



January 7, 2010

Dear County and District Superintendents and Charter School Administrators:

### **IMPROVING STUDENT NUTRITION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM**

I am writing to underscore the importance of a strong School Breakfast Program (SBP) as part of our collective effort to increase academic achievement among all California students. As educators, our number one priority is to ensure that children perform well in school so they develop and learn the skills necessary to be successful in life. The gap in achievement that exists between students in different socioeconomic groups cannot be ignored. Closing this gap and ensuring that all students are equally prepared academically is the top priority for the California Department of Education (CDE).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently released data reporting tragically high levels of food insecurity and hunger across the country. In California, almost three million low-income adults are food insecure and an additional 10 million people, including children, live in these food insecure households. This is a startling statistic and reinforces the importance of child nutrition programs in preventing hunger and helping students to succeed in school.

#### **School Breakfast and Academic Achievement/Program Improvement**

Research consistently shows that hungry students cannot learn. Specifically, students who routinely eat a nourishing breakfast perform better in school and have lower rates of absenteeism and less tardiness. After a comprehensive literature review of 22 different studies, WestEd gave an "A-" to the national evidence linking school breakfast and academic achievement<sup>1</sup>. One such study in Philadelphia and Maryland found that students who ate school breakfast at least four days per week had math grades that averaged almost a whole letter grade higher than the grades of students who rarely ate school breakfast<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, those who ate breakfast often had less hyperactivity,

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<sup>1</sup> Rampersaud, G., Pereira, M., Girard, B., Adams, J., and Metz, J. (2005). Breakfast Habits, nutritional status, body weight, and academic performance in children and adolescents. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 105(5), 743-760.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, J.M., Pagano, M.E., Nachmani, J., Sperling, P., Kane, S., and Kleinman, M.D. (1998). The relationship of school breakfast to psychosocial and academic functioning. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 152(9), 899-907. Available at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/152/9/899>.

lower absenteeism (1 day less), and less tardiness (0.7 days less) during the four-month study period.

For these reasons, the CDE encourages Program Improvement (PI) schools to increase participation in the SBP. Moreover, local educational agencies (LEAs) may, under certain circumstances, use Title I funds to help with breakfast expansion as well as automated point of sale systems that eliminate the stigma of participating in the school meal programs. Please be sure to check with your Title I director regarding appropriate uses of Title I funds.

### **School Breakfast Implementation and Participation**

The SBP is an easy way to enhance children's health and improve their academic achievement. In most cases, the breakfast can be completely supported by federal funds and state meal reimbursement. Please note that LEAs that have vibrant, well-attended breakfast programs have realized a significant increase in meal reimbursement revenue.

Sadly, though, the SBP is underutilized in California. Specifically, while over 9,800 public school sites participate in the National School Lunch Program, about 16 percent of these schools do not offer a SBP. Of the 16 percent that do not offer a SBP, approximately 620 (or 40 percent) of these school sites serve at least 40 percent of their meals to students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Moreover, of the 3.1 million public school students who are eligible for a free and reduced-price meal, only about 908,000 (or 29 percent) of these students are participating in the SBP.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that low-income students have access to healthy meals so they can meet all of their nutritional and educational needs to be successful in the competitive world.

### **How to Increase Participation in School Breakfast**

There are numerous ways to increase participation in the SBP. For instance, you may adjust the school start time (and bus schedules) in ways that encourage more children to eat breakfast in the school site facility (e.g., cafeteria or multipurpose room).

Here are some other examples:

- Universal Classroom Breakfast, in which all children eat breakfast in the classroom (which has been shown to increase attendance and decrease

tardiness and trips to the school nurse). A significant number of California schools have implemented universal classroom breakfast.

- Grab-and-Go, in which children receive breakfast from mobile carts as they arrive at school (via school buses or other means) and eat prior to entering the classroom.
- Breakfast to Go, in which students are allowed to pick up a bagged breakfast from the cafeteria and bring it to the classroom. When used in St. Paul, Minnesota, the 12 participating schools saw the number of students eating breakfast increase from 39 percent to 63 percent since the inception of the program. The district reported that the program has built community in the classrooms, has provided a more relaxed start to the day, has reduced tardiness rates by eight percent, and reduced office referrals for discipline problems by 20 percent.
- Second Chance Breakfast, in which breakfast is offered some time after first period, most often during recess or a passing period.

Please note that if the students are eating breakfast in the classroom, the instructional minutes while the students are eating can be included in the annual instructional minute calculation as long as students are eating their breakfast while an instructional activity is occurring. For example, in an elementary classroom setting, a teacher may read aloud to the class while students eat a breakfast; or in a high school classroom setting, a teacher may present educational materials relevant to the class while the students eat a breakfast.

### **Summer Breakfast Program and Summer Food Service Program Start-up and Expansion Grants**

To assist LEAs in expanding their SBP participation, the CDE is pleased to announce that the SBP and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Start-up and Expansion Grants are available again this year. These are competitive grants in which up to \$15,000 may be awarded per site for nonrecurring expenses incurred in initiating or expanding a SBP or SFSP.

You can find information about the grants, and download the application, on the CDE School Breakfast Program and Summer Food Service Program Start-up or Expansion Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/fo/profile.asp?id=1781>. Applications are due January 15, 2010.

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We encourage PI schools to apply for grants to start up or expand the SBP and the SFSP. The CDE will award additional points to PI Schools who apply for SBP grants this year where at least 50 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

A child eats breakfast regularly will be a healthier and better student—it is just that simple—and, working together, we can ensure that every child has access to a nutritious breakfast every school day.

If you have any questions regarding the SBP, including how to plan the right approach for your school and various ways of increasing breakfast participation, please contact your Field Services Unit Child Nutrition Consultant by phone at 916-445-0850 or 800-952-5609. You may also contact Jennifer Sheldon, Child Nutrition Consultant, School Nutrition Programs Unit, by phone at 916-322-3195 or by e-mail at [isheldon@cde.ca.gov](mailto:isheldon@cde.ca.gov).

Sincerely,



JACK O'CONNELL

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cc: Food Service Directors