



NEWS RELEASE

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August 6, 2007

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BREAKFAST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY, BUT NOT ON THE SCHEDULE FOR MANY STUDENTS

Austin, Texas—Kids need pens and notebooks to get through the school day, but they also need a healthy breakfast. Yet, a new report from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) in Washington, D.C., finds that in many large urban school districts, including the Houston Independent School District (HISD), most of their low-income students are not getting breakfast on a daily basis. HISD is working to change that by making breakfast part of the school day with its “First Class Breakfast” program.

In “Breakfast in America’s Big Cities,” FRAC surveyed 23 large school districts, selected on the basis of size and geographic representation. The survey found that school strategies that make breakfast part of the school day were the most effective ways to reach children. These strategies include universal breakfast, where all children can eat regardless of income; “grab and go” breakfast from carts in the hallway; and breakfast in the classroom.

The five school districts – Portland, Newark, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Los Angeles – that most heavily used these options served an average of 72.5 low-income students with breakfast for every 100 low-income students who ate school lunch during the 2005-06 school year.

In comparison, HISD served an average of 45.4 low-income students with breakfast for every 100 low-income students who ate school lunch in 2005-06. Statewide, Texas schools reached 52.6% of the low-income students who ate lunch, ranking the state 11th-best in the nation.

HISD launched the First Class Breakfast program at 20 schools in the fall of 2006 to boost participation and improve student achievement. First Class Breakfast gives students the option of having their morning meals brought to them at their desks every day rather than requiring them to go to the cafeteria to get it. The meals are free to all students, and the program was expanded to 35 schools in the spring of 2007.

So far, the results are promising. One school, Horace Elrod Elementary, saw participation increase 150% after it began its First Class breakfast treatment. HISD says it plans to offer the program district-wide beginning in September 2007.

“The school breakfast program offers an effective, affordable, and long-lasting way to improve student achievement and children’s health,” said Celia Hagert, senior policy analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities. “More large school districts should follow HISD’s example and make breakfast part of the school day and free for all children.”

The national school breakfast program was created by Congress 40 years ago to ensure that children were getting the healthy meals they need to perform well in school. Numerous studies have shown that a good breakfast improves learning and attendance, and reduces behavior problems and visits to the school nurse.

Studies also show that children who start the day with a healthy breakfast are more likely to be a healthy weight. In Texas, 42% of Texas fourth graders are either overweight or at risk of being overweight, and 70% of overweight children will become overweight or obese adults.

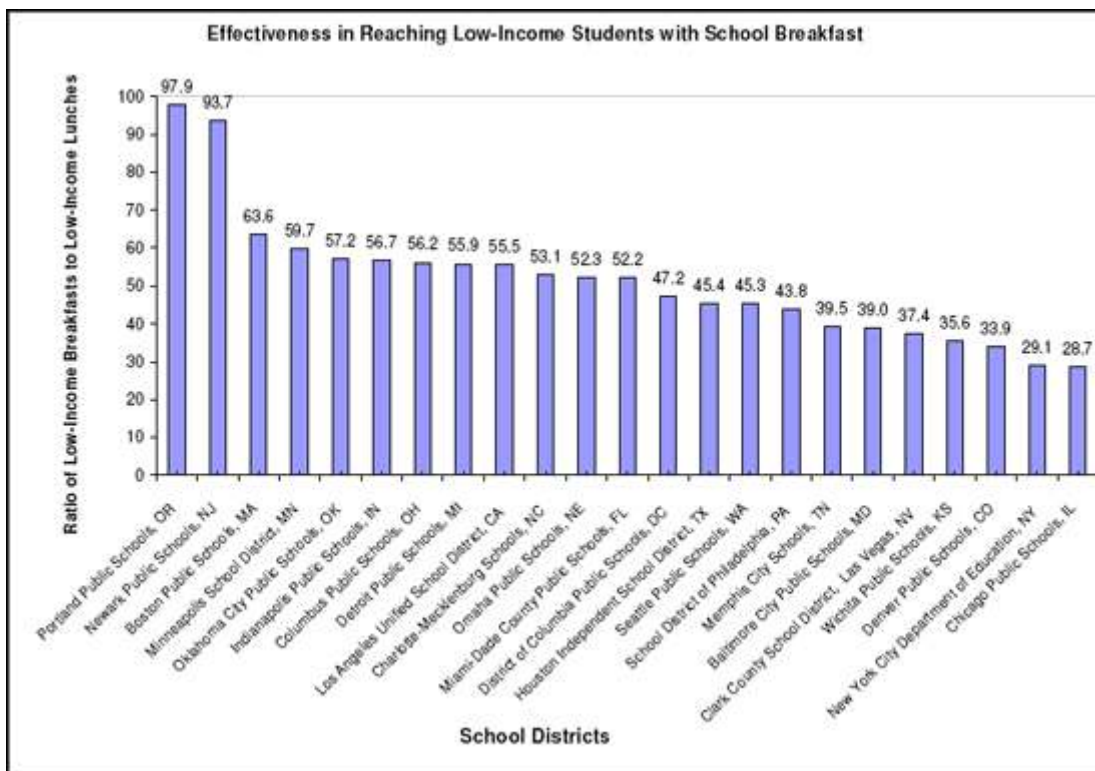
“The first day of school is fast approaching. Now is the key time for school districts to think about ways to improve breakfast participation,” added Hagert.

The FRAC survey also asked school districts to identify barriers to student participation. A vast majority of districts reported that time was a factor – from students not having enough time in the morning to eat, to tight bus schedules that get students to school too late to participate. Many of these barriers could be addressed with more flexible breakfast options.

The breakfast program is paid for by the federal government. Children from low-income families eat either for free or for a reduced price, depending on their family’s income. Children in higher-income families pay for breakfast, but their meals are also subsidized. The Texas Department of Agriculture administers the program (see <http://www.squaremeals.org>).

Low participation means that school districts also are missing out on federal funding. FRAC estimated that if HISD had been able to reach 70% of the low-income children who received free and reduced-price lunch in school year 2005-06, more than 24,000 additional students would have eaten a healthy school breakfast, and the district would have received an additional \$5.2 million in federal funding. Statewide, an additional 370,000 low-income students would have had breakfast, bringing an additional \$77 million in federal funds back to Texas.

To download FRAC’s report, see www.frac.org/pdf/urbanbreakfast07.pdf.



Key Statistics

2005-2006 School Year	Texas	Houston ISD	U.S.
Number of low-income children*	2,123,826	159,597	17,366,432
Percent of children who are low-income	46.9%	77.1%	35.6%
Number of low-income children who ate school breakfast	1,116,582	44,760	7,739,904
Low-income children who ate school breakfast as a percentage of those who ate school lunch	52.6%	45.4%	44.6%

*Low-income children include all children who are enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch. Children with family income below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$22,321 for a family of three in school year 2007-08) are eligible for free meals. Children with family income between 130% and 185% of FPL (\$31,765 for a family of three in school year 2007-08) eat for a reduced price.

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For more than twenty years the Center for Public Policy Priorities has been a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy research organization committed to improving conditions for low-and moderate-income Texans.