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Impact of School Lunches on Elementary School Students' Academics

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*Impact of School Lunches on Elementary School
Students' Academics*

Yudbeth Coronel

Spring 2022

Senior Capstone

Advisor: Dr. Paoze Thao

Abstract

The focus of this senior capstone is to analyze the impact of school lunches on elementary student's academic performance. It is obvious to note that the nutrition a student consumes can have a huge impact on their academics; whereas students who do not, students who do not receive the correct number of calories per day may adversely have the opposite outcome during class time. The finding indicates that school lunches with a healthy diet could impact students' academic performance as opposed to those unhealthy diets that could result in student's poor academic achievement.

Introduction

I decided to research this topic because as a future teacher it is important to know what my students are consuming since it impacts their academic performance. Nutrition plays a large part in school performance. Children who don't consume enough fruit and vegetables, and healthy proteins tend to have lower test scores than their peers. Hunger can lead to children missing school or having to repeat grades. As we all know the way a student is eating has a major effect in their life. Therefore the way they eat should be important and paid attention to. Consuming the right calories a day can improve the participation in their classroom. Nutrition has a huge impact on elementary school academic performance. In this research I will provide information about the history about the school lunches in California, the amount of calories consumed in a school lunch, and the different ways a student's academic performance is being affected and also a survey completed by 3 teachers and two lunch ladies from a school district.

Literature Review

History

President Harry S. Truman was the person who created the national school lunch program in 1946 as a measure of national security. The reason why he came up with this idea was after reading a study that talked about many young men who were being rejected from World War 2. The reason why they were being rejected was due to a medical condition that was being caused by their childhood nutrition, which had been affecting them for years already. Ever since that happened more than 180 million school lunches have been served all over America to children who were attending a public school or, non profit private school. During 1966, President Lyndon Johnson had extended the program by offering breakfast to school children. It began as a two

years pilot program for children in rural areas and those living in poorer neighborhoods. It was believed that these children would have to skip breakfast in order to catch the bus for the long ride to school (Educational Bug, 2015).” Another concern that President Johnson had was that the poor families were not always able to afford to feed their children breakfast before attending school. According to “President Johnson believed that, like many of us today, that children would do better in school if they had a good breakfast to start their day (Educational Bug).” The program was a great success so it was decided for the program to continue. In 1975, “ breakfast was being offered to all children in public or non-profit private schools. This change was made because educators felt that more children were skipping breakfast due to both parents being in the workforce (Educational Bug, 2015).” In 1968, the program started to offer summer meals for those students who were low income children. During summer the students would still have access to snacks, breakfast, and lunch. The only requirement needed was for students to apply at the end of the school year, and contract their local school administration and the help will be given to the families in need. “Since its inception, the school lunch/meals programs have become available in more than 98,800 schools. The 2004/05 school year reported that over 9.2 million children participated in the breakfast and lunch programs; and as many as 1.6 million children took advantage of the summer meals program that same year (Educational Bug, 2015).” The program started for just children who were low income families, and were now offered to all children in the schools. For some families the meals were either free for the children or with a reduced rate which depended on the family’s income. The program was a great deal for families who had a child attending a public school or non-profit private school. “During the 2004/05 school year, children of a moderate to higher income family would spend on average \$1.50 for a lunch or breakfast ticket each day (Tom Wright, 2018).”

In April 2021, the USDA decided to extend free school lunch to all the schools in Monterey county. Micha James, the director of nutrition for the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District mentions “It will allow us to continue to provide food to students without any stigma attached for anyone needing to pay money or parents needing to consider whether they’ve sent money to their children as they leave for their school day (Tom Wright, 2018).” Lunch is one of the things parents are supposed to pay for at school but is one the most important components of a child's education. “This action also increases the reimbursement rate to school meal operators so they can serve healthy foods to our kids. It’s a win-win for kids, parents and schools (Tom Wright, 2018).” If the action of serving free lunches remains available it increases the rate of students being able to receive a healthy lunch that will benefit their academic performance and health. There are many students who don’t have enough money to eat breakfast. A school not being able to provide a healthy lunch can increase their lack of academic performance.

The impact on students’ academics depends if school lunches are healthy or not. If a lunch is not being served with the correct calories, servings, and vegetables, and meats. According to research “Nutrition for kids is based on the same principles as nutrition for adults. Everyone needs the same types of nutrients — such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, protein and fat. Children, however, need different amounts of specific nutrients at different ages.” A healthy lunch will contain protein, which can be any seafood, lean meat, chicken, beans and eggs. Fruits are also supposed to be consumed during their lunch meal instead of providing apple juice; the fruit should be given fresh instead. A side of vegetables should also be served in a lunch meal. Some of the vegetables that can be included can be broccoli, carrots, and if the vegetables are being served from a canned or frozen vegetable the products should be in lower

sodium, for a healthier serving. A serving of grains should also be included in a school lunch. Grains options can be whole wheat bread, oatmeal or brown rice. Dairy products should be served in a school lunch to be considered a healthy lunch. Examples of dairy products can be fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese. According to Mayo Clinic Staff these foods should be included in every elementary students' lunch to be consuming the correct amount of calories per day.

The academic performance of a student is important because it is the success a student will have in the future. According to research "Students at schools that contract a healthy school lunch score higher on CA state achievement tests (Michael L. Anderson, 2017)." Consuming a better meal prevents low scores from testing and gives the school more opportunities. According to Jessica Brusio "Boys between the ages of 11 and 13 need 1,800 to 2,600. Girls aged 11 to 13 need 1,800 to 2,200 calories per day while those between the ages of 14 and 18 need 1,800 to 2,400 calories per day, according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Jessica Brusio, 2015)". Research mentioned that "We find that in years when a school contracts with a healthy lunch company, students at the school score better on end-of-year academic tests (Anderson, 2017)." The benefits from a healthy lunch provided from the school helps students score higher tests and school assignments. Another benefit would be getting higher grades, better memory and alertness, and faster information processing. All these benefits can help a student be successful in their future education. Many students have these impacts during their school years due to school lunches not being healthy enough for them to concentrate and pay attention during class. In the year 2008, the Journal of School Health revealed a study report that discovered that 5th graders who ate fast food on a daily basis scored far worse on the given standardized literary assessments. The reports of the study linked the relationship between eating unhealthy and

declining reading & math scores. Scores decrease because their focus on the lecture is not fully involved. School lunches not being healthy don't let their mind focus and learn the new material. "Nutrition has a major impact on the student's life as well. Right from shaping their academic performance to impacting the classroom behaviors, the nutritional levels and proper nourishment play vital roles in enhancing the overall life conditions of the young heart.(Snapp, B. D. (1989)."

Methods and Procedures

Once the semester started I had an idea of what capstone topic I wanted to research. I wasn't completely sure on the topic but once I met with Dr. Thao, I was able to find more engagement with my topic and I became more invested in my topic. In order for my primary and secondary questions I have to research many peer-reviewed scholarly research and journal articles that I was able to use to answer my questions. My research was conducted by the library. During this research I was able to obtain current literature that was related to my primary and secondary questions. I did run into some minor issues obtaining current information on the issues of my topic. I was able to find a few articles but not the amount I was expecting. After the issues I went through finding articles I stayed positive and worked with what I had to make my research well developed and organized. I decided to interview three teachers and two lunch staff members. Each school staff member was given a survey that had 5-6 questions. Each question was beginning to be asked to be answered in a few sentences. The survey was given to the staff members on March 8, 2022 and was given back to me on April 7, 2022. The three teachers I interviewed were two 2nd grade teachers and one 3rd grade teacher. These were the only

teachers that were willing to complete the surveys. These teachers were from a local school in Greenfield CA.

Results and Discussion

Through my research, the district I did my research on was a district in Greenfield California. The school I did my research at was Cesar Chavez. This school had their lunch menu available online on the district website and in paper version at the school. This menu is available for all parents and staff members to have access too. The menu had the information for the whole month and showed what students will be having for breakfast and lunch. Being able to have access to the menu gave me the opportunity to analyze the lunches given there for students who are considered healthy. For my surveys I had three teachers and two lunch ladies answer a few questions rather than calories, academics, and etc. The data collected was from teachers and lunch ladies in a Greenfield school. One of the questions in the survey was “Do you think the way elementary students eat at school impacts their academics during class time? If yes, why?”. Teacher #1 answered with the following answer, “As a teacher with 3 years of experience I have seen a huge academic performance in those students who don’t eat during lunch time because they might like the lunch provided for them. Students who don’t consume lunch lack attention during lecture time and tend to be more distracted than the other students who do eat their lunch”(Teacher #1 Survey, See Appendix #1). This response showed how important it is for students to have lunch during school because it can affect their academic performance and needs to be improved. When students aren’t consuming the correct school lunch it impacts their lack of performance during class time. Teacher #1 was also asked “ Do you know what a healthy meal consists of for an elementary student?”. Teacher #1 response was “I think a healthy lunch meal

consists of meat for example, chicken or meat. A side of vegetables like broccoli or carrots. And lastly a dairy product such as milk”. Most of the teachers know what a healthy lunch consists of, which is great so they can understand if the students are receiving the correct amount of calories needed for them per day. When a child isn’t consuming this amount of calories they have a lack of academics in their classes. A student needs to consume the correct amount of calories to have the energy and strength to pay attention and participate in class. Teacher #2 was asked “ Have elementary students mentioned to you that they are hungry and then after you see them not paying attention?”. Teacher #2 responded with “I have seen this a lot, I often hear my students say they are hungry and then later on, I see them falling asleep or distracted. Is sad seeing a student lack academics because they are not eating”(Teacher #2 Survey, See Appendix #2). When a student is not consuming their daily lunch they don’t have the same energy to pay attention as the other students who are consuming their lunch. Lack of energy can have a student fall asleep and not have enough energy to understand what is going on during lecture time. Students who are falling asleep later on are more likely to ask questions after the lecture because they didn’t pay attention. Lack of energy leads to low grades. Students who aren’t paying attention tend to score lower on their grades. Teacher #2 also mentioned that she has noticed her students who score low are the ones who aren’t eating their lunch and don’t have the energy to pay attention or participate in class.

Recommendation

Therefore, I recommend that it is essential for school districts to pay more attention to what they are providing in their lunches. Students are being impacted by the way school lunches are being served. Suggesting a meal change can also be done to improve the lack of academic performance of elementary students. As how teacher #2 states, “In my opinion I think improving

the menu can help students improve their lack of academics. Providing a menu students enjoy will help them eat their meal and have energy for class time” (Teacher #2 Survey, See Appendix 2). These are some ideas that can be implemented to make our school lunches healthier. Another recommendation I have is for educators to use Time nutrition education can take place in the classroom. For example, lessons that include counting with pictures of fruits and vegetables. Examining how plants grow, and learning fractions by measuring ingredients for a recipe. Learning how to make recipes with healthy food choices can be beneficial for elementary students to also eat healthy at home. For the parents, my recommendation is that Parents should attend school meetings and ask if the calories given in school lunches is the correct amount a child should be consuming per day. Suggesting a meal change is also another idea to improve the lack of academics because of school lunches. Attending meetings where they speak about the choice they make for their students is important. The parents have the control to change anything that is not beneficial for their students. The voice of a parent is important and should be heard, therefore parents participation has a huge impact on the decisions schools have for their lunch meals.

Problems and Limitations

Finding information to answer my primary and secondary research questions was smooth. However, I did run into a few minor issues along with my research. These issues did not stop me from obtaining the information I needed. One of the problems I had during my research was obtaining information that was currently happening. Most of the peer articles I found were from 2 to 3 years ago. Articles that were up to day right now would have been more helpful. Even though the literature sources I found were a bit old, it doesn't make them and the content I found invalid. The information found is relevant today as it was 2 to 3 years ago. One of my goals in

my research was to interview the principal but because of our different schedule I wasn't able to. I wanted to interview the principal because they are the ones who decide and approve on the food choice that is given to students during lunch time. Another limitation I had was I was only able to interview three teachers. Most teachers didn't have the time to complete the survey, therefore I was unable to interview more. My plan was to interview 6 teachers each one from a different grade K-5. Another problem I had was that surveys were not given back on the due date I gave. The surveys were given two weeks after the due date. This delay made me a bit behind on my research. I was able to gather all the information for my research. The number of school lunch members was also another limitation I had while developing my research. I was planning on interviewing the manager from the cafeteria since they are the ones who have the most information about the school lunches and the way everything is set up for the students lunch. The manager was on vacation when I gave out my survey. I was upset that her feedback would be really important to have a better understanding of what the Greenfield district lunches provide to students. I wanted to also interview 4 lunch staff members but only two were willing to participate on the survey I was given. I did the best I could with the survey I was given back from the school staff members.

Currently, lunch meals aren't paid attention because the school districts are more focused on their curriculum and state testing. Lunch meals are as important as a curriculum and should be paid more attention to. The way a student is consuming affects their academic performance. Lunch meals need to be advocated for more than they currently are. They believe that a student should be eating all their lunch meal but not much further than that, they don't investigate if what they are consuming is the correct food they should be consuming depending on their age and

gender. Not enough research is being given to schools so they know how school lunches affect elementary students' academics.

Now that my research is all completed, I feel like some of the things I did could have been done a different way. For example, I could have conducted my research differently or re-design my project approach if the time I had was essential. However, completing this project and as a future educator, I feel I am better prepared for the impact school lunches have on elementary students' academic performance. I am now aware of all the impacts and effects school lunches can have on elementary students.

Conclusion

From my research, I have found that school lunches have a huge impact on elementary students. The way a child eats during school has a huge impact on their academic performance that later affects their future education. School lunches should be provided with enough calories and healthy food options. The way a student is consuming can impact their test scores and academic performance during class time. All these impacts are happening because a student is not consuming the right amount of calories or the correct food choices a child their age should be consuming to not have a lack of performance in class. According to the words of a 2nd grade teacher, “As a teacher with 3 years of experience I have seen a huge lack of academic performance in those students who don’t eat during lunch time, it might be because they don’t like the lunch provided for them. Students who don’t consume lunch lack attention during lecture time and tend to be more distracted than the other students who do eat their lunch”. (Teacher #1 Survey, See Appendix 1).

Not only does this research show how school lunches impact elementary students but also shows responses of what teachers are experiencing with students who are not consuming the correct food during lunch. Public schools get a lot of support from the government. Therefore, with all that help a meal change can happen to support our students' academic performance. By implementing a new healthier lunch choice can give the students the opportunity to be more engaged during class and improve their academic performance. Healthy school lunches are a necessity that has to be changed. By incorporating a healthier school lunch with enough calories, and correct food products give students the opportunity to have a better academic performance and engage more in class time. For example, when a student has eaten all his healthy lunch he will participate in class and not fall asleep because he didn't eat well. Incorporating healthy lunches increases test scores and more engagement is occurring during class. Test scores increase because students are eating well, therefore they are fully focused during lecture and understand the material better. The integration of healthy lunches allows students to have a healthier life and engage more in their education. Also students will be providing enough calories to help them develop and learn more things during class. Thus, lunches that aren't healthy lead to lack of academic performance and students start to test badly and don't understand the lecture correctly. This change has been done by all the districts. School lunches have a huge impact on elementary students and have to be taken into consideration in order for those students to succeed.

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Appendix 1

Teacher #1 2nd Grade Interview Questions/Answers: April 7, 2022

Do you know what a healthy lunch meal consists of for elementary students?

“A healthy lunch should consist of meal options for example, meat or chicken. A side of vegetables such as carrots or broccoli. And lastly a dairy product”.

Do you think the way elementary students eat at school impacts their academics during class time? If yes, why?

“As a teacher with 3 years of experience I have seen a huge lack of academic performance in those students who don’t eat during lunch time, it might be because they don’t like the lunch provided for them. Students who don’t consume lunch lack attention during lecture time and tend to be more distracted than the other students who do eat their lunch”.

Elementary students with low grades are often the students who often don’t eat lunch?

“20% of the students who don’t consume their lunch, are the ones with lower grades. Students who are hungry can’t pay attention”.

Have elementary students mentioned to you that they are hungry and then after you see them not paying attention?

Yes, I often hear from students that they are hungry because they didn’t eat their lunch because the lunch they provided wasn’t their favorite. So instead they throw them away. I see those students who mentioned being hungry get distracted and not paying attention.

What can be done to improve students' lack of academics because of school lunches?

In my opinion I think improving the menu can help students improve their lack of academics. Providing a menu students enjoy will help them eat their meal and have energy for class time.

Appendix 2

Teacher #2 2nd Grade Interview Questions/Answers: April 7, 2022

Do you know what a healthy lunch meal consists of for elementary students?

A healthy lunch will consist of a side of vegetables that will give them the enough vegetable protein the students need. Protein and a wheat product such as bread and beans should be included.

Do you think the way elementary students eat at school impacts their academics during class time? If yes, why?

Yes, when students are not consuming lunch they are participating during class time because they are hungry and their mind is not focused. Therefore, they can't concentrate during lecture time and start getting off track.

Elementary students with low grades are often the students who often don't eat lunch?

Yes, the students who score low on their quizzes are the ones who have said they didn't eat their lunch or had breakfast.

Do elementary students mention to you that they are hungry and then after you see them not paying attention?

"I have seen this a lot, I often hear my students say they are hungry and then later on, I see them falling asleep or distracted. Is sad seeing a student lack academics because they are not eating".

What can be done to improve students' lack of academics because of school lunches?

"Something that can be done to improve the lack of academics would be to make lunches more healthy and more kid free so they can enjoy their lunch and everything else.

Appendix 3

Teacher #3 3rd Grade Interview Questions/Answers: April 7, 2022

Do you know what a healthy lunch meal consists of for elementary students?

“A healthy lunch meal consists of a side of meat or chicken that way protein is being added to their meal. Vegetables should also be added, for example, green beans or carrots. Another product that should be included to make the lunch healthy would be any dairy product.”

Do you think the way elementary students eat at school impacts their academics during class time? If yes, why?

“Yes, the way students eat during lunch does affect their academic performance. For example, students who don’t eat well at school tend to be distracted during class and start talking to their classmates or start to spacing out because they are not concentrated.”

Elementary students with low grades are often the students who often don’t eat lunch?

“Yes, students with low grades are the ones who I noticed that aren’t eating lunch or breakfast. They score low on their exams.”

Have elementary students mentioned to you that they are hungry and then after you see them not paying attention?

“Yes, students who are often saying they are hungry are the ones who I see not understanding the lecture and asking what has to be done but they didn’t understand the instructions because they were not paying attention.”

What can be done to improve students' lack of academics because of school lunches?

“In my opinion, something that can be done to improve the lack of academics because of school lunches can be to analyze and see if the school lunches provided are healthy and have the calories an elementary student should be consuming.”

Appendix 4

Lunch Staff #1 Interview Questions/Answers: April 7, 2022

How many calories are consumed in a daily lunch meal?

“A lunch meal here in our district has an amount of 1,800- 2,200 calories which is the average number a lunch meal should be included”.

What does a typical lunch meal consist of?

“ A typical lunch meal for our district consists of a protein product, for example, meat spaghetti or beef/chicken cheese burgers. Also a side of salad or veggies. An option of whole milk or chocolate milk is also available.”

Are lunch meals often thrown away by students instead of eating their lunch meal?

“I do see elementary students often throw away their meals and don’t eat anything. Sometimes all the students eat is the fruit and drink their milk”.

Is a calendar available for parents to see what their students will be eating throughout the month?

Yes! A calendar is available for all parents in our district page. The calendar is usually updated every month. Parents have access to the lunch and breakfast meal calendar. We also have copies of the calendars available in every school office and easily accessible.”

Appendix 5

Lunch Staff #2 Interview Questions/Answers: April 7, 2022

How many calories are consumed in a daily lunch meal?

“Our district provides 1,800- 2,000 calories per meal. This is the calories an elementary student should be consuming daily.”

What does a typical lunch meal consist of?

“A typical meal has a dairy product which is milk, protein either meat or chicken, and a side of vegetables for example, carrots, broccoli, or a salad.”

Are lunch meals often thrown away by students instead of eating their lunch meal?

“Yes, we often see many foods being thrown away, especially protein food. Students usually just drink their milk and eat their vegetables or fruits.”

Is a calendar available for parents to see what their students will be eating throughout the month?

“Yes! A calendar for parents is available for all parents to view. The calendar is updated every month and it includes the lunch calendar and breakfast calendar.”

Appendix 6

Greenfield District/ Breakfast Menu April 2022



April



2021-2022 Breakfast Menu

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
				1 Chef's Inspiration
4 Cereal Berries	5 Blueberry Muffins Fruit Juice	6 Yogurt W/granola Banana	7 Banana bread Orange wedges	8 Fresh Fruit Smoothie w/ Granola Seasonal Fruit
11 Concha Fruit Juice	12 Arroz con letche W/raisin	13 Bagels W/cream cheese Orange wedges	14 Chessy Breakfast Potato Bread Roll Seasonal Fruit	15 Spring Break No School
18 Spring Break No School	19 Spring Break No School	20 Spring Break No School	21 Spring Break No School	22 Spring Break No School
25 Pancakes Peanut Butter Berries	26 Carrot & Zucchini Muffin Fruit juice	27 Breakfast Sausage Cheesy Muffin Apple Sauce	28 Scrambled Eggs Toast Orange Wedges	29 Cinnamon roll Apple Sauce

Greenfield Union Elementary School District is an equal opportunity provider and employer

Menu is subject to change without notice *Not all items may be available everyday*

*All of the Grains/Bread items served are whole grain Offered Daily: 1%, Fat free, chocolate milk, fruit & salad bar
All students must take at least 1/2 of a cup of fruit or vegetable



Greenfield District/ Lunch Menu April 2022



April

2021-2022 Lunch Menu



Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
				1 Fish Sticks Roasted Zucchini Berries
4 Chicken Nuggets Cucumber Spears Seasonal fruit	5 Beef chili w/Beans Served over Oven roasted Red roasted potato	6 Grilled cheese Sandwich Steamed carrot Watermelon	7 Chicken Tinga Lettuce & Tomato Queso & Tostada Orange wedges	8 Tamales Lemon Celery Stick Apple
11 Pizza Baby Carrots Seasonal Fruit	12 Pozole w/ Chicken Corn Chips Lemon & Cabbage Fresh Berries	13 Beef or Chicken Burger w/ Cheese Coleslaw Pineapple	14 Italian Marinara Sauce over Pasta w/ Cheese Side Salad w/Ranch	15 Spring Break No School
18 Spring Break No School	19 Spring Break No School	20 Spring Break No School	21 Spring Break No School	22 Spring Break No School
25 Oven Baked Chicken Drumsticks Mashed Potatoes Orange wedges	26 Tuesday Beef Tacos Salad w/corn chip Shredded lettuce Cheese tomato	27 Macaroni & Cheese Oven Roasted Broccoli Watermelon	28 Hispanic & Italian Fusion Enchiladas Lasagna Orange Wedges	29 Corn Dog Side Salad Berries

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 Menu is subject to change without notice *Not all items may be available everyday*
 *All of the Grains/Bread items served are whole grain Offered Daily: 1%, Fat free, chocolate milk, fruit & salad bar
 All students must take at least 1/2 of a cup of fruit or vegetable






