

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 16 APRIL

The Advantages and Costs of Breakfast Clubs in Schools

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1. This report has been written in response to a motion from Cllr Gill Sanders which asked that this Committee should: “ *consider asking those schools which currently do not, to provide school breakfast clubs for their pupils. In particular, it is asked to consider the impact this would have on raising attainment, improving absence rates and lateness and to investigate how sponsorship, alongside the Pupil Premium, might fund the breakfasts. This information should then be provided to all schools in the County.*”
2. Common sense tells us that if children and young people are properly “fed and watered” that will make a positive contribution to their health and wellbeing and that this may well, in turn, serve to improve such things as attendance, attention and behaviour and, ultimately, contribute to improved learning.
3. Breakfast clubs have been a way of life in some schools for many years. The original motivation for many of them was driven as much by a social conscience as a desire for improved individual (..and therefore school) performance, and recognition that many young people arrive at school with little or no breakfast, not by choice but simply because that option is not available at home.
4. The local authority has no central record of which schools and academies have breakfast clubs but a “quick and dirty” survey of schools and academies in the City and Banbury reveal that of 61 schools’ and academies’ websites (a mixture of secondary, primary, special and nursery) 23 make reference to the existence of a breakfast club. This may not be a robust piece of data however each website is different and evidence of a breakfast club is not, necessarily, immediately evident. It does, however, point to the likely proportion of schools and academies in these areas, which have breakfast clubs.

The evidence

5. What common sense tells us is borne out, by and large, by the evidence. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) published a report in July 2006, *Research into School Breakfasts in Wales*. While this is now a decade old the principal findings are likely to still be valid. The final report opens with a summary of the research which has preceded it. What follows

are direct quotes from that part of the report with particular reference to the health and educational benefits of breakfast clubs.

“Health and nutritional benefits of breakfast provision

Research has revealed the proportion of school pupils who do not eat breakfast. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food study (2000), 17 percent of British school children leave home in the morning having eaten nothing, while Balding (2000) states that breakfast is a particularly common meal to miss. In a survey of Year 6 pupils, five percent reported eating no breakfast, three percent just had a drink, and nine to thirteen percent ate crisps or chocolate for breakfast. In a survey of Year 10 girls, more than a fifth (21 percent) reported eating no breakfast. The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that 30 percent of children do not go home to a cooked meal and that for some a school meal is the only ‘real meal’ they get each day (NPI, 2000)

The poor, long-term health prospects arising from the imbalanced diets of many children have been documented (Donovan and Street, 1999). It is suggested that breakfast clubs can address these health needs by contributing to children’s nutritional requirements for a balanced diet by providing a meal at the beginning of the day (Street and Kenway, 1999). Breakfast clubs have the potential to have a significant impact on children’s health and wellbeing by providing a nutritious breakfast or supplementing daily diets with fruit (Lucas, 2003)....

The UEA (2002) reported that clubs had reinforced messages about the importance of eating breakfast and that pupils who had taken part in those clubs had disseminated messages about health and nutrition elsewhere, for example in their own homes.

Breakfast clubs can also offer an opportunity to teach children about healthy foods, the importance of healthy eating and food hygiene, as well as providing information on unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and drinking (Street and Kenway, 1999).

Educational benefits of breakfast provision

The New Policy Institute (NPI) suggests that educational difficulties often arise from the ‘erratic attendance and poor concentration and behaviour in school’ exhibited by a significant number of children from the first years of primary school (Donovan and Street, 1999). A number of studies indicate that breakfast clubs have the potential to address these issues and improve the educational experience of pupils, particularly in terms of classroom performance, school attendance and punctuality (BNF, 2005; Teachernet, 2005b; NPI, 2000).

In terms of classroom performance, Street and Kenway (1999) suggest that breakfast clubs provide a form of before-school care in an informal atmosphere which helps the children start the school day on time, calm and

ready for learning, rather than having their concentration interrupted by feelings of hunger. This conclusion was supported by the UEA (2002) who found that: 'There were felt to be close associations between mental alertness and reduced preoccupation with feelings of tiredness or hunger, a more social, settled transition into the school day, or the development of more positive attitudes towards the school'. Studies by the NPI (2000) and the UEA (2002) found that attendance at such clubs made the children appear more settled, attentive and motivated to learn (BNF, 2005) and that it appeared to 'smooth the transition between home and school' (UEA, 2002). Research into pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties indicated that there were significant positive effects of providing breakfast. These included increasing on-task behaviour (Bro et al., 1994, 1996), bringing about a decrease in behavioural problems (Terry and Kerry, 2000) and helping the children start the day in a good mood which was perceived as having an overall educational benefit (Watson and Marr, 2003). However, the UEA (2002) found that in some schools behaviour was said to have declined as children had become more energetic.

Research also suggests that breakfast clubs have a positive effect on attendance. In an evaluation of breakfast clubs within an Education Action Zone in Middlesbrough (Simpson, 2001) it was found that groups of pupils who regularly participated in breakfast clubs improved their attendance at a faster rate than those who did not attend. Clubs were a way of ensuring that pupils arrived in school earlier and with less fuss (UEA, 2002) and that by attending school more frequently, pupils were in a better position to take advantage of the opportunities available to them (Simpson, 2001). The clubs could also offer a quiet space for homework and the opportunity for small-group learning support (Street and Kenway, 1999).

6. While on the one hand some food is, generally, better than no food, account does need to be taken of the School Food Plan, a new set of standards for all food served in schools and academies which was launched by the Department for Education. The standards became mandatory in all maintained schools, academies and free schools with effect from January 2015. The standards are of application throughout the school day, including breakfast. Menus do therefore need to be co-ordinated to ensure that the standards are maintained and that proper account is taken of breakfast fare.
7. As can be seen, the benefits of breakfast clubs are considerable with only a fleeting reference to the potential for pupil behaviour to decline as a result of pupils becoming more energetic!
8. The NFER report goes on to discuss the many and various social benefits for children and young people of attending breakfast clubs.
9. In summarising the existing research the report notes that:

The provision of school breakfasts has been inspired by evidence of the positive impact it can make on a range of issues, including school attendance,

punctuality, concentration, attainment, and in promoting messages about health and nutrition; such programmes have been introduced in a number of countries worldwide.

There is little quantitative evidence about the effectiveness of school breakfasts; however the qualitative evidence is consistently positive. (Research into breakfast clubs in Wales, 2006. p.20)

Funding

10. As with so many great ideas, breakfast clubs are constrained, to some extent, by funding. As the NFER report notes:

Research suggests that the most significant challenge to breakfast provision in schools is finance. Financial viability and stability have been highlighted as major factors that may limit the development of breakfast clubs (Street and Kenway, 1999). In some cases volunteers contributed extensively to running breakfast clubs but it was recognised that relying on this support was not a sustainable approach (UEA, 2002). This meant that difficult decisions may have to be taken about breakfast clubs when the initial funding comes to an end. Dilemmas regarding prioritising the school budget could mean that breakfast clubs become overlooked (Teachernet, 2005a). A national evaluation of a breakfast programme pilot scheme in England undertaken by the Department of Health in 1999 indicated that the stability of such clubs was a major concern for all stakeholders and in some cases charges were introduced to supplement the initial input of funding or provide a source of funding when initial funding ran out. However, even nominal charges were considered a barrier to attendance (Shelmit et al., 2003). There is also evidence to suggest that even when fees were charged for attending the clubs, finances remained a concern (Street and Kenway, 1999)....

Staffing represented the main item of cost associated with the delivery of breakfast clubs (Street and Kenway, 1999) (Teachernet 2005a). This was especially true of primary schools where supervision ratios were higher than secondary schools (UEA, 2002). Staff recruitment and retention was also highlighted as a real concern (Street and Kenway, 1999). (Research into breakfast clubs in Wales, 2006. p.11)

11. The most straightforward means of funding is of course for a school or academy to use its own resources. An Ofsted report on the use of Pupil Premium notes that some primary schools use it for this purpose. For some schools however there will be other greater priorities.
12. There are, however, other sources of funding but which may not be obviously or immediately available and would require further investigation at a local (school) or County level. These would include such things as charitable or private business grants.

Conclusion

13. The *overall* benefits of breakfast clubs are evident but they come at a price; the cost of the food itself and identification and cost of staff or volunteers to run them.
14. Members of the committee will be aware of the high degree of autonomy vested in schools and academies and that it is for them to decide, according to their circumstances, whether or not to run a breakfast club and, if so, how. The committee may not be able to require the introduction of breakfast clubs but it can commend them to schools and academies.

Financial and Staff Implications

15. There are none for the Local Authority but there are for those schools and academies which run breakfast clubs.

Equalities Implications

16. Breakfast clubs are likely to be of particular benefit to pupils whose families may find it difficult to provide their children with a nutritious start to the day.

RECOMMENDATION

17. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - (a) **Ask officers to draw this report to the attention of headteachers and chairmen of governors with a suggestion that active consideration be given to the introduction of breakfast clubs in schools and academies which do not already have them. The suggestion to include a recommendation that this might extend to discussion with colleagues in schools or academies which do have breakfast clubs; and**
 - (b) **Ask officers to explore what charitable or other sources of funding might be available to support breakfast clubs in Oxfordshire and to alert schools and academies to those opportunities.**

JIM LEIVERS
Director for Children's Services

Background papers:

G. Jones, R. Powell, R. Smith, A. Reakes, *Research into school breakfasts in Wales*, NFER, July 2006

The Pupil Premium, Ofsted, September 2012

Contact Officer: John Mitchell , Assistant to the Director 01865 815619

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