

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

ABELL SALUTES:

The Debating Society at City High School

Restoring and Enriching the School's 125-Year-Old Debating Tradition

Fifteen-year old Erica Gambrill is in a classroom at Loyola High School and is articulating the case for legalizing marijuana. Eugene Fulton, 16, is in a classroom at Catholic High and is making the case for interracial adoption. Elenia Quaffai is in Pikesville Senior High, defending the death penalty.

These young men and women are standing on their feet in front of their peers and several adult judges, engaged in the highly sophisticated and classic art of arguing. As each presents, he or she is displaying, amply and with facility, the scholarship, organizational skills, poise, confidence, and solid mastery of the techniques of persuasion. These are City High School students, debating. For a high-school debating team in only its second year of existence and against formidable competition, these young debaters, heirs to the City tradition of debate that goes back more than 100 years, are doing exceedingly well, and winning more than their share.

continued on page 6

Data from Abell Foundation Project Concludes: Changes in Student Breakfast Program Will Increase Participation, Improve Performance

At approximately 8:00 on a chill, bright Monday morning in November, some 600 children file into Montebello Elementary at Harford Road and 32nd Street in Northeast Baltimore. They are coming to school, routinely, to attend another day in the semester—but first there is the matter of breakfast. By 8:20 a. m. the 600 children are in their respective classrooms and, in an obviously cheerful mood, sit down at their desks to juice, a bagel (sometimes hot pancakes) and milk—and it's all free, compliments of the federal government, the State of Maryland, and The Abell Foundation.

While these students are part of a cheery, chatty, fun-filled eating club, they are also part of a serious experiment. It is one designed, first, to influence *all* students in the Baltimore City Public Schools who ordinarily would not eat breakfast at home to eat breakfast in school; and, second, to evaluate the effect of breakfast on attendance, tardiness, behavior, social skills, and academic performance.

History and Background

In the 1960s society became aware that too many children were coming to school without breakfast—for a variety of reasons having to do with changes occurring in the family and in the workplace. It was in recognition of these phenomena that the federal government, through the U. S. Department of Agriculture, began in 1966 to offer a free or reduced breakfast to students based on family ability to pay. With federal and state subsidies, the breakfast costs a student 55 cents (full price), 10 cents (reduced price), or nothing (free), depending on the child's family income. Each school pays approximately \$2,000 to \$5,000 more annually if all children participate in the breakfast program, depending upon the percentage of reimbursement eligibility.

But despite the humane concerns that brought the reduced price/free breakfast program into being, and despite the availability of subsidies over time a disconcerting fact emerged: in most schools, even the ones in the poorest communities, only 5% to 20% of the

continued on page 2

Students stayed away from public displays of their family's economic status

students took advantage of the breakfast offered to them in school. All across the country the pattern was the same, and so was the question for the educational establishment and community leaders—“Why?” Why were so few of the students who were clearly entitled to a free breakfast, and who needed it, simply not showing up to take it?

A part of the answer undoubtedly lay in the stigma involved in the arrangement that called for eligible students to claim their “free food” in the company of peers. Since only a small percentage of students were eating breakfast at school, each who asked for it drew disproportionate attention to him or herself. For a student to have to ask for the breakfast under such circumstances was a highly visible admission of poverty. The consequence was that students stayed away from such public displays of their family's economic status.

Then, too, there were the problems of scheduling and access. In most schools, breakfast was offered before the start of the school day. Because schools resist activity that takes away from instructional time, breakfast time cannot be carved out of the existing school day, and so must be scheduled quite early. The arrangement requires that students get to school even earlier,

The Abell Report

Published bi-monthly by
The Abell Foundation
111 S. Calvert Street, 23rd Floor
Baltimore, Maryland 21202-6174
(410) 547-1300
Fax (410) 539-6579

condemning participation in the breakfast program to a low priority.

Solutions to both of these problems were provided by a highly focused approach to school breakfast that The Abell Foundation funded last year. The approach was to offer the school breakfast free to all students regardless of their ability to pay (thus eliminating the stigma of asking) and to serve the breakfast *in the classroom* during the homeroom period rather than in the cafeteria before the school day began (thus eliminating the problem of the early-hour access). This approach was designed to increase significantly the number of Baltimore City Public School students participating in the school breakfast program.

Within the project, comparisons were made between what happened in three pilot schools that adopted the new approach to school breakfast in the classroom and what happened in three similar “control” schools. In the control schools, the school breakfast continued to be available as it always had been—in the cafeteria, free or at a reduced price. Only 18% of students at the six Baltimore City Public Schools participating in the project were taking breakfast in school before the start of the project, although 70% to 90% of them are eligible for free or reduced price meals.

To activate the project, a notice was sent out to 10 of the city's schools describing the pilot program. Six schools contacted the Baltimore City Public Schools' Department of Food and Nutrition Services to indicate that they were interested in the project. Three were offered the classroom feeding program in the spring semester of 1997 and the other three were scheduled to start the program in the fall semester of 1997. William Paca and Montebello elementary schools and the Diggs-

Johnson middle school began the program in February of 1997. The Abell Foundation agreed to pay the additional costs of the breakfasts that were not covered by the federal reimbursements (55 cents a day for some students and 10 cents for others).

The study was designed to allow two comparisons: 1) to compare the number of students who showed up for school breakfast when it was offered free to all students in the classroom with the number who showed up only when low income students got free meals and the breakfast was provided in the cafeteria; and 2) to compare what happened to important student outcome measures like absenteeism, discipline, tardiness, and achievement for students in the pilot schools with the performance in these areas for students in the control schools.

In the “pilot schools” participation in the breakfast program and attendance in the classroom both increased

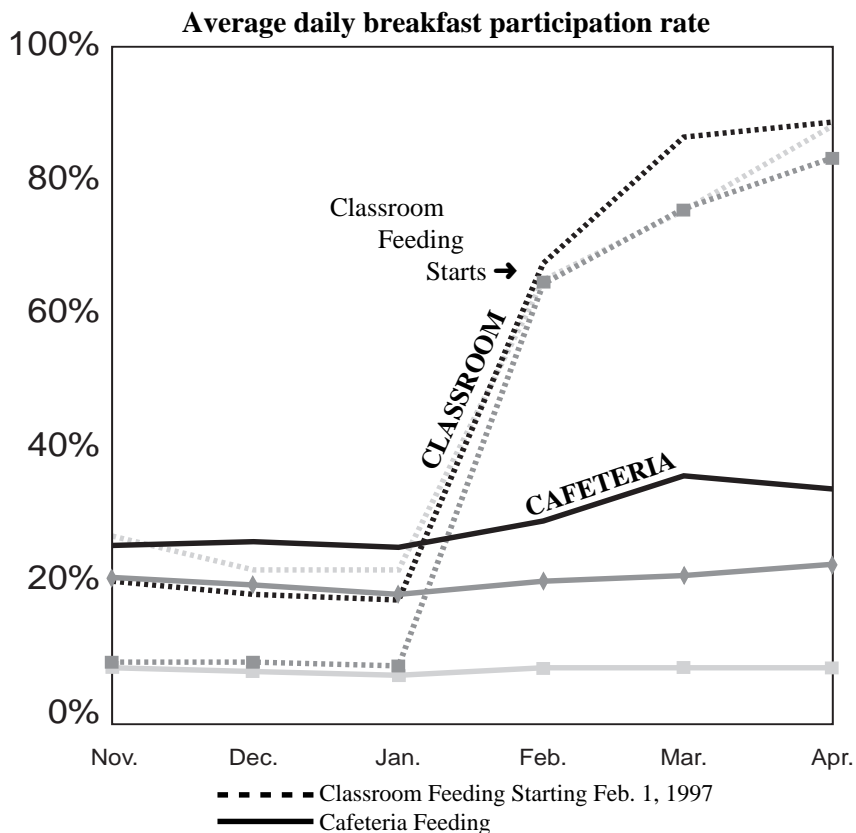
Results

In the three months before the project began, the rate of school breakfast participation in all six schools averaged about 18% per day, or about 160 students in a school which had 800 students. Beginning in February 1997 when the breakfast program was offered in the classrooms of the pilot schools, the rate of breakfast participation climbed immediately to nearly 75% of the student population and hit 85% within two months. In the three control schools, there was virtually no change in the breakfast participation rate.

As promising as these increases were, some other increases that oc-

Chart 1: Classroom Feeding Boosts Participation in Three Baltimore Schools

Dramatic increases in school breakfast participation due to classroom feeding vs. no change in three similar schools with cafeteria breakfast



occurred at the same time were even more encouraging. In the three control schools, the average daily attendance dropped from 85% to 84% during the period of time February through June 1997; during the same time period, attendance in the three “classroom, free-breakfast” pilot schools rose from 86% to 89%. This increase represented a five-point percentage spread between attendance at the control schools and that of the pilot schools.

Changes were also evident in student behavior and punctuality. In the three pilot schools, the number of disciplinary incidents was cut in half in the semester after classroom feeding began. In the one control school that sent data, the number of disciplinary incidents was virtually the same over the

course of the two semesters. And in the two of the schools with complete data, tardiness was cut to only one quarter of its previous rate.

Last year’s classroom feeding project was actually the third year of a program that The Abell Foundation supported in 1995. The Foundation’s program was based on a 1987 report on a school breakfast program in Lawrence, Massachusetts by Meyers, Sampson et al. The Lawrence study had demonstrated a positive relationship between school breakfast and student classroom performance.

Getting Started

In the first year of The Abell Foundation’s support of Baltimore’s school breakfast program in 1995, the

Foundation joined forces with the School Breakfast Partnership. This partnership was comprised of Baltimore City Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services, Harvard Medical School, Maryland Food Committee, Middle Atlantic Milk Marketing Association (MAMMA), School Nutrition Accountability Program (SNAP), Kraft Foods, and the Public Welfare Foundation. At that time approximately 20% of the free-lunch eligible elementary students (or 14% of the total elementary student population) were participating in the Baltimore City Public Schools’ Breakfast Program. The goal of this collaboration in ten schools was to increase the participation of students in the breakfast program by 10%, while at the same time it aspired to promote nutrition education.

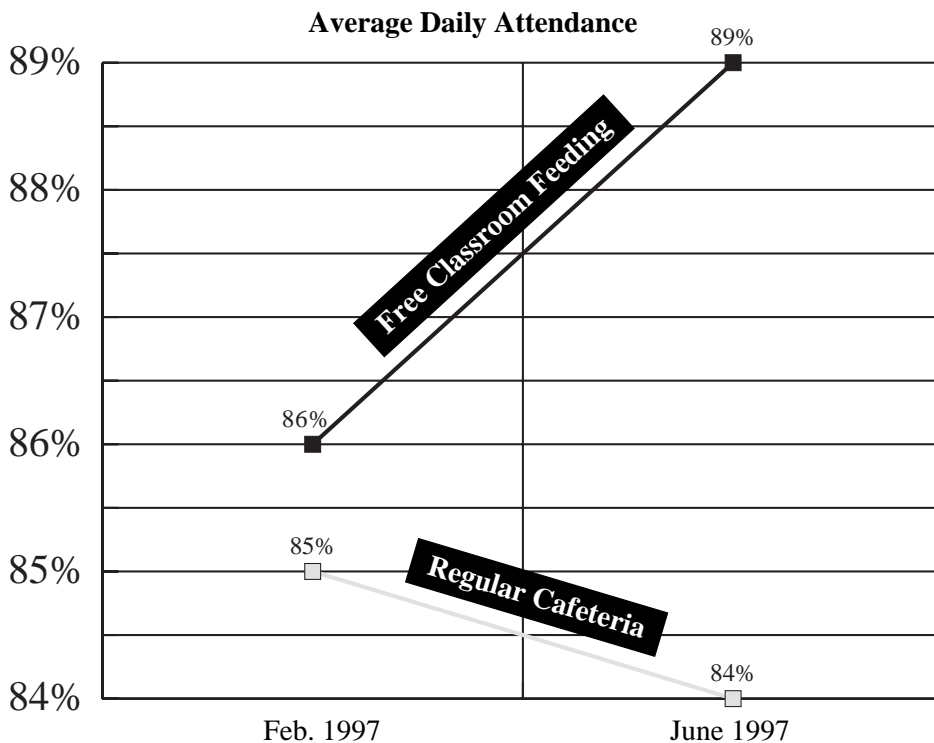
The Maryland Food Committee staff was available for presentations to school board members, school administrators, food service workers, teachers, parents, students and community groups. Exhibits and handouts extolling the nutritional value of school breakfasts were supplemented by in-class workshops and presentations. Parents and community leaders were encouraged to attend 2 1/2 hour training sessions and to volunteer with the local school’s breakfast program. The Breakfast Booster Clubs then worked closely with the schools to help overcome the deterrents to student participation in the breakfast program.

In an extra effort to increase student participation, Lockerman Bundy Elementary School was designated to serve free breakfast in the cafeteria to all of the students. By the end of the 1995-96 school year, the universal breakfast program was discontinued because of the low number of participants, despite the additional promo-

continued on page 4

Chart 2: Average Daily Attendance Increases for Free Breakfast Schools In One Semester

Gain for 3 schools w. free classroom feeding
vs. decline for 3 schools w. regular cafeteria breakfast



continued from page 3

tion. Another attempt was made: Southeast Middle School became a universal free breakfast site with classroom feeding beginning in December 1995. Surprisingly, within only three weeks of the startup of new strategy, student tardiness rate decreased by 60% and the daily breakfast participation grew to 90% of the student body. This classroom feeding strategy was part of the Harvard Medical School research project.

In recognition of the immediate success of the initial classroom feeding strategy, The Abell Foundation then focused its funding on the expanded pilot project, setting into operation the study to test the validity of classroom feeding, offering free breakfasts in the classroom to all the students at three schools.

Beyond data, the human equation

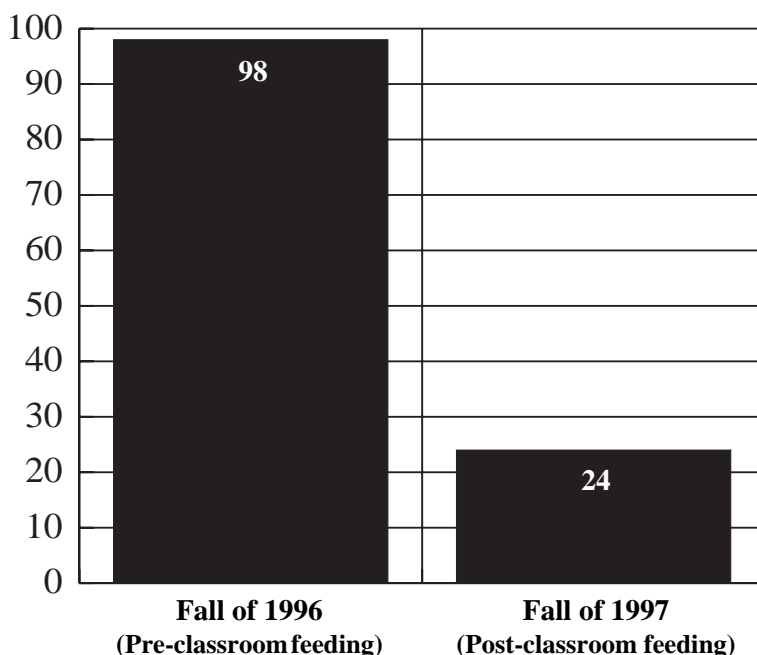
But the universal free breakfast program is defined by more than the data; there is a human equation at work in the programs that endears it to students, parents, teachers and administrators. This dimension of the program cannot come solely from analyzing the arithmetic of the surveys; to experience the value-added, one must sit with the children on any given morning in their classroom where they share 20 joyful, physically gratifying minutes with their friends.

The classrooms are bright, cheerfully decorated, and spotless, and the children seem playful and in good spirits. One can appreciate their mood, for this is a place they *want* to be, and eating breakfast is something they very much want to do.

A teacher in attendance comments to an observer: "These little children, most of them, would, without these

Chart 3: Monthly Average of Tardiness Plummet After Classroom Feeding Begins in two Baltimore City Public Elementary Schools

of Tardiness



School Population: 1000+ elementary school students

breakfasts, simply go hungry. So some would go to their teachers at 11:00 or so and complain that they just can't sit still any longer—they need something to eat.

We don't hear that kind of talk anymore. These breakfasts are a godsend."

Another: "A breakfast makes such a difference in the behavior of these kids—when their tummies are full their mood is better. They aren't looking to fight."

Still another: "A key to the success of the universal breakfast program is that no child has to step up and ask for a free or reduced price breakfast because he or she is poor. They are all poor, and none of them should have to say so in front of their friends."

One teacher points out, "Many of these children are on medication, and *must* have food after they take it. I have seen what happens when they *don't* take breakfast after taking medication. Quite simply, they get very ill." Unmindful of their against-the-odds circumstances, the children are enjoying an eating and social experience, which appears to be a fine way for them to start their day—which is off to a better start when breakfast time ends.

The free breakfast program helps level the playing field between haves and have-nots in a society that happily cares about such matters, and takes responsibility for providing to those who cannot afford it an essential element of a productive school day—breakfast.

Conclusions: recommendations, the promise

Dr. Michael Murphy, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the Harvard Medical School and a child psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, was one of the researchers who

Journal Highlights Effects of Diet on Children

Reprinted from *Education Week* January 21, 1998

Three studies published in the latest issue of the journal *Pediatrics* offer insight into the effects of diet on children. In one of the first studies to link hunger to a child's behavioral problems in school, researchers found that habitually hungry children from low-income families are seven times more likely to misbehave in class, fight, be enrolled in special education, or have psychological problems. According to the study published in the January issue, chronic food insufficiencies may have just as much influence on a poor child's behavior as other factors such as living with a single parent or being exposed to violence. For the study, researchers, led by Dr. Ronald E. Kleinman of the Harvard University Medical School, interviewed 328 parents and children living in the Pittsburgh area in 1993 and asked them about the availability of food in their homes and their children's behavior in school. Twenty-one percent of the parents of hungry children reported some "psychosocial dysfunction," such as fighting, not listening to rules, or stealing. In contrast, only 3 percent of children who were not routinely hungry displayed similar behaviors. Less than 1 percent of children in the United States suffer from malnutrition, meaning that they weigh less than 95 percent of children their height, according to the study. But hunger—prolonged food insufficiency—is becoming more common, according to the authors. "The data from this study reveal that hunger seems to have a unique impact on the psychosocial functioning of poor children," the authors write.

conducted the study. According to Dr. Murphy, "In Baltimore, as in most of the country's major cities, measures of student performance like attendance and standardized test scores are declining. Last year, 31 of Baltimore's schools were singled out by the Maryland Department of Education as needing special monitoring because of indicators like these."

"Although there are probably many things which could be done to help these schools turn things around, a free school breakfast in the classroom appears to be one of the simplest and least expensive. Thanks to the Abell Foundation's vision and support over a four-year period, we have learned that it costs only about \$2,000 to \$5,000 per year over federal and state subsidies for a school in a low-income area to provide a free breakfast in the classroom to all students who want one."

Dr. Robert E. Schiller, Superintendent of the Baltimore City Public Schools, was so impressed with the findings that he is exploring ways to provide the funding necessary to provide universally free classroom feeding in some or all of Baltimore's other elementary schools as early as the second half of the current school year.

The findings about school breakfast in Baltimore are a part of a larger Harvard Medical School study of the effects of hunger and increased feeding that has also looked at students in Boston, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. In Baltimore, these studies have been done in close collaboration with the Department of Nutrition and Food Services of the Baltimore City Public Schools. Funding for the research has been provided by the Kellogg Corporation and the Mid-Atlantic Milk Marketing Association. ■

ABELL SALUTES:

Continued from page 1

City students, with the support of a grant by The Abell Foundation, in the echoes of their predecessors in the Bancroft and Carrollton Wight literary societies, are once again debating the issues and declaiming such great speeches from history and literature as *Othello's* apology and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart."

In the fall of 1996 the City debating team joined the Baltimore Catholic Forensic League and the National Forensic League. Fifteen students competed in speech and debate activities this first year. Debating activities were held once a month from October to March at various schools, all within Baltimore County. The type of debate is known as Student Congress. Several students also competed on Saturdays in speech activities.

At the end of 1996-1997 school year two students, Eugene Fulton and Robert Williams, qualified for the National Catholic Forensic League competition in Student Congress. Eugene made the final Student Congress competition and finished in the top 15 in the nation!

The 1997-1998 City team now consists of 21 members. Seven of them have already qualified for the state semi-finals through their successes in the Student Congress. Eugene may become the first City student to qualify for the state finals in Student Congress and extemporaneous speaking.

The Abell Foundation salutes the City debating team coach, Don Koch, principal Joe Wilson, and each and every one of the young and aspiring debaters, for restoring and enriching the debate tradition at City. ■

Some Recent Grants by The Abell Foundation

Citizens Planning and Housing Association **\$16,750**

For research related to initiative designed to limit billboard advertising of alcohol and tobacco products.

Baltimore City Health Department **\$25,000**

For an evaluation of the prevalence of iron deficiency anemia among Baltimore City middle school students.

Baltimore's Festival of the Arts **\$25,000**

Toward the 1998 CityArts Grants Program designated for emerging arts groups reaching underserved neighborhoods.

Empower Baltimore Management Corporation **\$25,000**

For an initiative to identify out-of-state minority businesses for possible relocation to Baltimore's Empowerment Zones.

The Growth Management Institute **\$15,000**

For a study of the 1996 Maryland Smart Growth legislation and its potential effectiveness.

Maryland Food Bank/Baltimore Area Gleaning Network **\$24,465**

For initial staffing and equipment costs to provide coordination of volunteers and farmers in a city-wide effort to glean and distribute recoverable fresh produce from regional farms.

Parks and People Foundation **\$62,176**

For the second and third phases of the development of a comprehensive strategy for management of open spaces in Baltimore City.

Women's Housing Coalition **\$58,200**

Toward the development of the Margaret J. Bennett Home single room occupancy project for low-income, disabled women in Baltimore City.

**The following back issues of
The Abell Report
are available.**

Check request and send to:

The Abell Foundation
111 S. Calvert St.
Baltimore, MD 21202

PLEASE SEND ME:

- "Baltimore Unbound";** Study Warns: Foundering Baltimore City Could Pull Baltimore Region Down With it; Presents Recommendations For Survival and Growth of Suburbs, City Renowned urbanologist David Rusk applies his ideas in a study of Baltimore's continuing economic stagnation, offering a frank assessment of its causes, and makes specific recommendations for solutions.
- The Cultural Arts as Economic Development; What Baltimore Can Learn From Charlotte.** Can Baltimore position its considerable cultural arts assets to better serve the community? Is Charlotte's effort a model?
- The Effects of Divorce On Children** "What helps? What hurts? Three law professors examine selected programs. Recommended: Family Focused Court Reform.
- Moving Forward With Reverse Commuting: Needed, A Strategy** A "Mobility Strategy" could make a positive difference to Baltimore City and to the entire Baltimore region, but developing one has proven, historically, difficult.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____