



Union City: Breakfast boosts mean better food for all students

Union City's staunch commitment to serving breakfast to every single student has reaped enormous benefits that stretch far beyond a surge in participation.

Fewer children visit the nurse because of hunger headaches. Students are more focused each morning. They're enjoying a wider variety of more appealing, healthy foods at both breakfast and lunch.

And then there's the money.

Reimbursements Skyrocket

Since 2013, federal reimbursements for breakfast have rose \$1.5 million primarily because of the skyrocketing participation, according to Business Administrator Anthony Dragona. The district now collects more than \$2.5 million annually for breakfast alone. Federal reimbursements for school meals overall has also soared \$6.5 million, Dragona says.

That has enabled the district to install kitchens in all but one of its 14 schools, buy new equipment and make their cafeterias brighter, happier places for students to eat. This, in turn, means the district can provide fresher, more appetizing meals, which further fuels participation.

"The quality of food increases dramatically as a result of greater participation in breakfast and lunch," explains Dragona, whose district takes advantage of a federal accounting option known as Community Eligibility that allows schools to provide free meals to all students and reduce paperwork.

"The better the food is, the more kids want to eat it," he adds.

Pancake and burger stations, hot breakfast sandwiches for high school students to "grab and go," more appealing repackaging of Asian offerings and sandwiches are just a few of the food improvements the district has implemented in recent years, thanks to increased federal dollars.

The real bottom line, though, is the kids.

“We have beautiful kids, but they have struggles,” Dragona says. “It’s really about setting a tone. When you provide breakfast and healthy, appealing choices for lunch, the road you’re leading the child down to get a good education is a much smoother one.”



This report was prepared by Hunger Free New Jersey. For more information, visit hungerfreenj.org or njfoodforthought.org.