



April 17, 2007

80th Legislature

House Education Committee

CSHB 454, relating to the provision of free lunch and breakfast to all enrolled students in certain school districts and campuses.

My name is Celia Hagert. I am a senior policy analyst for the Center for Public Policy Priorities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of CSHB 454.

Recent scientific research links children’s nutrition & academic performance to school breakfast

“What we find particularly exciting is that this [school breakfast] is a relatively simple intervention that can significantly improve children’s academic performance and psychological well-being.”

J. Michael Murphy, EdD, School Breakfast Program researcher, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School

√ **School breakfast improves academic performance**

- Children who eat breakfast show improved cognitive function, attention, and memory.
- Participating in school breakfast is associated with improved math grades, attendance and punctuality.
- Children perform better on tests of vocabulary and matching figures after eating breakfast.
- Consuming breakfast improves children’s performance on demanding mental tasks and reaction to frustration.
- School breakfast programs can lower absence and tardiness rates and improve standardized achievement test scores.
- Providing breakfast to mildly undernourished students at school improves their speed and memory in cognitive tests.

√ **School breakfast can improve children’s diets and may reduce obesity risk**

- Children who eat breakfast tend to have more adequate nutrient intakes than children who do not
- Adolescents who eat breakfast tend to have a lower body mass index (BMI); higher BMIs can indicate overweight and obesity
- Girls who eat breakfast are more likely to have a lower BMI than girls who skip breakfast.
- Adolescents with one or two obese parents who eat breakfast every day are more likely to have BMIs within a healthy range than those who tend to skip breakfast.

Is breakfast at school better than breakfast at home?

- Children who eat a complete breakfast, versus a partial one, make fewer mistakes and work faster in math and number checking tests.

- Children who eat breakfast at school – closer to class and test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.
- Low-income elementary school girls who participate in the School Breakfast Program have significantly less risk of being overweight.

Why research best practices?

- Schools that provide breakfast in the classroom to all students show decreases in tardiness and suspensions as well as improved student behavior and attentiveness.
- Providing students with breakfast in the classroom setting is associated with lower tardy rates
- and fewer disciplinary office referrals.

Why free meals?

- Children who participate in universal school breakfast have lower rates of absence and tardiness.
- Schools that provide universal school breakfast have higher breakfast participation, especially
- when breakfast is served in the classroom, and students who significantly increase their
- breakfast participation are more frequently on time and in attendance.
- Schools providing all students with free breakfast have greater positive changes in academic
- performance.
- School districts that have eliminated the reduced-price breakfast category – thereby serving breakfast free to all low-income students – have also had success in increasing participation and lowering administrative costs.

Examples of Recent Successes

"First Class Breakfast" - Houston ISD. Houston ISD started serving free breakfast to all students in the Spring of 2006. The district reports that the implementation of its new program of breakfast at no charge to all students, and an expanded classroom breakfast program during the 2006-2007 school years, will result in increased participation. Students at 20 Houston Independent School District (HISD) schools participate in The "First Class Breakfast" program, which was designed specifically for HISD schools to improve student achievement. This program went into effect in September 2006 and gives students the option of having their morning meal brought to them at their desks every day rather than requiring them to go to the cafeteria to retrieve it. The program is designed to offer students a convenient option for obtaining a nutritious breakfast to start their day.

School districts in Washington state and Tampa, Florida have eliminated the reduced price category in their school breakfast programs. This means they now serve free meals to all students with income below 185% of poverty. These districts report increased participation, lower labor costs, and a reduction in the costs associated with recouping the unpaid balances of students in the reduced-price category. In Tampa, the percentage of reduced students participating increased an average of 30% and federal revenue increased by approximately \$700,000.

Leaving Money in Washington

For each day a low-income child was not being served breakfast in 2005-2006, school districts lost \$1.27 in federal funding for every child who would have received a free breakfast, and \$0.97 for every child who would have received a reduced-price breakfast. Those meals add up to hundreds of millions of dollars in federal child nutrition funding going unclaimed by Texas districts every year.