Breakfast clubs found to boost primary pupils’ reading, writing and maths results

Breakfast clubs that offer pupils in primary schools a free and nutritious meal before school can boost their reading, writing and maths results by the equivalent of two months’ progress over the course of a year, according to the results of a randomised controlled trial published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) today.

106 English primary schools with higher than average numbers of disadvantaged pupils took part in the trial, which was delivered to 8,600 pupils by the charity Magic Breakfast. Over the course of an academic year, parents were encouraged to send their child to free breakfast clubs before registration. The children were able to choose between cereals, wheat biscuits, porridge and bagels.

The independent evaluation by researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the National Children’s Bureau found that Year 2 children in schools with a breakfast club made two additional months’ progress in reading, writing and maths compared with a similar group whose schools were not given support to offer breakfast.

The evaluators reported that the pupils’ concentration and behaviour improved too. This suggests that breakfast clubs provide an opportunity to improve outcomes for all children, not just those who actually attend, by creating better classroom environments. The impact for Year 6 pupils was slightly smaller but still promising.

The results suggest that for pupils in relatively disadvantaged schools it is attending the breakfast club, not just eating breakfast, which leads to academic improvements. This could be due to the nutritional benefits of the breakfast itself, or the social or educational benefits of the breakfast club environment.

The 2013 School Food Plan recommended breakfast clubs should be set up in schools with the highest levels of deprivation. This evaluation suggests there might be benefits to an expansion of the policy using a free, universal and before-school model - and that this is something that schools should also consider in terms of their own spending priorities.

The EEF has published evaluations of three more trials today, all designed to find out what does and doesn’t work when it comes to teaching and learning.

1,850 children in 30 primary schools took part in a trial of ReflectED, a programme developed by Rosendale Primary School in Lambeth to develop pupils’ ability to think about their learning, assess their progress and set and monitor goals. Children kept a record of their learning through photographs, written notes and audio recordings made using Evernote software. They were encouraged to review these records over time and discuss them with their teachers and classmates.

The evaluators from the University of Manchester found promising evidence that the 10 year olds who took part in the ReflectED programme made additional progress in maths compared to the pupils who did not participate. These results were from a small trial so further research is required to determine whether a similar impact might be achieved in other schools.

Results from two other trials are published today:

- A pilot trial of ThinkForward, a coaching programme to support GCSE pupils at risk of not being in education, employment or training after school, was designed to find out if this particular method of coaching could be tested at a larger scale. The evaluators from the Sheffield Institute of Education at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Essex found that more work is needed to develop a model that would produce robust results in a randomised trial. A small-scale assessment of the impact of the programme was carried out at the same time, but did not find any evidence that it improved outcomes.
An evaluation by The Institute for Effective Education of The Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Project (TEEP), a whole-school professional development course delivered by outstanding teachers, found it didn’t have an impact on pupils in low performing schools’ GCSE English and Maths results. Teachers received three full-days of training on topics including pedagogical approaches, phases of learning and effective teacher behaviours. The evaluation did not measure whether TEEP had an impact on younger students or the level of implementation across the school the following year.

The EEF has also published an evaluation of a form of Project-Based Learning, an approach to lower secondary teaching where learning is organised around a single project, driven by an essential question that students aim to answer. In this trial, each project contained significant academic content and involved students creating a high quality product or exhibition that was shown to an external audience. For example, pupils explored the history of significant people from their local area (covering history, writing and art), published a book and held a launch for local community members.

Evaluators from the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at Durham University and York Trials Unit found from a randomised controlled trial in 24 schools that the intervention had no clear impact on pupils’ levels of literacy, although participating schools pointed to a number of other benefits of the programme like improved teamwork and communication skills.

The results of an evaluation of Online Reading Support was published at the end of October.

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation and of the Sutton Trust, said: