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Breakfast Pays Big Dividends In Boston Schools

By Patricia Hawke

For many years, scholars have recognized the link between a good breakfast and improved student behavior and academic performance. Boston schools see breakfast as their first tool of success.

In 2000, the Boston schools partnered with the Massachusetts General Hospital to conduct a study on the impact of the federal School Breakfast Program in 16 of their elementary schools. Researchers found that a simple breakfast of milk, juice and cereal provides a fourth of the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of key nutrients needed by growing children. Breakfast reduces hunger in the classroom and improves the overall nutrition of the students. They found that student behavior and grades improved, especially in mathematics. Students were able to spend more time on tasks and were more creative. Attendance improved. Students demonstrated better concentration facilities and improved emotional functioning. Trips to the nurse's office were drastically reduced.

Breakfast is by far the least expensive program for improving academic achievement, yet less than half the children eligible for the free or reduced price meals participate nationwide. One major obstacle is perception — breakfast programs are viewed as programs for the "poor kids", a label many students wish to avoid. The other major obstacle is timing. Most schools across the country serve breakfast before the start of school — children who arrive late due to tight morning schedules or on buses that are late, miss breakfast.

Many of the Boston schools have implemented innovative strategies to overcome the obstacles of perception and timing:

- Nearly 80 elementary schools now offer a universal breakfast — all children eat together for free. The "poor kid" stigma has been eliminated.
- Participating Boston schools make breakfast a normal and expected part of the morning schedule — no different than taking attendance.
- Boston schools serve breakfast in a variety of ways, using the method that works best for each individual school's culture. Methods range from serving cold or hot food in the classroom from a cooler

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or thermal pack; grab and go, brown bag breakfasts; sending students to the cafeteria after attendance; or a combination of these approaches.

· Involving the children makes the program more successful. Children rotating being in charge of food delivery to the classroom, after-breakfast trash removal, and returning leftovers to the cafeteria instills pride and responsibility. They become part of the program, not just participants.

The Boston schools have been recognized for their efforts in the School Breakfast Program. Project Bread, the state's leading anti-hunger organization and Boston schools partner in the School Breakfast Program, awards Boston schools that have achieved an 80 percent or greater student participation — the point at which the breakfast program pays for itself with federal dollars.

In 2002, Project Bread recognized 10 elementary schools with the School Breakfast Excellence Award. Each award is \$1,000 that the school's principal can use for any school-related expense.

The Boston schools have found that when their educators make it a priority and part of the daily schedule, it is more acceptable to the students and has a better chance to succeed. Breakfast is such an inexpensive way for Boston schools to achieve substantial academic results — especially in the children who need it the most.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Boston schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Massachusetts/Boston/index.html>

Charter Schools In Boston Are Urged To Join Boston Schools System

By Patricia Hawke

In an unprecedented move in April, the Boston schools launched an initiative to convert all the charter schools within the city over to their school system as pilot schools. The move was in response to the millions of funding dollars lost each year for the children who attend the charter schools. Converting the schools to pilot schools, under the jurisdiction of the Boston schools, would reclaim future dollars, as well as expand the Boston schools' portfolio of experimental schools.

The Boston schools began with a recruitment letter to 550 charter school teachers and principals, signed by Boston Teachers' Union President Richard Stutman, then Boston schools Chief Operating Officer Michael Contompasis (now interim superintendent), and the Pilot Schools Network head Dan French. It was followed up with an open invitation meeting, where Boston schools officials and union members tried to convince the charter school educators of the advantages for making the conversion.

Charter schools were created in 1993 by state law and are under the jurisdiction of the state. There currently are 14 charter schools in the city of Boston that serve approximately 4,300 students. They

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give parents more choices for schooling their children, while enjoying autonomy and more freedoms than traditional schools. Educators determine what and how students are taught, the length of the school day and year, and how to disburse budgets. Teachers' salaries and benefits, however, are determined by each school with no guarantees or unemployment protections. Additionally, there are no restrictions on how many overtime hours teachers may work without pay.

Pilot schools, under the jurisdiction of the Boston schools, were created in 1995 in response to the competition from the charter schools. Of Boston schools' 58,600 students, about 6,000 attend the 19 pilot schools. They have more autonomy than traditional schools but less than charter schools, with educators having to negotiate their freedoms with the Teachers' Union and the Boston schools. Pilot school educators, however, are guaranteed union pay between \$42,355 and \$81,702 annually, as well as benefits and protection, including a restriction on how many overtime hours teachers may work without pay. Seven new pilot schools are planned by 2009.

The Boston schools' conversion initiative will be an uphill battle. It has been met with skepticism by many charter school educators, who like the flexibility and autonomy that would be lost. Converting to a pilot school would mean immersing themselves into rigidity, red tape and bureaucracy, as well as inheriting the Teachers' Union.

Some educators were intrigued by the idea but do not give it much hope. Some see it as a bold move that deserves a hearing and discussion, as with any new idea. Some would be interested, if the Boston schools were set up to deal with charter schools like New York City and Indianapolis — autonomy is embraced rather than restricted.

Spencer Blasdale, executive director of the Academy of the Pacific Rim and president of the Massachusetts Charter School Association, encouraged each charter school to at least find out more details. He stated that his school, which is currently located in an old factory complex, could save \$396,000 annually in rent — if the Boston schools provide permanent facilities. Then Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant noted that the Boston schools already had difficulty finding permanent facilities for their existing pilot schools.

As the Boston schools continue their recruitment of charter schools, the residents of Boston can only wait to see what the outcome may bring.

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