

BREAKFAST

Eleanor Moore, manager of ContinYou's Breakfast Clubs Plus network, considers how secondary schools can boost their breakfast provision.

Head the one about the teenager who had a packet of salt 'n' vinegar for breakfast? It's a common story: young people get up, dash straight out the door, maybe buy some crisps or chocolate on their way to school – and that's their fuel for learning until lunchtime.

You'd expect their concentration levels to suffer as a result, and all the evidence supports this view. A Reading University study in 2003 went so far as to say that children who don't eat proper breakfasts 'end up with the reaction times of pensioners'.

The benefits of clubs at primary level have been well documented. Improvements in attendance, concentration, achievement and social development are frequently recorded alongside improved school-home relations, pupil-staff relationships and benefits to the overall health of the school population. Clubs can reduce bullying; develop confidence, self-esteem and motivation; and support a whole range of other school/community activities.

But when these benefits could clearly apply to all young people, it seems an anomaly that the majority of breakfast clubs are currently based in primary schools. The case for breakfast clubs in secondary schools is compelling, particularly when you consider the additional challenges that exist for teenage pupils.

For a start, there is generally less provision of appropriate early-morning 'childcare' for older children. Breakfast clubs offer teenagers a 'safe space' to go to before school, a place where they won't have to worry about the bullying and peer pressure that can flourish in an unsupervised yard or playground. And while problems such as bullying, antisocial behaviour, isolation, boredom and family crises also exist for younger children, the infrastructure, time and support to identify and counteract them is less available for 11-18s. Secondary schools can be big, anonymous places where individual support and nurture can slip down the list of priorities in the face of external pressures and targets.



A safe place to go

As an informal 'place to go', clubs give staff an opportunity to develop relationships with pupils. Although important at primary level, the chance to experience a different set of relations with staff is invaluable at secondary level, where issues of respect, trust and expectation are crucial to successful classrooms. Positive outcomes are even more likely when pupils have a chance to shape and lead the club. These opportunities have proven particularly

effective in re-engaging alienated students.

Breakfast clubs also offer an opportunity for homework/research time. Older pupils are more likely to have curriculum work that demands independent research and attention outside the classroom. Linking the breakfast club with IT facilities, newspapers and topical magazines enhances students' capacity to learn research skills, develop a broader world view and may attract pupils who wouldn't ever consider attending a 'homework' or 'booster' club. In addition, it

Teenagers need

also offers out-of-curriculum hours access to IT for those who do not have it at home.

And underlying all of this is the promotion of a positive attitude towards diet and health. Teenagers are at an age where they are particularly susceptible to media and peer pressure on issues around weight, image and food choice. They experience considerable growth and hormonal changes; and the behavioural patterns and attitudes they develop around food are likely to stay with them into adulthood. While health promotion may be taught in the classroom, breakfast clubs can communicate these messages just as effectively, and moreover, offer the emotional support needed to ensure young people stay on track with their health.

The biggest challenges

Staffing, funding and resources, and finding an appropriate location are the key challenges for any breakfast club, but there are other specific issues for secondary school clubs.

- Engaging senior management and governors: the competing agendas, targets and pressures faced by secondary school senior management teams, coupled with greater pupil numbers and larger premises, can mean less time and energy for developing new initiatives. If the school is working on many other initiatives, capacity may be a problem.
- There may be a lack of understanding of the link between breakfast clubs and the attainment agenda. Again, although this link has been well-documented, information may well have focused on primary-level audiences, or may not have been disseminated broadly enough.
- The size and scope of secondary schools present practical problems. Ensuring the

provision of healthy food for large numbers of students; providing the 'added value' activities and support; and finding a venue that is large enough to cater for the school population, yet small enough to make a personalised 'club space' is a difficult balancing act.

- Engaging older pupils is more difficult. Firstly, many 11 to 18 year-olds have an ambivalent attitude to school and would prefer to spend as little time there as possible. Making breakfast clubs cool enough, finding a balance of healthy food (that they will eat), and overcoming negative perceptions of a 'school' activity takes skill. Secondly, teenagers are notorious for finding it hard to get out of bed. Recruitment for early morning activities, therefore, especially when 11-18s are more likely to be responsible for their own transport to school, will always be an inherent hurdle to overcome.

- Engaging parents is more difficult. While the importance of pre-school supervision is apparent to parents/carers of younger children, it may become less so for parents of teenagers. It is harder, therefore, to get parents to support the club – either through encouraging their children to attend, or by offering the voluntary time or resources that ensure the club remains open. This is even more of an issue among clubs that charge.

Breakfast clubs offer teenagers a 'safe place' to go before school...



Top tips

Pupil involvement

Recruit them from the start, have suggestion boxes for breakfast foods or allocate responsibility for menu planning to a particular group. Offer opportunities for 'breakfast buddies' or peer mentoring. Involving pupils in the design, running and marketing of the club will reduce the stigma of it being a 'school activity' and could elicit some good ideas.

Creating the right environment

Encourage pupils to design and decorate the space. Consider using a venue other than the dining hall or adapt the room to create a 'coffee shop' vibe. If you have to change this back before lunch, allocate responsibilities for setting out newspapers, serving hot drinks and putting out cushions/bean bags to older students. Design funky menus. One school has plasma screens in the canteen and uses these to project videos or news broadcasts in the morning. Having a radio on immediately creates a homely atmosphere.

Access to IT and study areas

Offer use of computers, board games or books after eating. Have a supervisor on hand to keep an eye out for problems, but encourage pupils to 'surf' on the net, finish any homework or just read and relax. This is particularly welcome on winter days as an alternative to a rain-soaked schoolyard.

Transition

Arrange for Year 6 pupils of neighbouring schools to attend the club in the last week of the summer term – or pay a visit to their breakfast clubs and introduce yours.

Embedding the club

Draw up a statement of aims for the club and a set of guidance documents and regulations. Include the club in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) – and allocate some of the SIP budget to sustaining the club. Include responsibility for overseeing the club in the job description of one of the senior management team. Encourage teaching and other staff to use the club. Recognise pupil involvement in managing and running the club in school assemblies and newsletters.

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