

The Affect of School Meal Programs on Academic Outcomes

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Food is a unifying force the world over, but in this country its quantity and quality in schools has become a serious topic of debate. As state and federal budgets are being cut to decrease deficits, one area that is being looked at to cut costs from are school breakfast and lunch programs. While due diligence need be pursued in funding issues, long-term consequences should be extrapolated out to determine where budget cuts should be made.

Researchers have been examining the effect of nutrition on academic outcomes for many years with strong supporting results. In cross-sectional data, the students who ate school breakfast often had math grades that averaged almost a whole letter grade higher than the grades of the students who ate school breakfast rarely. The fact remains that these findings are congruent with previous reports of the positive association between school breakfast participation and academic performance (Murphy, 1998). Students with an increased fruit and vegetable intake and lower caloric intake of fat were significantly less likely to fail the assessment (Florence, 2008).

If funding is decreased or eliminated from dependent academic institutions the effects will be realized over the long-term for present recipients. Florence demonstrated that, above and beyond socioeconomic factors, diet quality is important to academic performance. This association is important to children's future educational attainment and herewith future income, socioeconomic status, and health (Florence, 2008). Galal states that the implication for education policy makers is clear: targeted investment in child-nutrition will pay-off well for education and that appropriate nutrition interventions in schools are likely to prove to be very high-yield investments (Galal, 2003).

The legitimacy of school meal programs appears evident but funding remains an issue. Kleinman states that making breakfast free to all students irrespective of socioeconomic status offers the potential for improved nutrient intake, decreased hunger and improved academic

and psychosocial performance (Kleinman, 2002). It is possible to dramatically increase school breakfast participation by making it free to all children. From a public health as well as an educational point of view, the potential impact of increasing school breakfast participation through a UF (universal free) breakfast program deserves much greater attention (Murphy, 1998).

The significant outcomes found in this study indicate the need for further research investigating nutritional risk and its relationship to child academic, and psychosocial functioning, hunger, and breakfast eating patterns in larger, multi-site samples that allow for multiple assessments of dietary intake and child functioning over several time points (Kleinman, 2002).

Cross-sectional studies have been extensively used to study this topic with the effects of nutritional quality on academic outcomes being stated affirmatively. But reservations should be held due to the lack of longitudinal studies. Limiting factors in Kleinman's research include the sample size was relatively small and consisted primarily of low-income, African-American and Hispanic children from a single area of the country. However, similar rates of child hunger and school breakfast intake have been found in large national surveys (Kleinman, 2002).

References

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