts Provided	Reimbursable Funds—Breakfast
FY10—523,745	FY10—424,628	FY10—\$884,691
FY11—883,649	FY11—650,587	FY11—\$1,306,412
FY12—1,218,757	FY12—893,801	FY12—\$1,851,009
FY13—1,162,139*	FY13—857,511*	FY13—\$1,770,911*

Note: In 2011, New Jersey stopped providing the state portion of reimbursement funds for the breakfast program. Amounts reimbursed are strictly from the federal government. *Due to Hurricane Sandy, our schools were closed for over two weeks, which resulted in 36,305 fewer breakfasts served during October and November 2012 as compared to the same period in 2011. This directly affected the reimbursement from the federal government. (The difference between the total breakfasts provided and free breakfasts provided is due to how the district reports our meals served.)

they are not hungry, they perform better in their classes and on the state tests, thus improving student achievement.

The number of student disciplinary issues has declined since students now eat in their homeroom instead of in the cafeteria. In addition, the schools are cleaner! The breakfast program has reduced the number of students carrying food to snack on during the day and depositing their trash throughout the building.

Everyone Wins

We believe this program can be replicated in other school districts, although it is most successful from a financial standpoint in districts with a high percentage of free and reduced applications. The additional cost to run this program is minimal since the cost of labor already exists. The cost of each meal (\$0.75) is low compared with the amount reimbursed by the federal government (\$1.85) and the amount in rebates (\$18,582 average) that the district receives from the company providing the breakfasts, depending on the number of breakfasts purchased each month.

The additional cost to run this program is minimal.

Since the inception of the program, the district has seen an average increase in several areas, illustrated in Table 1.

In a high-poverty district like Perth Amboy, students view school as a refuge from their surroundings; they sometimes spend as many as 10 hours per day in our facilities. And by providing these students with a free breakfast and lunch, we are ensuring that they are well-nourished and taken care of while they are in our charge.

The Free Breakfast for All program promotes healthy eating, keeps student in school, and enables them to focus on what children should be focusing on: learning.

It is about student performance and a healthy environment.

This program helps business officials see that their job is not just about the numbers, spending, and state aid. It is about student performance and a healthy environment, and going the extra mile to provide those in need with what they need to achieve and survive. A productive and healthy environment will help us populate our future with well-adjusted and highly productive adults.

Derek J. Jess, RSBA, is school business administrator/board secretary for the Perth Amboy Board of Education, Perth Amboy, New Jersey. He was a recipient of a 2011 Pinnacle of Achievement Award. Email: DJJESS@paps.net

Index of Advertisers

American Fidelity Assurance Co	page 3
AXA Equitable	page 20
CPI Qualified Plan Consultants, Inc.	page 40
DecisionInsite, LLC	page 32
Distech Controls Inc.	page 11
Grainger, Inc.	page 27
Horace Mann Insurance Co.	inside back cover
Lowe’s Companies	page 23
Office Depot.	page 5
Sungard K-12 Education.	page 33
Transfinder	page 14
Tyler Technologies	page 1
Virco Mfg Corp.	inside front cover, back cover
Weidenhammer	page 17