

Classroom program increases school breakfast participation, not obesity

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Serving free breakfast in New York City's classrooms has boosted the number of students eating what some consider the most important meal of the day at school, according to research by New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy and the Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

The study, published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, finds that this increase in school breakfast participation did not raise the prevalence of obesity in New York City schools, as some critics may have feared. At the same time, breakfast in the classroom did not appear to improve students' attendance or [academic achievement](#).

The School Breakfast Program, a federal program subsidizing school breakfasts for "nutritionally needy" children, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Like school lunch programs, school breakfasts aim to reduce food insecurity, improve nutrition, and facilitate learning.

Traditionally, breakfast programs take place in school cafeterias before classes begin, but many districts across the country have adopted a different approach by serving breakfast in classrooms at the start of the school day.

"Moving breakfast into the classroom is intended to encourage participation in school breakfast programs, particularly among students unable to arrive early, and to reduce the stigma associated with a trip to

the cafeteria," said Amy Ellen Schwartz, director of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan Chair in Public Affairs at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

New York City has offered free breakfast to all students since 2003, and began implementing breakfast in the classroom in 2007. As of 2016, breakfast in the classroom is offered in nearly 400 of the city's 1,800 public schools, with more than 30,000 classroom breakfasts served each day. According to the New York City Department of Education, since the implementation of breakfast in the classroom, the participation rate has increased from 25 percent to 80 percent.

Advocates argue that moving breakfast from the cafeteria to the classroom provides many benefits, including improving academic performance, attendance, and engagement, and reducing hunger and food insecurity. Others have raised concerns that breakfast in the classroom can contribute to weight gain and obesity, as some students may consume extra calories by eating two breakfasts—one at home and one at school.

Using data from the New York City Department of Education and its Office of School Food, the NYU researchers studied students in kindergarten through eighth grade at roughly 200 public elementary and middle schools offering breakfast in some or all classrooms. They examined school breakfast and lunch participation, student height and weight measurements, and administrative data including demographics, attendance, and math and reading test scores in grades 4 through 8.

The researchers observed a substantial increase in school breakfast participation when breakfast was served in the classroom, with no impact on lunch program participation. Despite this increase in breakfasts served, the researchers saw no evidence that the breakfast

program contributes to obesity.

In contrast to previous studies finding an academic benefit to breakfast in the classroom, the researchers found that the effects on academic achievement were small and statistically insignificant. At the same time, breakfast in the classroom did not hurt students academically by taking time away from instruction.

Serving breakfast in the classroom had no effect on attendance, which the researchers suggest may be because attendance rates are already high in elementary and middle schools.

"While we find that providing breakfast in the classroom had large positive effects on participation in school breakfast programs, our analysis provides no evidence of hoped-for gains in academic performance, nor of feared increases in obesity," said Sean Corcoran, associate director of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy and associate professor of educational economics at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

"When looking at academic achievement and attendance, there are few added benefits of having breakfast in the classroom beyond those already provided by free breakfast," added Corcoran. "The policy case for [breakfast](#) in the [classroom](#) will depend upon reductions in hunger and [food insecurity](#) for disadvantaged children, or its longer-term effects."

Provided by New York University

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