
The impact of primary school breakfast clubs in deprived areas of London

Key findings

Key Stage 2 results were better in primary schools in deprived areas of London one year after introducing breakfast clubs compared with the results of a comparable group of schools without breakfast clubs.

- Average KS2 results were statistically significantly higher by 0.72 points in the year after the introduction of a breakfast club in 13 primary schools in deprived areas of London compared with a non-significant 0.27 point increase in 9 control schools.
- Schools started breakfast clubs to address problems relating to children being hungry on arrival at school and by mid-morning showing signs of tiredness, lack of concentration, and poor behaviour or learning.
- Pupils most likely to attend the breakfast clubs were those who had been arriving early because their parents needed to be at work or college. Children who reportedly arrived at school having had no breakfast, were frequently late, had behavioural or learning issues, or who came from a family in crisis were also encouraged to attend.
- Amongst the control schools, the main reason for *not* wanting to start a breakfast club was that it was morally wrong to provide children with breakfast, as this was the domain and responsibility of the family. There were also concerns about additional demands placed on staff, the cost of staffing, and the ability to maintain the programme indefinitely.
- There was a real perception that the many facets of a club added value to the school through a variety of channels and benefits. The present study adds to the growing bank of evidence that breakfast clubs can have a beneficial impact, specifically on academic performance and punctuality. It will require a larger study in more representative samples and with better assessment of potential confounders to confirm the findings presented here and the role of food *per se*.

Background

There has been a trend over the last ten years for schools to introduce breakfast clubs, especially primary schools. This has mainly been driven by concerns that a substantial proportion of pupils are not eating breakfast and arriving at school hungry, which may impact negatively on learning and behaviour. The main aims of many breakfast clubs fit into four categories:

- provision of food at the start of the day
- improving pupils' education
- meeting the social needs of children and improving social skills
- improving school relations with parents.¹

The role of breakfast clubs is wider than the provision of food; they also provide a calm and safe environment before school, help develop social skills and provide the opportunity for additional learning through 'play' activities, or provide time to complete homework. Attending a breakfast club may also assist pupils to arrive at school on time (or even encourage them to attend at all), and be ready to learn when classes begin.

Aims

The three aims of the study were to:

- assess whether the introduction of a breakfast club in primary schools was associated at the school level with improved academic performance, punctuality and reduced absences compared with schools with no breakfast club
- describe the perceived benefits of breakfast clubs to individual pupils and to the school community
- establish which aspects of the breakfast club contribute to any perceived benefits

Methods

Selection of schools

In February 2007, 53 primary schools (including junior schools) were identified in Lambeth, Haringey and Camden (all areas of similar deprivation)² with 30% or greater known eligibility of free school meals (FSM) and more than 50 pupils on roll. In addition, 17 schools known to operate a breakfast club in other London Boroughs were contacted. Schools were selected to take part in the study if they had either run a breakfast club for between 1 and 5 years (breakfast club schools) prior to recruitment or they had never run a breakfast club (control schools). Of those eligible, 13 (29%) with breakfast clubs and 9 (41%) without took part in the study.

Data collection

Key Stage 2 average point scores were obtained from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES^a) Achievement and Attainment Tables³ for the academic year preceding the introduction of a breakfast club, for the year in which the breakfast club was introduced, and for each subsequent academic year through to 2005-2006. For each of the nine control schools, information was obtained for the same time period as for the corresponding breakfast club school with the most similar characteristics. Percentages of both authorized absence and unauthorized absence were also obtained from the Achievement and Attainment Tables for each time-point. Breakfast club schools were asked about attendance at the breakfast club, the food served and the activities on offer at the breakfast club. In April and May 2007, an in-depth qualitative interview was carried out in every school. They were asked about the reasons for starting the breakfast club, how the club was run and the perceived benefits. Control schools were asked their views about breakfast clubs and why they currently did not have one.

^a Now the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

Results

Approximately 13% of pupils on the school rolls attended the breakfast clubs, with 10% of pupils attending the breakfast clubs regularly (three or more days a week).

Quantitative results

Breakfast clubs were introduced between September 2001 and February 2006 inclusive. The end of the academic year prior to the start of clubs therefore ranged from July 2001 to July 2005. Compared with the year prior to the start of the breakfast club, breakfast club schools showed a statistically significant 0.72 point increase in the Key Stage 2 average point score in the year immediately after the introduction of breakfast clubs (Table 1). This difference was sustained, in subsequent years, although there was no further increase in average Key Stage 2 scores. There was no corresponding change in the control schools (Table 1). There was no difference in average point scores at either time point between the two groups (unpaired t-test).

Table 1. Key Stage 2 average point scores (mean, sd) before and after the start of breakfast clubs or corresponding period in control schools, by type of school

Key stage 2 average point scores	Type of school				
	<i>n</i>	Breakfast club <i>13</i>		Control <i>9</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>sd</i>
One year before* start of breakfast club (or corresponding period in control school)		26.1	1.74	27.3	1.19
One year after* start of breakfast club (or corresponding period in control school)		26.8	1.58	27.5	1.94
Mean difference (95% CI)		0.72	(0.06, 1.38)	0.27	(-0.81, 1.34)
<i>P</i>		0.03		0.58	

* Refers to the Key Stage 2 results in the three terms immediately preceding the introduction of a breakfast club or in the three terms following its introduction. In the control schools, results for the corresponding terms were used.

Authorised and unauthorised absence rates were also compared. Although there was a greater decline in authorized absences in the breakfast club compared with the control schools in the year after the breakfast clubs were introduced, the difference between time points or between groups did not reach statistical significance.

Qualitative results

Schools had started breakfast clubs because they were aware that some children were coming to school having not eaten. Some pupils appeared to suffer from tiredness, lack of concentration, poor behaviour or learning issues by mid-morning. In addition, some pupils were arriving at the school gate very early (raising issues of pastoral care and safety) or regularly arriving late.

The children most likely to attend were those who had been arriving at school early because their parents needed to be at work or college. Children known to arrive at school having had no breakfast, be frequently late, have behavioural and learning issues, or come from a family in crisis, were targeted to attend.

Schools believed that they had reaped significant benefit through the introduction of breakfast clubs especially in the case of the most socially deprived children. The benefits fell into four categories:

- improving children's social skills
- promoting links between parents and school and children and class teachers
- improving the punctuality of children who were frequently late
- improving children's health and concentration levels

Furthermore, the introduction of a breakfast club was seen as a welcome addition and benefit, having a positive and synergistic impact on other activities in the school.

There were some concerns about running breakfast clubs: extending the school day for staff; using volunteers; having poor facilities for running the club; and the club being used as

cheap childcare. Most importantly, there was concern about the long-term effects of schools taking on the role of parents at a time of day which encroaches on family time. There were also concerns about the costs (extended staff time, breakfast ingredients) and continuation of the breakfast club if support from charitable organizations ceased. Amongst the control schools, these same concerns were expressed as reasons for *not* wanting to start a breakfast club.

Discussion

The many perceived benefits of breakfast clubs reported by schools included a strong sense that: children were less hungry; were mixing with a greater range of pupils (in particular different ages); were more focused in their work; and punctuality improved.

This study is unique, however, in suggesting that over the longer term (i.e. one year or more), the introduction of a breakfast club in schools in deprived neighbourhoods was associated with an improvement in pupils' Key stage 2 average point score. Of further importance is that the observed improvement was sustained over time. Control schools did not show significant improvements in attainment over equivalent periods.

The two main limitations to this study were sample selection bias and limited quantitative data to allow control of confounders in the analysis. The greater improvement in the Key stage 2 average scores in the breakfast club schools compared with the control schools may be accounted for by the presence of head teachers in the breakfast club schools who were more keen than those in the control schools to introduce changes in the environment generally that were likely to improve pupils' performance. There were a number of potential confounders of the improvement in Key Stage 2 average point score for which it was not possible to control, such as other initiatives that may have been introduced in the school at the same time as the breakfast clubs, or changes in or addition to key school personnel. This is consistent with the finding that on average only about 10% of pupils in the schools with breakfast clubs could be described as 'regular' attenders, and it is unlikely that the changes in Key Stage 2 outcomes could be attributed to this 10% alone. Importantly, head teachers themselves perceived that improved attainment was as a result of the introduction of a number of related initiatives associated in part with the introduction of the breakfast clubs.

Conclusions

In this group of schools with breakfast clubs, there was a real perception that the many facets of a club added value to the school through a variety of channels and benefits. The present study adds to the growing bank of evidence that breakfast clubs can have a beneficial impact, specifically on academic performance and punctuality. It will require a larger study in more representative samples and with better assessment of potential confounders to confirm the findings presented here.

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References

¹ Harrop A and Palmer G (2002) Improving breakfast clubs lessons from the best. London: New Policy Institute.

² DfES (2007). Schools and pupils in England: January 2007 (Provisional)

³ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) School and college achievement and attainment tables. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families. www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables