

Healthy start

How a free breakfast club at one infant academy in South Yorkshire has given children a calm and nourishing start to their school day. By **Nicole Weinstein**

At 8am, the school hall at Grange Lane Infant Academy (GLIA) in Doncaster is filling up with children who are starting their day with breakfast club. The smell of toast and buttered crumpets is wafting through the room, the dining tables are set up with bowls, plates and jugs of milk, and there is a selection of healthy cereals and fruit for children to choose from.

Apart from the usual chatter and laughter of children, there is an air of calm in the room. Some children are happily playing

with the resources that are laid out on gym mats around the room or colouring at the tables. A group of boys are lining up giant dominoes and watching them topple in a chain reaction. Children from as young as three are pouring cereal into their bowls and spreading their toast with jam. The breakfast monitors are on hand to help and there is plenty of lively conversation in the room as children ease into their day with a healthy breakfast alongside their friends.

On an average day, between 40 and 80 children attend the drop-in breakfast club at GLIA, which is free for all 248 children who attend the school and nursery. There is also a

paid-for breakfast provision, which starts at 7.30am and costs £1 for half an hour.

'Around ten children a day are dropped off at 7.30am,' explains Louise Chappell, head teacher of the two-form-entry infant school, nursery and two-year-old provision.

'We've developed and refined our breakfast club offer over the past decade,' she adds. 'We set it up to support busy parents and provide a calm start to the day for our pupils. It started out with low numbers, but most of the school now use it. Although there may have been some stigma early on, there isn't now because it's open to everyone.'

The breakfast club forms part of GLIA's wraparound offer, which includes childcare from 3pm to 5pm at a cost of £5 an hour. 'Between five and ten children attend our after-school club, but it has not taken off as well as the breakfast club, mainly because our extracurricular offer is so good – we have two or three clubs each night,' Chappell says.

The school is in an area of disadvantage, measuring 0.3 on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), the tool used to measure child poverty and deprivation in schools.

'Our families are mainly white British – we have about six percent EAL [English as an additional language] pupils – and Pupil Premium has stayed in the 40 per cent bracket for the time I've been here, which is ten years. This is double the national average. We also have high levels of children with special educational needs and disabilities, around 24.5 per cent,' Chappell adds.

Parents use the club for a variety of reasons – from dropping their children off before work to helping them settle. Some have older children in junior school, and this helps them get there on time.

Having quality time in the morning to interact with staff and peers is 'really important,' explains Chappell. 'We have a dancing coach on Fridays and the children start the morning with a wake-up, shake-up dance. Behaviour has always been good at the school, but the learning behaviours have improved markedly. They're ready to learn when they get to class.'

But not every child can get to breakfast club. Chappell and her team have developed a model that is fully inclusive. She says, 'The ones who need it most may be the ones who



Grange Lane has 40-80 children attend its drop-in breakfast club



GLIA says learning has improved



GLIA also offers after-school care at a cost of £5 an hour

don't attend. We do a bagel run every morning where the breakfast monitors take food to the classrooms.

'So every child gets a bagel to start the day, just in case it's been a rushed morning and they haven't had breakfast.'

UNIVERSAL PROVISION

The free breakfast club at GLIA is a universal offer open to all families regardless of need. The offer will soon become commonplace in primary schools across England. Labour pledged to fund up to 750 participating state-funded schools to provide children with access to a breakfast club that involves free food and childcare, starting from April. The 'early adopter' schools will help the Department for Education understand how schools design and implement their offer at a local level and identify any barriers to implementation ahead of a nationwide roll-out, the date of which is yet to be

confirmed. The Children's Wellbeing Bill, which puts the requirement for the school breakfast clubs into law, was debated in January (see box).

FLEXIBLE OFFER

Chappell says it is important to put families' needs at the heart of the breakfast club offer. 'Flexibility is key. A drop-in service works for our families. Some parents might use it one day and then not for a fortnight.'

She also says it is important to be clear on the reasons for establishing the provision. 'Our families trust that we are not running it because we think the children are coming to school hungry. It's about supporting our parents and understanding that mornings can be rushed.'

Having staff members that children are familiar with is also key to its success. 'We have the same staff every day. We pay the school cook to prepare the food in the

morning, so it's done efficiently. We have one higher-level teaching assistant, two class TAs, and a Level 3 qualified early years practitioner with paediatric first-aid training,' Chappell adds.

For children who are vulnerable and new to the school, having them in 40 minutes early before they enter a busy Reception class 'makes a difference', explains office manager Linsey Tomlinson.

'We've had children in care. Bringing them in early, outside of the busy registration time, enables them to get support from the pastoral team,' she explains.

'It also helps to get to know the families better. A quick chat at the beginning of breakfast club might lead to us understanding more about their circumstances and how we can support them further,' she adds.

Breakfast clubs have also made a 'significant difference' to the persistent non-attenders, Chappell says. 'We have a low

breakfast provision: policy update

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill legislates for free breakfast clubs in every state-funded primary school in England, so that children get a 'welcoming, softer start to the day'. Debating the Bill on 8 January, education minister Bridgit Phillipson said that breakfast clubs are 'good for attendance, good for attainment and good for behaviour'.

Sharon Hodgson, Labour MP for Washington and Gateshead South, told the House of Commons on 8 January that the Education Endowment Foundation found that school breakfasts can help deliver 'two months'-worth of extra attainment at Key Stage 1'.

She added, 'There will also be huge health outcomes. One in three children are already at risk of future food-related ill health, such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease, by the age of ten. By providing a nutritious breakfast, we can ensure that children start their day at school ready to learn.'

A total of 750 schools have signed up to become early adopters of the Government's breakfast club scheme, which will offer parents 30 minutes of free childcare and free breakfasts for children from April. A £33 million fund was announced in the Autumn 2024 Budget to cover the costs of early adopter scheme breakfast clubs in

2025-26 and the continuation of the National School Breakfast Club Programme, which is delivered by Family Action and will run until July.

The DfE will work with the schools to 'test and learn' how best to implement the new breakfast clubs ahead of national roll-out. The offer should build on existing school provision and 'work seamlessly in contributing to the full wraparound childcare offer'. For example, if a school or PVI setting delivers before-school childcare for a school from 8am to 9am, this should continue, according to the *Breakfast clubs early adopter guidance for schools and trusts in England*.

early years in schools



percentage of them, but we find if we can get those that are reluctant to come to school in early, it makes a massive difference because they enjoy the soft start to the day.'

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

GLIA partners with Magic Breakfast, a charity that supplies and delivers breakfast food directly to the school. For a small membership fee – GLIA pays £500 a year – the school receives bagels, crumpets, a selection of cereals, bread and baked beans. A Magic Breakfast engagement partner also works with the school to create a bespoke offer. This varies from a breakfast club in a school hall to breakfast served in the classroom, or grab-and-go models.

'The £500 covers all the food – far less than the yearly cost. We pay for the staffing, the milk and butter and the spreads, which

costs under £1,000 year. We received a grant from Doncaster Council last year which covered the majority of the staffing costs. But the benefits outweigh the costs. We're not here to make a profit. We're here to provide a service, and we can see the benefits in the children,' Chappell says.

Having the support of a delivery partner has also given GLIA the opportunity to apply for new funding streams. 'We've received funding for bowls and dishes, a fridge and a freezer and resources. We often get given books, which are great for morning reading. We're never short of

healthy, high-quality food. There are no Coco Pops in sight,' Chappell adds.

She says it is 'really easy to run', but warns that schools may encounter challenges if staff decide they don't want to do it. 'It's important to be aware of the ratios and all the qualifications of staff, especially if you roll it out to early years,' she explains.

Magic Breakfast says breakfast should not be an additional burden on school budgets. 'If done in the right way, it will alleviate some of the challenges, such as improving behaviour in class, increasing attendance, improving mental and physical health and increasing parental engagement.'

The breakfast club has become a well-established part of the school day at GLIA. Chappell says, 'I genuinely think it's one of the best things we've done. Starting breakfast club at the beginning of school gives children an amazing start to a school day.' ■



MORE INFORMATION

- Early adopter schools and trusts guidance: <https://bit.ly/4gMOMtq>
- Magic Breakfast: www.magicbreakfast.com
- The National School Breakfast Programme: <https://family-action.org.uk/services/national-school-breakfast-programme-nsbp>
- <https://childcareworks.org.uk>

how breakfast provision fits with wraparound childcare

Eighty per cent of schools provide some form of wraparound care, but at least '40 per cent of schools offer wraparound in a form that may not support parents to work the hours they want', according to DfE research. This may be because the hours offered are limited, or there is no provision on the school site, which requires parents to pick up or drop off their children between the school day and wraparound childcare.

The Government's ambition is that all parents and carers of primary-school-aged children who need it should be able to access term-time childcare in their local area from 8am-6pm. Some schools may already provide a breakfast club or after-school club, but it is not full 8am to 6pm provision.

To support the expansion, in the

Spring Budget 2023, the Chancellor announced £289 million over two academic years for the National Wraparound Childcare Programme, which aims to increase the supply of wraparound childcare.

James Hemsall, managing director of Coram Hemsalls, says, 'What we have at the moment is lots of interconnected elements of an early years and childcare strategy: school-based nurseries, PVI, 30 hours entitlements, breakfast, wraparound, free school meals and Holidays Activities and Food (HAF). There is a golden thread that runs through all these different parts of the jigsaw puzzle: a focus on food and child poverty, school readiness, supporting working families and children in their early years growing, learning, developing and ensuring that

all children have that equal opportunity.

'There's a strong focus from the Government on ensuring that we reach the most disadvantaged children and we support families to be economically active. So while we've got all of these different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, now is an opportunity for the Government to look at those and see how they best fit and are streamlined and achieve all of those outcomes in one whole jigsaw picture, rather than individual pieces.

'My advice to schools is that early education and childcare across the whole year – not just term time – will be a strong area of interest from the Government. Schools need to be thinking about how they fit in with that ambition and what the opportunities are for them to deliver part or all of it.'