

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY



Evaluation of the School Breakfast Clubs Program

Final report

February 2019

Dr Fiona MacDonald

vu.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00124K
CRICOS Provider No. 02475D



Abbreviations

DET	Department of Education and Training Victoria
SBCP	School Breakfast Clubs Program
SS	Special School ¹
SFOE	Student Family Occupation Education

¹ In this report, Special Schools refers to all schools who provide special education for students with moderate to severe disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and physical, mental or health impairment. These include specialist development schools, schools for Deaf Children and schools for Autism.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This is the final report from the evaluation research of the School Breakfast Clubs Program (SBCP). In 2015, the Victorian Government committed \$13.7 million to partner with Foodbank Victoria and establish breakfast clubs in 500 of Victoria's most disadvantaged primary schools. The overarching aim of this evaluation research was to evaluate how well the program achieved its stated purpose of tackling the disadvantage students experience through hunger and poverty, to help student learning and engagement with school, and to build connections between students, families, school communities and local communities.

Evaluation research of the School Breakfast Clubs Program

The research investigated the implementation and operation of breakfast clubs, identifying effective aspects of the program and aspects that require improvement. The evaluation research investigated the impact of the program on student learning and connectedness to school and how schools built connections between breakfast clubs, school communities and local communities. The Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (SBCP M&E), comprising representatives from Foodbank Victoria and the Department of Education and Training Victoria, provided guidance and feedback on the evaluation research, including assistance with the refinement of data collection instruments. The data were collected and analysed by the report author in consultation with colleagues from Victoria University as acknowledged.

The evaluation research was guided by the following questions:

1. How does the SBCP address the needs of students who attend school without eating breakfast and provide them with the opportunity to participate and engage with all aspects of school?
2. How does the SBCP improve student learning and connectedness to school?
3. How effective is the SBCP and how can it be improved and evaluated in the future?

Key findings

Frequency and attendance

Foodbank Victoria, in partnership with the Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET) has established breakfast clubs in 500 Victorian government schools. Many schools had identified a need to provide food to students who arrived at school hungry. Schools were responding to the need as best they could. Some schools handed out muesli bars or a piece of fruit while others provided cereal, toast, or juice served at a sit down breakfast.

Foodbank Victoria guarantees delivery of healthy, nutritious long-life and fresh food to schools twice a term. Between 2016 and 2018, Foodbank Victoria delivered over 1.8 million kilograms of food to SBCP schools.

The SBCP enables 30% of all Victorian government primary school students to access a breakfast club, providing healthy and nutritious food to students who may otherwise come to school hungry.

Over 50,000 breakfasts are served every school week in SBCP schools.

More than 40% of SBCP schools conduct their program five days a week. The frequency of breakfast clubs in SBCP schools has increased consistently between 2016 and 2018.

On average, every SBCP school serves 33 students, each day the breakfast club is conducted. The overall attendance at breakfast clubs represents 21% of the total enrolments in SBCP schools.

The findings suggest that breakfast clubs are meeting the needs of more than the one in five children identified by welfare agencies who arrive at school without eating breakfast.^{10,11,12,13,59}

Non-metropolitan schools provide breakfast for more of their students: 40% of non-metropolitan schools serve breakfast to over 25% of their student population, compared to 12% of metropolitan schools.

Schools with the highest level of disadvantage, as determined by their Student Family Occupation Education (SFOE) index, have been the most responsive to student need with 51% of the 237 schools with the highest SFOE index conducting their program five days a week. The frequency of breakfast clubs is consistent across metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools.

Approximately 165 schools conduct their program one or two days a week. The findings indicate that staffing is the greatest barrier to offering their program more frequently. Other issues include insufficient space to run the program and storage for the food provided by Foodbank Victoria.

Improved student learning

Teachers report that breakfast clubs have had a significant impact on student learning:

- 95% of teachers note an improvement in concentration
- 90% have observed greater levels of engagement and focus for students who attend
- 88% of teachers report improvements in student's social skills
- 85% of teachers note a positive impact on the academic outcomes of students who attended breakfast club.

Teachers indicate that the combined improvement in concentration, engagement, social skills and other educational factors has had a positive effect on students' capacity to learn and educational attainment.

Increased attendance and punctuality to class are attributed to the SBCP by 85% of teachers. They have observed an improvement in students' attitudes toward school and their readiness to learn at the start of the day.

Students also recognise the benefits of the SBCP, linking the healthy food they eat at breakfast club with an improvement in their capacity to learn.

Breakfast clubs enable schools to teach children about the benefits of eating breakfast, healthy nutrition to their learning and overall development:

- 89% of schools use breakfast clubs to teach the importance of breakfast
- 89% of teachers note improvements in student's awareness of healthy eating
- 92% of teachers report that breakfast clubs have a positive impact on the health-promoting environment of their school.

Schools have made strong links between breakfast clubs and their welfare and wellbeing practices. Schools value the opportunity to informally touch base with students on a regular basis, particularly those in need of additional support.

Operational practices

Foodbank Victoria provides an extensive menu, including grab-and-go options such as fruit cups or an apple, to schools who are able to order as much food as they need to conduct their breakfast club.

The flexibility of the SBCP is acknowledged as a significant strength of the program. The capacity to adapt breakfast club practices to the unique needs of their school community is highly valued by schools, contributing to the positive response to the invitation to participate in the SBCP.

Staffing the breakfast club is the most significant challenge for schools, over 72% identify this as an ongoing barrier to the frequency and reach of their breakfast club. Despite this barrier, schools have made a significant commitment to running breakfast clubs.

The findings show that school staff are largely responsible for delivering the program, with 88% of breakfast clubs conducted by school staff. Teachers are supportive of the program however the findings indicate that education support and wellbeing staff have made the greatest commitment to operating breakfast clubs.

Many schools engage volunteers from their school community and local community to assist with the running of breakfast club. Schools with regular volunteers are very appreciative of their commitment to the breakfast club.

The findings indicate that some schools prefer not to engage volunteers with their breakfast club with 30% reporting that they prefer to run the program with their own staff.

Around 25% of schools report that they pay staff to conduct the program.

Schools have created leadership roles for senior primary school students at breakfast clubs with over 50% of schools reporting that students assist with daily operations.

More than 85% of schools provide additional food at their breakfast club. Schools report that their students prefer breakfast food that is not part of the Foodbank Victoria menu, with toast and spreads the most popular additional item. Preparing toast adds to the preparation time of breakfasts clubs.

Approximately 40% of schools have entered into partnerships with local businesses to donate the additional food for their breakfast club, over 75% purchase items from school funds, with some doing both.

Connectedness and Relationships

The evaluation research shows that the SBCP successfully addresses aspects of disadvantage for students. Nutrition is the focal point of breakfast clubs, responding to the immediate hunger needs of students, but the wrap around benefits of the program provide greater avenues for connection and engagement with students improving their capacity to learn.

Breakfast clubs enable schools to create nurturing, caring environments, where students can start the day having eaten a healthy breakfast and be better prepared for learning.

Schools report that breakfast clubs strengthen relationships:

- 95% of teachers observe a positive impact on social relations between students and school staff
- 89% of teachers report a positive impact on social relations between students and community members

Breakfast clubs build connections with students, enabling schools to create safe and welcoming spaces, where children and families can connect with volunteers, teachers and the broader school community.

The case study research demonstrated the commitment of schools to the inclusive nature of the SBCP, breaking down the shame and stigma that children and families living with disadvantage experience.^{14,16}

The food provided by Foodbank Victoria is vital to the success of breakfast clubs but the invaluable support and assistance provided through its staff, induction program and communication is highly valued by SBCP schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for the SBCP emerged directly from the evaluation research findings:

Recommendation 1: That the Department of Education and Training and Foodbank Victoria investigate the possibility of providing additional practical assistance to schools to reduce the time required to prepare food for breakfast clubs. The aim is to reduce the time commitment for schools and make breakfast clubs more efficient. For example, the provision of larger (4 slice) or commercial sized toasters to schools would cut the preparation time for schools offering toast.

Recommendation 2: That the DET and Foodbank Victoria investigate ways to support schools to increase the frequency of breakfast clubs and provide breakfast to students every day where possible. For example, the DET could increase the scope of Foodbank Victoria to provide more support, or facilitate funding, for schools who are finding it difficult to offer their breakfast club more frequently.

Recommendation 3 That schools be encouraged to consider the days of the week they offer breakfast clubs when not operating every school day. The aim is to recognise the challenges for children going without food for extended days when breakfast clubs do not run every school day. For example, the Foodbank Victoria toolkit and induction program could be amended to include information to encourage schools to consider the impact of long periods between breakfast club for students living with hunger and poverty.

Recommendation 4: That schools be encouraged to keep accurate records of attendance numbers. The aim is to support schools to monitor their own breakfast club and implement a quality improvement program to ensure the program continues to meet the needs of their school community. The records would also assist with future evaluation of the overall program.

Recommendation 5: That the breakfast-for-all approach of the SBCP be maintained and schools encouraged to promote the inclusive nature of their breakfast club. The aim is to ensure that all children are able to share the benefits and experience of a healthy, communal breakfast.