

Ringing the bell for breakfast

Advocates say too few Wisconsin schools offer morning meals

By Alan J. Borsuk

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In launching a national campaign to get more students of all ages to eat nutritious breakfasts, a bipartisan group made Wisconsin one of its main targets Tuesday.

The launch of the "Got breakfast?" campaign in Washington, D.C., followed the release of a report that once again places Wisconsin last in the United States in use of the federally funded school breakfast program.

"Wisconsin is America's Dairyland. You need to do a better job," Ruth Jonen, national president of the School Nutrition Association, said at the news conference. Jonen, director of food service for a suburban Chicago district, is a Wisconsin native.

Former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole and former Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern took part in the event in the nation's capital, saying they disagreed over the years on many issues but that the subject of nutrition programs for kids was not among them.

"Here's a great program just waiting to be accepted," Dole said. He said states were leaving large amounts of federal aid for breakfast programs unused because of low participation. He said higher participation would be "a win-win all the way around."

The annual report on school breakfast from the Food Research and Action Center, a private, non-profit group, said that Wisconsin would have received \$12.9 million more in federal aid in 2004-'05 if the use of school breakfast here were on the same level as in some other states. Federal aid covers the large majority of breakfast costs. In Wisconsin, the state adds 10 cents to the approximately \$1.50 per breakfast in federal aid.

For at least the third year in a row, the report ranked Wisconsin 51st among U.S. states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in school who also got breakfast, a widely used measure

of how much school breakfast is being used. In Wisconsin, that rate was 26.5%, while in 13 states it was more than 50%.

Wisconsin ranked next to last in the percentage of eligible schools taking part in the breakfast program (50.4%), with Ohio last at 49.2%.

The report says participation in breakfast programs increased 11.2% in Wisconsin last year but that other states near the bottom increased more and that Wisconsin was still in last place.

Some progress made

Elizabeth Burmaster, state superintendent of schools, said that progress is being made across the state in offering breakfast to students. The number of districts involved has grown from 85 in 1992-'93 to 284 last year (out of 426 public school districts in the state), according to the state. The number of students taking part went from 22,285 to 59,644 over the same period.

Burmaster said that Wisconsin, with its emphasis on local control of school policy, does not have a state mandate that breakfast be offered, so decisions need to be reached district by district. Others give additional reasons for low breakfast use here, including trouble fitting breakfast into daily schedules, the effect of school bus schedules on early morning routines in schools, and fears of increased local costs even with federal and state aid.

There also is a strong feeling among some politicians and others that breakfast is a family responsibility and not a school matter.

Gov. Jim Doyle and Burmaster proposed increasing the state funding for breakfast from 10 cents to 15 cents per meal in January, but the increase didn't pass the Legislature.

Burmaster said she would continue to push the issue. She said, "When you're looking at student achievement and closing the achievement gap, you absolutely can point to the significant impact of making sure that children are healthy and supporting good nutrition patterns."

Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, said leaders of school districts in Wisconsin should "come to their senses" and see that "their schools will be much better and their kids will do better" if more have nutritious breakfasts.

Participants in the event pointed to research that has concluded that students who have good breakfasts do better in school on everything from grades and test

scores to attendance and behavior and that, generally, many students, especially from low-income homes, do not have such breakfasts.

Some school breakfast supporters say breakfast should be offered to all students, regardless of income, because of the educational benefits and because many kids don't eat decent breakfasts regardless of income. They also argue that there are ways to offer breakfast, such as from carts in halls or in homerooms, that take little time.

Jonen said many schools make sure to give students nutritious snacks or breakfast on days when state standardized tests are given because the administrators and teachers know that will help. She said schools should act with the idea that "every day is a test day."

The "Got breakfast?" campaign will promote breakfast for kids the way "Got milk?" has promoted dairy products, participants said. Included in the groups launching the campaign were representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Dairy Council.