



## How to do a successful pilot

By Dana Woldow

After parents have made a good faith effort to support the nutrition department by getting more meal applications returned, or getting some positive media coverage of the school food program, or canceling the fund raising bake sales that were happening at lunch time, it is fair to ask your student nutrition director to run a pilot at your school testing one of the changes you and your group want to make. Let's say you decide to push for lower sugar cereals; working with your director, design a pilot to replace the current offerings with lower sugar choices. Ask your director to agree to run the pilot for at least 3 weeks, in order to give it time to catch on with the students. Make sure she agrees not to shut the pilot down after just a few days, even if the participation does drop; she should give your group an opportunity to step up the publicity if the pilot is slow getting off the ground.

Her responsibility will be to arrange for only lower sugar cereals to be offered during the time of the pilot. Your responsibility will be to make sure the students are excited about, and willing to try, the new offerings. Consider numerous different strategies, including doing a school wide breakfast promotion, with posters advertising the benefits of eating a healthy meal, and class incentives for kids to eat breakfast.

The first step, after getting permission to do the pilot, is to make sure that all parties at your school site – Principal, teachers, other staff, and parents – are aware that the pilot has been approved by the nutrition department, and that you would like their support too before the pilot begins. Explain why it is in the best interests of the children to start the day with less sugar. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to share any concerns they might have about the pilot before it begins.

- ▶ See if the Principal will allow you and the nutrition director to attend a staff meeting and make a 5 minute presentation, so that the teachers are all on board before you begin.
- ▶ Go to the PTA or other parent group meeting and make your pitch to the parents.
- ▶ Sometimes people will oppose something new just because no one ever asked them for their opinion. Don't assume that everyone will automatically support the idea of a less sugary breakfast, and don't dismiss any concerns people raise. Try to address people's concerns with respect, but also with facts.
- ▶ There are many studies available that link better nutrition with improved classroom behavior and better academic performance. Make sure people are aware of this research.

► Don't try to rush into doing the pilot without first laying the ground work in your community. If people feel like this decision was made by just a few insider parents, with no buy in from the school community, it won't matter how healthy the breakfast is, people will oppose it.

It is vital to have the support of teachers for any school food pilot; their support can make or break your efforts. Once you have the teachers on board, ask them talk up the new breakfast in class. See if they are willing to give a small reward (which you provide) to every student who tries the breakfast the first week; a pencil or sticker is usually enough for elementary school kids.

Start calling and e-mailing parents (this is where having your group of supporters comes in so handy) and explain to them that school food reform starts right here, right now, and that what you need them to do is just commit to having their kids eat school breakfast for one or two weeks. Point out the advantages - that it means less morning chaos at home, even if it also means having to get out of the house earlier in order to get to school in time for breakfast. The kids are more likely to eat instead of dawdle and pick at their food, if they are seeing all their friends eating too. The kids will think it is novel and fun, at least for a few weeks.

Get the Principal to let you send home flyers explaining what the pilot is and why it is being done, and spell out clearly what it is you want parents to do (bring kids to school 20 minutes early to eat school breakfast for a week? remember to send breakfast money in addition to lunch money?) Be sure to mark the dates of the pilot in bold. Give the pilot weeks a special name - like Fit & Fun Breakfast Weeks, or Brain Power Breakfast Weeks - and promote the hell out of it before it happens. The Friday before the pilot, see if the Principal will let you make an announcement in the morning or at lunchtime reminding the kids to come to breakfast starting Monday morning.

If you are lucky, there will be some supportive teachers who would be willing to join their class for breakfast in the cafeteria at least one morning. If the school really embraces it, there might be a small reward given to every class that can get a certain minimum participation each day (maybe half the kids?) Can you get a parent volunteer (you, perhaps?) to go into the cafeteria and read the kids a story while they eat? Your school might have a small PA system or cordless microphone you can use for this.

Meet with your nutrition director at the end of the first pilot week and review the results. Did participation drop? If so, you need to ramp up your publicity efforts. More calls and e-mails to parents, more flyers sent home, more classroom incentives. If participation has stayed close to the same, or increased at all, ask your nutrition director to make the change permanent. If there has been little or no drop in participation, she should be more than happy to do this for you.

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