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School Breakfast: A Morning Kick-Start for Academic Success

When talking about the future of the Treasure State, there is one fact that everyone can agree on: Montana will need a strong, diverse, and well-educated workforce to compete in a global environment. For today's students, getting the education they need may hinge on a very simple habit -- eating breakfast before school.

"Eating a well-balanced breakfast is essential for learning in any classroom," says Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau. "Schools all across Montana have been expanding their breakfast programs to meet the needs of families during our tough economic times. If children do not have a good breakfast at home, they are unable to learn new material or to concentrate on complex tasks when they get to school."

The benefits of school breakfast programs have been examined in studies across the country. Principals, teachers, school nutrition staff, and health care providers all put their stamp of approval on these programs, because children and teens who regularly participate in school breakfast may potentially:

- **Have fewer tardies and school absences.** For hungry children, breakfast is a reason to get to school.
- **Be ready to learn when class starts.** With a full stomach, children can concentrate on classroom work.
- **Have fewer mistakes and be able to work faster.** This seems to be especially true for math skills.
- **Show improved results on standardized testing.** Memory and verbal skills are also improved.
- **Be better nourished.** They eat more fruit, drink more milk, and consume a wider variety of nutrients.
- **Have healthier weights.** Children and teens who eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight.

In the Victor Schools, Child Nutrition Director Maria Stover knows that the morning meal serves a real need for at-risk students. Her cafeteria provides a grab-and-go breakfast (with hot and cold choices) to over 300 students in a total district enrollment of 350 (K-12). She notes the rewards are great for a minimal effort.

On the Rocky Boy's Reservation, director Geri LaMere gets strong administrative support for breakfast in K-6 classrooms. Switching the breakfast from the cafeteria to the classroom increased participation from 30% to nearly 95% of students in those grades. As a result, the children are more alert and ready to learn.

At Lewistown Middle and High Schools, director Cindy Giese offers a self-serve breakfast with a hot entree, cereal, fruit, and other healthful choices. This type of breakfast has helped reduce tardies at the middle school and offers high schoolers with early classes and clubs a place to eat smart and hang out with friends.

"Teachers recommend that students eat a good breakfast during test week," notes Supt. Juneau. "However, children need breakfast every school day. When kids eat breakfast, we see the results in both their school performance and their health. It's exciting to see the innovative ways that Montana schools are making sure kids are healthy, focused, and ready to learn."

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