

School Breakfast Programs

By Sara Barila

Breakfast has long been heralded the most important meal of the day. It is the most crucial element of the morning; both mentally and nutritionally. Simple. Unfortunately, many of SA's kids are trudging the corridors empty-bellied.

Studies prove that a healthy breakfast promotes brain function. SA Health says “a good overall diet is associated with a higher IQ”. Unfortunately, failing to eat their cereal could mean our kids will struggle through their schooling, and fail to reach their potential.

There are several organisations running school breakfast and nutrition programs in conjunction with schools, each of them declaring that they; a) Provide breakfast and nutrition education to thousands of children, and b) That there are still plenty more children missing out due to lack of resources. Some of these organisations include Save The Children and the Australian Red Cross. Both organisations are supported by Foodbank SA (the state's largest hunger-relief organisation).

‘The South Australian Schools Breakfast Program Mapping Study’ was commissioned by SA Health in 2008 to the SA Division of the Australian Red Cross. The Australian Red Cross invited all 860 SA schools (government and non-government) to participate in a survey of the state's schools' Breakfast Programs. Of the 809 (94%) schools that responded, 249 (31%) confirmed having a Breakfast Program (BP), varying between weekly and daily.

While we were unable to obtain the total number of children receiving breakfast through a BP in SA, the Red Cross says that they alone served approximately 74,000 breakfasts last year and that, on average, 156 children receive breakfast from them per day. Save the Children also state that more than 1,300 underprivileged children benefit each day from their Breakfast, Health, Nutrition and Life Skills program.

The importance of a good breakfast

SA Health's Health Promotion Director Michele Herriot says research reveals that children and teenagers who regularly eat breakfast not only gain the benefits of a more nutritious diet, but also are able to concentrate better and “are more receptive” in school than students who skip breakfast.

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SA Health goes on to state that “when children skip breakfast, their mental function declines”, adding that “some studies have even shown increased rates of depression, anxiety and hyperactivity in kids who do not have breakfast”.

A good breakfast will contain food from the breads and cereals group, the dairy group, and fruit. One of SA Health's many breakfast suggestions is a nutritious cereal, chopped fruit and milk. This combination ensures children pick up a good amount of carbohydrates (energy), protein and calcium (vital for muscles and bones), vitamins, minerals and fibre.

Eating breakfast regularly:

- Helps children's concentration
- Improves 'visual and thinking abilities'
- Lowers the rate of obesity
- Lowers cholesterol levels
- Will improve your child's mood.

For over two decades, associate professor Dr Jennifer O'Dea has conducted studies on nutrition in youths. In 2011 Dr O'Dea



examined the performance of 800 students in the NAPLAN tests in 19 schools across NSW. The study found:

- Students that ate breakfast performed significantly better than those that skipped it
- Students that ate the most nutritious breakfasts achieved the highest scores.

In 2008, the Education Department reported that students who skip breakfast are more likely to snack on sugary and fatty foods later in the day.

Breakfast Programs

Breakfast programs ensure children get a good start at school by providing a healthy breakfast. Most of them are free, and teach the children, their families and the community good nutrition and important life skills.

According to the Red Cross survey, the main motives for establishing a BP were:

- Students consistently arriving at school hungry
- An attempt to improve the cognitive function of the students
- To educate students about healthy eating
- To improve social skills, life skills and school attendance.

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Surprisingly, BPs are more common in secondary schools than in primary schools. This appears to be where the need - at least in terms of age - is greatest. Fourteen to sixteen year olds are less likely to have breakfast than younger children, and less likely to consume sufficient nutritious food. Teens that don't have breakfast, or buy a takeaway breakfast on their way to school, have an overall poorer quality diet and are more likely to be overweight.

The survey found the overall perspective of all schools on BPs to be positive. Schools noted that physical/mental behaviour, socialisation around food, healthy eating practices, positive interactions with others, development of leadership skills, learning and academic performance, school attendance and general happiness improved.

Of the 45 schools that terminated their BP in the last 5 years, 33% was due to lack of funds, 24% due to irregular attendance and 22% due to lack of staff or volunteers.

The Red Cross Breakfast Clubs are funded by the government, the community and The Sanitarium Health Food Company.



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However, there are many more schools on the waiting list and additional support is urgently required.

The Australian Red Cross suggests that low cost food sources and partnerships could support school BPs over the long term. Further resources are still needed to support schools in sourcing food from Foodbank, food-coops and donations.

It must be noted that it is not only important to provide children with breakfast, but also broader education programs to help both parents and children understand the importance of a healthy breakfast, and to inspire them to act. Ten per cent of surveyed schools deem breakfast to be the responsibility of parents. This statement was made by schools from all locations, regardless of whether or not they have a BP.

SA Health, the Australian Red Cross (SA Division) and the Education Department have created eight fact sheets to support schools looking to introduce or improve a breakfast program. **For more information, visit www.redcross.org.au/good-start-breakfast-club-fact-sheets.aspx.** ■