School meals - Eat tu Principals?

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — August 30, 2016

The Brookings Institute released a report [1] on the significant but unheralded role of the school principal in determining the diet children receive while in school. They cite three prior studies:

- **Universal Free Breakfast** [2] – which concluded “… the policy resulted in small increases in breakfast participation … We find limited evidence of policy impacts on academic outcomes.
- **Breakfast in the Classroom** [3] - which concluded “… our findings provide no evidence of hoped-for gains in academic performance, or of feared increases in obesity.”

and my personal favorite:

- **Water Jets** [4] – which found “Results from this study show an association between a relatively low-cost water availability intervention and decreased student weight.” And the weight decrease was – wait for it – 2.5% for boys and 2.2% for girls. And we know that this is important because it has a significant p-value! That is until you recognize that for a typically obese 10-year old boy [5] with a BMI of 21 or more this represents a reduction of about 2 pounds.

The article goes on to use these citations to state that such programs “are important for student outcomes.”

Now they do make a good point that despite nationally mandated standards and district level policies implementation is local, that is, the principals make the final decisions. Fair enough. But then we come off the rails in another way.

“Alternatively, even if principals are fully aware of the benefits of these programs, they often have other competing priorities that dominate, and are focused on management efficiency, not
necessarily student benefit. Apparent from our research is that principals, when making decisions that impact school meals, prioritize academics over the meals programs. Concerns about student safety and school cleanliness also weigh heavily in their decisions. For instance, we found that some principals opted not to install water jets in the cafeteria, despite the benefit to student health [4], in order to avoid spilled water that could result in students slipping.” Italics and bold added.

I understand that a hungry child needs help and that school systems are socially efficient means of providing this care. But really, criticizing school principals for prioritizing academics over meals? What's next -- McDonald’s stressing reading over Happy Meals?

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