



West Virginia Universal Free Meals Pilot Evaluation Report

The West Virginia Universal Free Meals Pilot project provided a nutritious breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of financial need, in 72 schools in seven counties during the 2011–2012 school year. This report examines the implementation and impacts of the pilot, including both the benefits realized and the challenges encountered and overcome.

Method of study. The report draws on information from surveys, individual and focus group interviews, extant data sources, and WESTEST 2 results.

Findings. At the conclusion of the pilot project's first year, analysis of WESTEST 2 data revealed no major differences in student achievement—an unsurprising finding given the brief duration of the project. However, schools reported having healthier students, more nutritious food, and more food options. Stakeholders also reported that the overall environment of the schools improved, and behavior problems decreased, while students' excused and unexcused absence records indicate that attendance rates in high schools leveled off rather than continuing to decline. Teacher-student relationships reportedly improved in elementary schools that implemented breakfast-in-the-classroom. According to most teachers, students also exhibited better concentration, higher levels of energy, and a more active engagement in the classroom. Research suggests that achievement gains may be expected in the future as a result of these improvements. Major stakeholder concerns included financing the program; inadequate kitchen equipment and cooking staff to produce more school-made meals; finding strategies to prevent loss of time for classroom instruction; insufficient time between breakfast and lunch; student wait time for meals and lack of time to eat; and food waste. For the most part, these issues became less of a concern by the end of the year, and the overall sentiment toward the program remained very high. The overwhelming majority of stakeholders reported that they wished to continue implementation of the program despite any challenges they encountered.

Recommendations. The program should be expanded and a longitudinal study of these 72 schools should coincide to analyze long-term impacts. To alleviate financial concerns, the WVDE should continue to aid districts in obtaining funding. Time should be allocated for key stakeholders to meet and exchange information about successful strategies. Districts initiating the program must provide schools with adequate time to make arrangements to avoid shortages in staffing, kitchen equipment, and supplies. Counties and schools should involve all relevant stakeholders in the decision making process, especially regarding the choice of appropriate breakfast strategies, scheduling, and type and quality of meals. Districts must allow schools the freedom to explore strategies that fit their needs (e.g. grab-and-go breakfast versus breakfast-after-first). Information must be well-communicated to staff and students that participation in school meals is voluntary and, while calories are limited per meal, students may have as many fruits and vegetables as they want. Proper monitoring of the program will help ensure informed decision making regarding meal schedules, lunch lines, and food distribution, to help alleviate concerns about student hunger and food waste.

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