

Title: School breakfast club programs in Australian primary schools, not just addressing food insecurity: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Background. Many Australian primary schools have established school breakfast clubs (SBCs) to address concerns about children arriving at school hungry and the subsequent impact on learning but their effectiveness is uncertain. This study aimed to identify the perceived benefits, impacts, operational practices and challenges of running SBCs. *Methods.* Case studies with ten Australian primary schools from different socioeconomic and geographic areas. Focus groups or interviews were held with 142 participants including: students, parents/carers, school staff and funding body representatives between July 2016 and October 2017. *Results.* There were no eligibility criteria to attend SBCs with all students able to attend, regardless of household income. Thus, participating in the SBC was often reported as a matter of choice rather than a consequence of food insecurity. Participants, including children, discussed the many social benefits of SBCs (i.e., social eating, relationship building, school connection and engagement) as well as perceived improved classroom behavior. Challenges for program delivery included resource limitations, particularly the reliance on volunteers and sourcing food. *Discussion/Conclusion.* SBCs offered a range of benefits beyond their primary goal of addressing food security. SBCs were highly valued by members of the school community for their social, welfare, wellbeing and educational benefits, but program sustainability is constrained by resource limitations.

Keywords: Child Health, School health, Social capital, Social connection, Wellbeing

Introduction

In response to concerns about children attending school without eating breakfast, Australian state governments and non-government organisations have supported the establishment of school breakfast clubs (SBCs) (Jose et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2019). Funding for SBCs varies for each Australian state in line with education provision across Australia, which is governed at a state level. Funding support for SBCs in some states is not directed to schools, but to a food relief agency which then supports schools to deliver the SBC (Byrne et al., 2018; MacDonald, 2019). Nationally, exact details about the delivery of SBCs are unknown, but SBCs may be offered daily or less frequently, onsite at a school or at a location nearby, sometime in the hour before school.

Australian schools have no history of subsidised meal provision with Australian children generally bringing their lunch from home (Bell & Swinburn, 2004). Many schools offer a food service such as a school canteen where children may purchase an entire meal or supplement food brought from home (Bell & Swinburn, 2004). Primary school canteens generally do not open before school, some may open during the mid-morning school break as well as during the lunch break. It is unknown exactly how many schools in Australia currently offer such services, but 85% of Tasmanian schools have a canteen/food service (unpublished data) and a survey of metropolitan schools in Melbourne in 2012 found 88% offered a food service (Chellappah, Tonkin, Douglas Gregg, De Courten, & Reid, 2012).

Breakfast consumption is associated with a range of health benefits and cognitive performance, such as nutritional intake, healthy body weight, memory and school achievement (Frisvold, 2015; Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metz1, 2005) particularly in children with compromised nutritional status (Hoyland, Dye, & Lawton, 2009). National Australian surveys have found that breakfast skipping is common among

Australian children with 13.2% of boys and 18.6% of girls aged 2-17 years skipping breakfast on at least one out of two days (Smith, Breslin, et al., 2017). Almost one in five Australian parents (18%) living in households experiencing food insecurity (not having regular access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs (World Food Programme, 1996)) reported their child/children would attend school without eating breakfast at least once per week (Foodbank, April 2018).

Reviews of the provision of school meals (breakfast or lunch) have reported small physical and psychosocial benefits such as weight and school attendance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kristjansson et al., 2007) and improved academic performance in undernourished children (Adolphus, Lawton, & Dye, 2013). Evidence that SBCs improve classroom behavior and academic performance remains unclear. Three randomized controlled trials that provided free school breakfasts for all students found that they did not improve classroom behavior or academic performance when measured using standardised tests (Bernstein L, McLaughlin J, Crepinsek M, & Daft L, 2004; Mhurchu et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2011). However, in these trials children tended to substitute eating breakfast at home for breakfast at school making it difficult to demonstrate any effect of SBCs on classroom behaviour and academic performance.

Previous evaluations of SBCs identified challenges in delivering SBCs in the Australian school setting (Byrne et al., 2018). These included access to suitable facilities and equipment, finding people to coordinate and deliver the service, ensuring the school community is aware of the program and funding the program. Given the expansion in the number of SBCs being offered in Australian primary schools and inconclusive evidence of academic and behavioral benefit when measured using standardised tests, there is a need to better understand the benefits and impacts, operational practices and challenges of running SBCs in primary schools as perceived by those involved. Given the differences between how

SBCs are delivered across Australian states this paper combines data from two independent evaluations of SBCs in primary schools undertaken in the Australian states of Victoria and Tasmania between June 2016 and October 2017. Both evaluations adopted a qualitative approach using multiple school case studies to obtain in-depth insights into the operation of SBCs in each state.

Overview of school breakfast clubs in Tasmania and Victoria.

At the time of conducting this evaluation in 2016 the Tasmanian State Government was not providing any direct support to schools or food relief agencies to support SBCs. However, between 2011 and 2014 the Tasmanian State Government had provided financial support directly to schools (\$400,000 in total, up to \$5,000 per school) to establish SBCs (Department of Education, 2012). Ninety-four schools had received funding through this initiative (personal communication) which ceased in 2014. Many schools continued their SBC after the cessation of the initiative, seeking support from community organisations and the private sector (Vandenberg M, Jose K, Abbott-Chapman J, Venn A, & Smith K, 2017).

In the 2015-16 budget, the Victorian Government committed \$13.7 million to partner with Foodbank Victoria, to establish SBCs in 500 of Victoria's most disadvantaged government primary schools during 2016-19. The aim of the SBCs was to tackle the disadvantage children experience through the effects of hunger when they arrive at school without having a healthy breakfast (MacDonald, 2019). Foodbank provided non-perishable and 'long-life' food to all schools (see Table 1) at the beginning of each term and helped schools establish and manage their programs.

Methods

Researchers in Tasmania and Victoria had adopted qualitative approaches using multiple schools as case studies to gain an in-depth understanding of SBCs and their role in

Australian primary schools (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Methods for the individual studies are provided below. The findings are presented using a cross case synthesis (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). Ethics approval was received from the Ethics approval was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania; H0015712) and the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE17-102). Approval to conduct research in government schools was received from the Tasmanian Department of Education (FILE 2016-22) and the Department of Education and Training Victoria (2016_003212). All adults provided written or verbal consent and parents/carers were required to give written consent for participating children. In Victoria, children gave written consent while in Tasmania verbal assent was ascertained.

Participants

School recruitment.

Purposive sampling in both states included school size, urban/rural location and level of disadvantage to ensure a diversity of schools were recruited. To assist with recruitment the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) provided researchers with a list of schools that received funding during 2011 to 2014 to establish a SBC. The DoE also provided the Occupational Needs Index (OENI), a relative measure of socioeconomic status and student need for each school (Department of Education, 2015). This information was used to assist with purposeful sampling. All schools invited to participate still had a SBC. School principals in five schools were sent an approach letter and information sheet inviting them to participate in the study. When a principal declined to participate, another school was selected. This process continued until five schools had been recruited. Four principals declined to participate due to workloads. Declining schools ranged from high to low disadvantage.

Frequency of operation of the SBC and funding arrangements were unknown in the Tasmanian schools prior to enrolment in the study.

The Victorian case studies supplemented the the annual survey of SBCs undertaken in 500 of the most disadvantaged primary schools (MacDonald, 2019). The level of disadvantage in Victorian schools used to guide sampling was the Victorian Department of Educations' measure of socioeconomic status and student need, the Student Family Occupation Education (SFOE) Index (State Government of Victoria, 2018). Food relief organisation, Foodbank Victoria, identified fifty schools from the larger study that had a SBC that operated three days or more per week, had no SBC prior to the provision of funding in 2016-2019 and a minimum of 25 students attended the SBC. To ensure small schools were not excluded by this criterion, they were considered if attendance at their SBC represented over 50% of their enrolments. Five principals of Victorian schools were contacted by phone inviting them to participate and emailed an explanatory statement outlining the study. Four of the five schools initially approached agreed to participate. The timing of the research did not suit one school, so another school was approached and they agreed to participate. Based on experience undertaking qualitative research researchers considered five schools in each state sufficient to capture different approaches to SBC delivery (Yin, 2014).

Individual recruitment.

Following enrolment of schools into the study, in both states the coordinator of the SBC or a nominated teacher was contacted and provided with information about the study. This included a sample newsletter article informing parents/carers about the study, information sheets (for staff, volunteers and parents/carers), consent forms, and advice (i.e., outline of the research, voluntary participation, information on interviews and focus groups) for recruiting participants into the study. Recruitment was undertaken by each school,

focusing on staff or coordinators of the program, parents, volunteers and children aged six years and older. Some parents and children were recruited at each school prior to researchers attending the program through newsletters or personal invitation. Some participants were recruited on the day following conversations with researchers. In Tasmania recruitment for the study focused on children aged 7 years and above and their parents/carers who attended the SBC, while in the Victorian study participation was open to all children, regardless of whether they attended the SBC. In Tasmania, representatives from the funding bodies were sent an information sheet and consent form, inviting participation in order to understand their role in supporting SBCs. Victorian schools were compensated with a day of casual relief teacher payment in recognition of the work required to set up interviews and focus groups. No Tasmanian schools were compensated.

Study Instruments

Surveys.

In Tasmania, principals completed a short survey online or in hard copy, that collected details about the SBC such as information on eligibility criteria to attend the SBC, number of children who usually attended, days the program was available, and the types of foods provided (see supplementary information 1). Principals were also asked to report how the SBC was funded and to provide contact details for the funding bodies. In Victoria, this information was known to researchers from annual surveys of schools, additional questions on these issues were asked of principals and coordinators during one-on-one interviews.

Interviews, Focus groups and Observation.

The interview and focus group schedules were developed following a review of the literature and discussions with stakeholders and researchers (see supplementary information 2). Interview schedules in Tasmania and Victoria were developed for each population group

(students, parents, volunteers/staff, representatives from funding bodies) and included background information, experiences, benefits and impacts, and challenges or suggested improvements to the SBC. To facilitate communication and act as prompts to stimulate children's responses, feeling faces were used in the Tasmanian focus groups (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010).

Tasmanian adult participants completed a short demographic details form, and children in both states reported on their usual involvement in the SBC (see supplementary information 3). Two of three researchers (author initials) visited each Tasmanian SBC during July - November 2016. During the SBC, children participated in focus groups while parents/carers participated in separate interviews. As the focus groups were conducted during the breakfast club, children were free to join or leave the group as they wished (Gibson, 2007). Hence, group numbers fluctuated as children joined and left discussions. SBC volunteers and school staff were interviewed on the same day at the end of the SBC or followed up on another day if they were not available. Representatives from funding bodies were also interviewed. Six interviews were conducted by phone (one funder, two parents, three teachers) who were unable to meet with researchers face-to-face.

The five Victorian case studies were conducted by the Victorian researcher (author initials) during two or three-day visits to each school during August - October 2017. Five focus groups were conducted with children (two groups at each of two schools and one group at a third, with 2 – 6 children in each group). Interviews of parents/carers, staff, volunteers occurred at a different time and location from the SBC. One phone interview was conducted with a teacher who was unavailable on the designated data collection day. During the visits to the Tasmanian and Victorian schools, observations and field notes were made about the SBC (i.e., process of providing food, student involvement in SBC, interactions between staff and children, interactions between children, how food was consumed) at each site.

Data Analysis

All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by professional transcription services. Data were de-identified and qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 11 (QSR International) and Excel, were used in Tasmania and Victoria respectively to support data management and analysis. The Victorian analysis used Microsoft Word and Excel to systematically sort and code interview and focus group text alongside observational data (Ose, 2016). Data were then analysed thematically using an iterative process that utilised coding to identify key themes (Yin, 2014). A summary of findings from each school was reviewed prior to commencement of data collection for the next school. Initial codes were developed from the data before being sorted, refined and regrouped into higher order conceptual categories. Preliminary analysis was conducted separately for the Tasmanian and Victorian studies. Cross-case synthesis then occurred (Yin, 2014) There was regular discussion between researchers from both states before agreement was reached on the four key themes that captured this cross-case synthesis.

Results

Five Tasmanian and five Victorian schools participated in the study. School populations varied from 80 to 1000 students. The reported percent of students accessing the SBC ranged from 5-23% in Tasmania and 15-45% in Victoria (Table 1). All children who participated attended the SBC.

INSERT Table 1

In total, 142 individuals participated in the study, including children, parents/carers, school staff, volunteers and funding body representatives (Table 2). One representative of a funding body was also the coordinator of the program.

INSERT Table 2

The cross-case synthesis found significant similarities across schools with respect to perceived benefits and challenges despite each school having adapted their practices to the unique needs of their school community. Four key themes were identified that capture these similarities; 1) not eating breakfast at home: not just food insecurity, 2) social benefits of communal eating, 3) impact in the classroom, and 4) challenges. No systematic differences were found between the states, school size or location with respect to the key findings. Where there was a difference between the two states in implementation of SBCs this is reported in the results below. An overview of how SBCs were delivered is provided before presenting the four key themes.

Overview of SBCs

In both states there were no eligibility criteria, with all students able to attend the SBC, regardless of household income. The availability of SBCs ranged from one to five days per week. One Tasmanian school ran the program from the nearby community centre, all others ran the SBC at the school. SBCs opened any time between 8am to 9am. Coordination of the SBCs in Victoria and Tasmania was carried out by teaching and education support staff, school chaplains, school cleaners, community workers or parent volunteers. Four of the Victorian school's paid welfare and educational support staff to coordinate their programs. All programs in both states relied on volunteers to assist with delivering the program.

Food source

In Tasmania, food was sourced from food relief organisations, local businesses, donations from the community or bought by the school. No formal audit of the food available was undertaken, but all programs in Tasmania offered toast, with spreads such as jam or Vegemite™ (a yeast extract spread) (Table 1). Some schools offered cereals, fresh fruit, muesli bars, yoghurt and juice or Milo™ (a cocoa/malt powder mix for milk). In Victoria, Foodbank provided schools with a range of food (Table 1), but four of the five schools provided additional food sourced from local businesses and donations. Two schools drew from school funds to purchase additional food such as toast, spreads and Milo™.

Involvement in SBC by students

In Tasmanian schools there was limited participation by the children in delivering the SBC, with the researchers observing that children usually had food prepared for them. In contrast, four of the Victorian schools allowed children to assist on an informal basis by helping set up and clean up, serving food and preparing posters promoting the SBC. One school formalised the role with students in Year 5/6 being nominated as breakfast captains.

Not eating breakfast at home: not just food insecurity

None of the schools collected data about families' capacity to provide breakfast for their children. Teachers believed they had a good understanding of which students were not eating breakfast at home based on the informal interactions between staff, children and families. Parents/carers, staff and volunteers at each school indicated that the primary reason for establishing a SBC was to provide breakfast for children who were not eating breakfast at home (i.e., food insecurity). However, school staff considered that only a few families experienced persistent food insecurity due to financial hardship.

We have ...a certain percentage of students who every so often will come to school without breakfast. ... We also have a handful of students who come without having

had breakfast on a regular basis; perhaps not every day but it would be the majority of days (Principal, Tasmania).

This was reflected in interviews with parents, with only two parents/carers volunteering that their child/children attended the SBC because they could not afford to provide breakfast. Some parents indicated that despite financial constraints they usually tried to give their children “*something*” for breakfast, and that the SBC provided additional support.

I lost my job ... being on a low income, I've got to scrape and scratch a couple of days before payday, but they obviously have breakfast, I make sure they have something (Parent/Carer, Tasmania).

Parents/carers, staff and children identified several reasons why children did not eat breakfast at home that were unrelated to financial constraints. These included juggling family and work commitments, bus travel, leaving home early, different food options available at the SBC and children choosing to eat at school. School staff considered it important that children who were missing out on breakfast at home for whatever reason could access the SBC.

Student 1: Well, I think that they [schools] have breakfast because a lot of people don't have breakfast at home, they don't have enough money to buy food.

Student 2: Maybe just home situations, like they just want to get out of the house really quickly.

Student 3: Or they sleep in pretty much every day (9-11 year olds, Victoria).

Social benefits of communal eating

School staff, parents/carers, volunteers and children at all schools discussed a range of social benefits they perceived as being associated with SBCs. These included social eating, relationship building, school engagement, monitoring wellbeing (early intervention) and manners/personal skills (Table 3). The SBC coordinators aimed to provide a safe and welcoming place for all students to come before school, where they could interact with their friends, other children and adults. Many parents/carers stated that their child/children chose to come to the SBC in favour of having breakfast at home, largely for social reasons. Children also indicated that the best part of the program was the opportunity to socialise.

INSERT TABLE 3 – social benefits table.

Most interviewees discussed the social benefits of the SBC, as they provide a unique opportunity for building relationships between children, as students of all ages attend SBCs, and between children and the adults (parents and older volunteers) who staff the program. These inter-age and cross-generation interactions were valued by many participants. When asked what they liked best about SBCs, some children commented on the presence of specific adults at the program.

It's fun, and every day in the morning we get to see [Coordinator and School Welfare officer] first (6 year-old, Victoria).

In Tasmania, the social elements of the SBC had important flow on effects for the school community; for example, some participants believed that SBCs contribute to improved school attendance rates, and strengthened school-community partnerships. In contrast, the Victorian principals were unsure about the impact on the broader school community.

SBCs were recognised as avenues for identifying changes in a child's wellbeing and for engaging with children and families who may be experiencing other difficulties.

So, it's food, it's people, it's relationships, it's connection and it's trying to build those – or probably mitigate against the risk factors that our kids have in their lives and to build that strong feeling of connectedness and belonging and food is an integral part of that (Principal, Victoria).

While most children had positive experiences of SBC a few discussed their discomfort in the presence of older and/or “mean” children whose behavior they did not like.

(What I don't like about the school breakfast program is) the mean people. When there's mean people here (7 year-old Tasmania).

Some staff and volunteers also reflected that some children who attended the SBC were disrespectful towards them. Such negative experiences were discussed by only a few participants across all sites in Tasmania and Victoria.

Impact in the classroom

In addition to the social benefits most parents/carers and staff considered that eating breakfast contributed to positive learning behaviors such as improved concentration and better academic outcomes

There's no question that the students who have a full belly are better able to concentrate on their learning, they're better able to self-regulate their emotions, and make improved behavior choices (Principal, Tasmania).

When children discussed the importance of eating breakfast, irrespective of where it was consumed, they talked about how it made them feel; for example, “*strong, smart, energetic, clever, run around, healthy and good*” (Children, 7 – 12 years, Tasmania).

Challenges of delivering SBCs

The greatest challenges to delivering SBC related to funding and staffing. These challenges were experienced by all schools and impacted on the regularity with which the program was offered, range of food available and equipment available to support program delivery. In Tasmania, local partnerships were invaluable for providing food to support program delivery. Interviewees in Tasmania and Victoria commented on the generosity of local businesses and community members. While the Victorian government provided funding to Foodbank to establish the SBC and support schools, they were not provided with funding to attract, or pay volunteers, and the Victorian schools discussed challenges associated with staffing SBCs.

All schools in Tasmania and four of the five in Victoria relied on volunteers to deliver the SBC. This raised specific challenges with respect to recruitment, rostering, training and support. The Victorian schools reported that finding volunteers to commit up to five days a week was challenging, resulting in four schools paying welfare and education support staff additional time to run the program. In Tasmania, three SBCs were managed by paid staff and two by volunteers. One Tasmanian school identified the requirement for volunteers to have Working with Children Registration as negatively impacting on their capacity to deliver the program. This registration, made mandatory in 2016, involves a police check along with a fee and impacted the availability of volunteers. Hence, the sustainability of SBCs was an ongoing concern for all schools.

I truly believe, at the moment, we've got enough, it's working, but for longevity we need to come up with a plan of how we're going to sustain it. We just haven't entered into that space. We're just in survival mode (Staff, Tasmania).

In addition to staffing and delivering the SBC some volunteers and coordinators also discussed the challenge associated with managing food consumption by children. This

included concerns related to over-consumption, managing allergies and intolerances as well as food waste.

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a better understanding of the perceived benefits and impacts, operational practices and challenges of running SBCs in Australian primary schools. It found a range of social benefits as well as challenges associated with delivering SBCs. In addition, while government and funding bodies consider SBCs a means for addressing food insecurity the findings provide evidence that indicates children are attending SBCs for a wider range of reasons.

This study found that SBCs may develop social capital among students and provide unique opportunities to monitor student wellbeing, but the reliance on volunteers to support program delivery threatened their sustainability. The provision of breakfast at school is designed explicitly to address the negative consequences of arriving at school hungry and support the health and wellbeing of children. As has been found in previous studies, adult participants identified improved concentration, classroom behavior and academic outcomes of students who attended (Smith, Blizzard, et al., 2017). However, this study found that children did not eat breakfast at home for a variety of reasons, not all of them related to poverty or food insecurity. Many children chose to eat breakfast at school instead of at home. Adult and child participants identified family and work commitments, bus travel, leaving home early and a different variety of foods as reasons children chose to eat breakfast at school.

Adult and child participants discussed a range of social benefits from the communal eating of breakfast at school. Social benefits included relationship building, cross-generational interaction, school engagement, the development of manners and skills, and

monitoring student wellbeing. Some of these social benefits have been previously identified (Byrne et al., 2017; Byrne et al., 2018; Defeyter, Graham, & Prince, 2015; Graham, Russo, & Defeyter, 2015; Ichumar et al., 2018) with attendance at SBCs improving children's self-reported friendship quality and reducing experience of peer victimisation (Defeyter, Graham, & Russo, 2015). In our study, a few children described negative interpersonal experiences, but the majority spoke positively about their socialisation. In Victorian schools, children valued their direct involvement in running their SBC. These findings illustrate how SBCs may generate social capital among primary school children. Building social capital and a sense of connectedness or belonging at school are acknowledged as key protective factors for children's health, education, and social well-being (Bond et al., 2007; Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2013; Rowe & Stewart, 2011).

This study revealed, for the first time that SBCs were perceived by adult participants as providing unique opportunities to monitor the wellbeing of students. The informal environment of SBCs was considered critical to facilitating conversations between staff or volunteers and children that enabled them to identify concerns and build relationships with children. Links to children's wellbeing were evident in both states, with welfare and wellbeing staff in Victoria and Tasmanian either coordinating the programs or regularly attending the SBCs to engage with children and their families. The Department of Education in Tasmania and Department of Education and Training in Victoria are focused on improving students wellbeing and improving their connection to school (Department of Education, 2018; Victorian Government, 2018).

All schools reported difficulty in finding volunteers to help run their SBC as has been found in other studies of SBCs and other aspects of school life (Byrne et al., 2018; Drummond, 2008). The 'breakfast for all' approach was a key aspect of the SBCs, although this created some challenges around ensuring all children in need attended. Funding, or

sourcing of food, was another challenge, particularly in Tasmania but also among the Victorian schools that wanted to provide additional items. Concerns about managing over-consumption have previously been reported, but warrant detailed investigation (Harvey-Golding, Donkin, & Defeyter, 2016; Jose et al., 2020).

Limitations and strengths

This study has some limitations. It includes data from two studies conducted independently in two Australian states, resulting in some differences in methodology between the two studies, such as compensation being provided to Victorian schools and not Tasmanian schools and only conducting focus groups with children during SBCs in Tasmania whereas in Victoria the focus groups were also open to children who did not attend SBCs. These differences may have influenced which schools chose to participate in the study and would have been problematic if the paper aimed to compare the experiences of delivering SBCs across the two states. However, this study aimed to better understand how SBCs were being incorporated into primary schools with each school considered a case study for implementing SBCs. The cross-case synthesis is an analytic approach that can be undertaken where studies have been undertaken independently (Yin, 2014). Other limitations include only one Tasmanian school rated as high disadvantage agreed to participate, in two Victorian schools no children participated and in three Victorian and one Tasmanian school only one parent participated. This may have limited the diversity of perspectives elucidated. Schools, where the introduction of SBCs had been more problematic may have chosen not to participate although all schools reported some challenges. Parents and/or children whose families rely on the SBC to provide breakfast may not have participated in this study or participants may have been reluctant to indicate the extent of their need. Staff who were less supportive of the program may also have been less inclined to participate. Classroom behavior was not assessed objectively, but this study was focused on perceived benefits.

Strengths include the inclusion of children, parents, volunteers and staff and the cross-case synthesis of research undertaken in two Australian states. Despite the differences between states in school demographics, funding and delivery methods and the sourcing of food, the perceived benefits and challenges were similar.

Conclusions and implications for practice

This study found that the primary reason for establishing SBCs was to address concerns about children arriving at school hungry due to food insecurity. However, findings showed benefits extended to a range of social and educational benefits with schools highly valuing their SBC for their social, welfare and wellbeing benefits (MacDonald, 2019; Vandenberg M et al., 2017). SBCs provided informal opportunities for engagement, relationship building, early intervention and support. However, as this study highlights, all schools, even those receiving funding, faced significant challenges in providing breakfast to students on a regular basis. While guidance for establishing SBCs in Australia (Australian Red Cross, 2019; Foodbank, 2016) identifies resourcing as a consideration for implementation, they fail to directly address the challenges associated with maintaining the commitment over time. Australian schools are adopting a range of initiatives to support the health and wellbeing of their students and staff considered SBCs a mechanism for furthering the wellbeing agenda (Department of Education, 2018; Education Council, 2018). Embedding SBCs within the broader agenda and adopting whole of school approaches (World Health Organisation, 2018) have been recommended as mechanisms that can support schools embed SBCs as core support services (Byrne et al., 2018; Jose et al., 2020). Clarity about the range of benefits to students and their families may assist in harnessing national and state level support for the service. The range of perceived benefits identified in this study help elucidate why schools remain committed to offering children the opportunity to eat breakfast together at school.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the schools and the breakfast clubs

| School | State | School Demographics | | | | Breakfast Club Program Characteristics | | | | Study participants |
|--------|-------|---------------------|---------------------------|----------|----------|--|--------------|--------------------|---|---|
| | | Enrolment (range)* | Disadvantage ^a | Eligible | Location | Commenced | Availability | Attendance per day | Foods provided | |
| 1 | Tas | 100-199 | High | All | Metro | 2014 | 5 days | 20 | Cereal, toast, yoghurt, juice, milk, milo | Children=5 Parents=5 Staff/Vol=3 |
| 2 | Tas | 300-399 | Med | All | Metro | 2008 | 5 days | 30-50 | Cereal, toast, milk, yoghurt, fruit | Children=6 Parents=9 Staff/Vol=2 |
| 3 | Tas | 400-499 | Low | All | Rural | 2008 | 2 days | 40-60 | Cereal, toast, milo | Children=11 Parents=1 Staff/Vol=4 |
| 4 | Tas | 200-299 | Low | All | Rural | 2013 | 5 days | 50 | Toast, fruit, milo | Children=4 Parents=2 Staff/Vol=5 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----|----------|------|-----|----------|------|--------|-------------------------|---|---|
| 5 | Tas | 400-499 | Low | All | Metro | 2009 | 1 day | 25 | Toast, fruit, juice milk, milo | Children=6 Parents=3 Staff/Vol=6 |
| 6 | VIC | 900-1000 | High | All | Regional | 2016 | 5 days | 120-150 (4 campuses) | Foodbank ^b , toast and milo | Children=5 Parents=2 Staff/Vol=6 |
| 7 | VIC | 500-600 | High | All | Metro | 2016 | 3 days | 80-90 | Foodbank ^b , toast and milk | Children=11 Parents=3 Staff/Vol=7 |
| 8 | VIC | 80-120 | High | All | Regional | 2016 | 5 days | 80-100 | Foodbank ^b , toast and milk | Children=0 Parents=1 Staff/Vol=3 |
| 9 | VIC | 50-100 | High | All | Regional | 2016 | 3 days | 35-50 | Foodbank ^b , donation, school garden | Children=8 Parents=1 Staff/Vol=8 |
| 10 | VIC | 600-700 | High | All | Metro | 2016 | 5 days | 25-35 | Foodbank ^b | Children=0 Parents=1 |

*Range used to ensure schools not identifiable

^aDisadvantage was measured using the OENI in Tasmania and the SFOE in Victoria. OENI = Occupational Education Needs Index is derived from parental background data collected at enrolment. SFOE = Student Family Occupation Education is derived by combining the student family occupation and student family education information.

^bFoodbank provides cheerios™, oats, wheat biscuits, muesli, baked beans, fruit cups, canned fruit, apples and long life UHT milk

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Table 2. Participant characteristics for Tasmania (Tas) and Victoria (Vic)

| Participants | Tas (n = 78) | Vic (n = 64) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Children | 35 (44.9%) | 24 (37.5%) |
| Age (Years) | | |
| 6-7 | 9 | 3 |
| 8-9 | 16 | 9 |
| 10-12 | 10 | 12 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 16 | 14 |
| Female | 19 | 10 |
| Participation in SBC | | |
| Every day provided | 16 | 16 |
| Not every day provided | 18 | 8 |
| Did not answer | 1 | 0 |
| Parents/carers | 17 (21.8%) | 8 (12.5%) |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 2 | 0 |
| Female | 15 | 8 |
| Number of children in family | | |
| One | 2 | 1 |
| Two | 6 | 6 |
| Three or more | 9 | 1 |
| Staff | 15 (19.2%) | 24 (37.5%) |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 7 | 6 |
| Female | 7 | 18 |

| | | |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| Not stated | 1 | 0 |
| Role with school | | |
| Principal | 2 | 5 |
| Teacher | 6 | 15 |
| Chaplain | 2 | 1 |
| Other | 5 | 3 |
| Years of service at school (range, years) | 0.3 -11 | 0.6 - 25 |
| Years direct involvement in SBC (range, years) | 0.4 - 9 | 1 - 2 |
| Volunteers | 8 (10.3%) | 8 (12.5%) |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 2 | 1 |
| Female | 6 | 7 |
| Years of school engagement (range, years) | 1.5 - 9 | 1 -2 |
| Years direct involvement in SBC (range, years) | 1 - 4.5 | 1 - 2 |
| Funding bodies' representatives | 3 (3.8%) | 0 (0) |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 1 | 0 |
| Female | 2 | 0 |

SBC; School breakfast club

Table 3 Social benefits associated with SBCs: illustrative quotes from children, parent/carers and staff/volunteer participants

| Social Benefits | Children | Parent/Carer | Staff/Volunteer |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Social eating | <p>Meeting with friends.</p> <p>Eating communally.</p> <p><i>“(The best thing about breakfast club) for me, probably just coming together with mates and chatting. It’s like I’m at home and I get to eat breakfast with everyone, and stuff. That’s probably my favourite thing about breakfast club.” (Tas*, 12 years).</i></p> | <p>Meet with friends, make new friends.</p> <p>Eating communally.</p> <p><i>They just love coming and talking to their friends. Because they’ll come - they’ll have their breakfast, and then they’ll go and play (Tas).</i></p> | <p>Meeting with friends.</p> <p>Eating communally</p> <p><i>They love the fact that they all get to share the food together. So, to me, it’s almost like it’s a social thing. We all have food together (Vic†)</i></p> |
| Relationship Building | <p>Interaction with adults who run the program.</p> | <p>Interaction with children of all ages and adults delivering the program.</p> | <p>Interaction between children and the adults delivering the program.</p> |

[The best part of SBC is] seeing [coordinator] and having food, and helping out in the kitchen (Vic, 7 years).

The other thing is we usually have the same people coming to Breaky Club, and so I think that's good for them because they're cross ages, they can get to build relationships with kids outside their own classrooms (Vic).

Some really nice relationships with the volunteers. It's really, really nice to see that, ... mums but also seniors in our community that they probably wouldn't meet otherwise (Tas)

School Connecting broader school community.

Parents connecting with the school community

Connection with school by children and parents

Engagement

I like to be around everybody (Tas, 9 years).

I met [friend] here. I've met a couple of others. You get to know different people ... You actually learn who's around so you get to know different people otherwise you probably wouldn't stop and talk (Tas).

But some kids will just come in because they like the atmosphere. Particularly in the colder weather it's nice to come in to somewhere and it's a lovely, warm environment for them to come in and be out of the cold before the start of the day. (Vic).

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Monitoring wellbeing | <p>Awareness of importance of eating breakfast and that some children are not eating this at home.</p> <p><i>You realise how well you're doing because some kids don't get breakfast and then they start feeling sick and then they have to go home (Vic, 11 years).</i></p> | <p>Adults to speak to about concerns.</p> <p><i>Sometimes kids that don't talk to anyone outside come in and sit beside someone here and talk to somebody here ... sometimes kids come in really upset that they haven't eaten at home or just upset in general and there's nice adults here that they can talk to as well (Tas).</i></p> | <p>Monitor changes in children</p> <p>Engage with families</p> <p><i>It's that first adult interaction in the school in a morning for some kids. I think if you notice – it also gives you a way of reading the kids. If a kid comes in and they're teary that morning it's logged somewhere and then I can go and speak to the child, speak to the ... teachers because they perhaps haven't seen what's been happening (Vic).</i></p> |
| Manners and Skills | <p>Communicating with others</p> <p>Assisting with delivery of SBC</p> <p><i>Yeah, I think so, because there's certain rules. Because a lot of people now use</i></p> | <p>Communal eating skills.</p> <p>Communicating with others.</p> <p><i>Just knowing obviously the importance of having breakfast and sitting down and</i></p> | <p>Communication and skills</p> <p><i>That's the sort of thing that they would do in grandma's kitchen, they'd learn how to wash dishes, they would have a chat to the person</i></p> |

more manners in other things than they having the manners. To be able to sit them who's drying dishes. They'll get a cloth and used to, before Breakfast Club started. down at a table and can eat properly with they'll go and wipe down benches (Vic). Because you have to say please and thank everybody else (Tas). you, and may I have this, may I have that (Vic, 10 years).

SBC; School breakfast club

* Tas = Tasmania

† Vic = Victoria

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