

Starting the Day Hungry:

New York City's Participation in the School Breakfast Program

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Executive Summary

Over eight million school children nationally participate in the federally-funded School Breakfast Program. In New York State, 462,791 children participate in the program. In New York City, 151,114 children receive breakfast at school.

Studies show that breakfast programs improve student achievement. A 1989 report in the *American Journal of Diseases of Children* found that “participation in the School Breakfast Program is associated with significant improvements in academic functioning among low-income elementary school children.”¹ Other studies show that students who participate more frequently in school breakfast programs have significantly greater increases in math grades.² The studies also reported decreases in rates of absence and tardiness.³

The Public Advocate views the School Breakfast Program as important to helping students meet their nutritional and developmental needs. This is especially relevant in a time of economic downturn when a record number of families are resorting to food pantries and entering the ranks of the city’s homeless. The School Breakfast Program may provide the only morning nutrition some students receive.

Findings

Last year 8,149,558 million children nationally participated in the federal school breakfast program, an increase of 367,729 from the previous year. Most states saw increases in school breakfast program participation. In Maryland, school breakfast participation increased by 19% and by more than 10% in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan and Rhode Island. New York State, on the other hand, saw a 0.9% drop in participation.

Within New York State, New York City has the highest percentage of low-income students eligible for free and reduced priced breakfasts. While 45% of all New York State students are eligible for free and reduced price breakfasts, 72.3% of New York City students are eligible. Statewide, 20.7% of eligible students participate in the program. In New York City, only 17.2% of eligible students participate. **In other words, New York City has the highest eligibility rate for free and reduced price breakfasts in the state and the lowest participation rate among the eligible.**

¹ Meyers, A.F., A.E. Sampson, M. Weitzman, B.L. Rogers, H. Kayne, *School Breakfast and School Performance*,” *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, vol. 143, October 1989b, pp.1234-1239.

² Murphy, J.M., M.E. Pagano, J.Nachmani, P.Sperling, S.Kane, and R.E Kleinman, *The Relationship of School Breakfast to Psychosocial and Academic Functioning: Cross Sectional and Longitudinal Observations in an Inner City School Sample*, Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, vol.152, September 1998a.

³ Ibid.

Some of the possible reasons for low participation levels in New York City's breakfast program include:

- Social stigma of participation in a low-income program;
- Failure of schools to fit breakfast program into morning schedule;
- Competitive foods sources such as vending machines.

Federal regulations allow schools, with some increase in local cost, to increase participation among low-income eligible, by serving free breakfasts to all students.

Across the country, universal free breakfast programs have:

- reduced stigma of free meals and increased participation among low-income students;
- raised test scores;
- improved classroom behavior;
- reduced lateness.

Recommendations

The Public Advocate believes that given the proven importance of morning nutrition to academic performance, a higher percentage of eligible low-income students should be participating in the school breakfast program. The Department of Education must take steps to improve participation among students in the existing program. Moreover, the city must explore expanding its universal meals program in schools where 80% or more of the students are already eligible for free and reduced price meals. Currently 16 school districts and 466 schools fall into this category. This universal program should include innovations to increase participation from national models and a consideration of a statistical study of the program's effects on student behavior and achievement.

The Public Advocate's office conducted this study to determine how New York City compares with other jurisdictions across the state and across the nation in providing breakfast to its students. The report is divided into five sections: 1. Methodology; 2. Overview of the School Breakfast Program; 3. Analysis of Participation in the School Breakfast Program; 4. Model Programs; 5. Conclusions and Recommendations.

1. Methodology

This study relies on data from the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services, the New York City Department of Education's Office of School Food & Nutrition Services (OSFNS) School Breakfast Program participation report of March 2002, as well as data from the Nutrition Consortium of New York State and the New York State Education Department.

To conduct the analysis of New York City's school breakfast program, this study uses data from various sources, including OSFNS statistics on New York City students participating in the School Breakfast and Lunch Program. To examine school breakfast

participation in upstate New York, the study relies on data provided by the New York State Nutrition Consortium, a statewide, nonprofit organization.

Methodology for Calculating the Percentage of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Meals

To find the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced meals, we divided the total number of applications on file to receive free/reduced meals by the total number of registered students. The Nutrition Consortium of New York State and other nutrition researchers throughout the country use the same methodology.

Methodology for Calculating the Percentage of Low Income Students Participating in the Free/Reduced School Breakfast Program

To determine the percentage of low-income students participating in the free/reduced school breakfast program, we divided the total number of free/reduced average daily participants in the breakfast program by the total number of free/reduced applications on file.

Data Limitations

Since the Office of school food and nutrition services' data was the primary source for the report, it is appropriate to discuss limitations. The data provides the total number of students who have submitted applications to receive free/reduced school meals, but does not provide the number of students eligible for free/reduced meals. **There may be even more eligible students but for the purpose of the study we assume all eligible students submitted applications.** Moreover, due to the difficulty in separating private school and public school participation in the program, the figures include participation by 193 parochial schools in the City.

2. Overview of the School Breakfast Program

School Breakfast Program

In 2002, approximately 8,149,558 students participated in the School Breakfast Program nationally.⁴ The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 funded this nutritional meal program, which began as a pilot targeting low-income children. It was made permanent in 1975, with the objective of providing adequate morning nutrition in all schools where it is needed.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service administers the program at the federal level. In New York, the New York State Education Department administers the program at the state level, and the Department of Education's Office of School Food Services and Nutrition Services (OSFNS) administers it in the city. Approximately 88% of the schools in New York State have school breakfast programs; in New York City, every public school has the program.

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, *School Breakfast Participation*, 2002.

Eligibility

Any child at a participating school is eligible to purchase a meal through the breakfast program. Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 and 185% of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals. Children from families with incomes more than 185% above the poverty level pay full price, although their meals are subsidized to a degree.

Funding

The school breakfast program is funded through cash reimbursements as well as commodities from both the federal and state governments. The federal government reimburses a school \$1.17 for every free meal served, 87 cents for every reduced-price meal served and 22 cents for every paid meal. The state also provides 11 cents for every free meal, 17 cents for every reduced-price meal and one quarter of a cent for every paid meal. Some schools are eligible for “severe need” federal reimbursement rates, which are 23 cents higher than regular rates.

Special Assistance Alternatives

To reduce paperwork at the local level, the National School Lunch Act established three alternative provisions:

Provision One allows free eligibility to be certified for a two-year period in schools where at least 80% of the children enrolled are eligible for free/reduced price meals, thus reducing application burdens.

Provision Two

- allows schools to establish a base year in which the school makes eligibility determinations. During the next three years, the school makes no new eligibility determinations and counts only the total number of reimbursable meals served each day
- makes meals free of charge to all students for the four years
- schools electing this alternative must pay the difference between federal reimbursement and the cost of providing all meals at no charge. This provision reduces application burdens and simplifies meal counting and claiming procedures.

Provision Three

- allows schools to simply receive the same level of federal cash and commodity assistance each year, with some adjustments, for a four-year period
- makes meals free to all participating children for a period of four years
- requires no additional eligibility determinations. Instead, schools receive the level of federal cash and commodity support paid to them for the last year in which they made eligibility determinations and meal counts by type
- schools choosing this alternative must pay the difference between federal reimbursement and the cost of providing all meals at no charge. The money to

pay for this difference must be from sources other than federal funds. The provision reduces application burdens and meal counting and claiming procedures.

Other Meal Programs

In addition to the School Breakfast Program, other meal programs such as the National School Lunch Program and Summer Food Program are available to schoolchildren throughout the country.

Barriers to School Breakfast Programs

Although many students qualify for free/reduced price school breakfast meals, participation levels are low due to several barriers, including:

- Social stigma: The perception of the school breakfast program as a welfare program has stymied participation in this program.⁵ Being identified as “free/reduced price eligible” bears a perceived stigma that keeps many students from participating in the program.
- Competitive foods sources: Vending machines providing food, regardless of quality or nutritional value, provide competition to the breakfast program.

3. Analysis of Participation in the School Breakfast Program

Comparing New York with Other States

In May 2002, the last month for which nationwide data is available, 8,149,558 million children participated in the federal school breakfast program nationwide, an increase of 367,729 since May 2001.⁶ Most states have seen increases in school breakfast program participation in the last few years, excluding New York, New Jersey and South Dakota.

In Maryland, school breakfast participation increased by 19% and by more than 10% in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan and Rhode Island. New York, on the other hand, saw a 0.9% drop in participation.

There are several possible reasons for the nationwide rise in school breakfast participation rates. State legislative requirements as well as funding initiatives have raised participating levels. For example, approximately 36 states have legislative requirements related to the school breakfast program and/or provide funds for school breakfasts.⁷ Twenty-two states either provide additional per-meal reimbursement, start-up or expansion funds, outreach and/or incentive funds, or pay for supervisory costs. States such as Pennsylvania provide additional per-meal reimbursement for lunch if breakfast is served.

⁵ National Dairy Council, *School Meal Programs: Challenges & Opportunities*, 2001.

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, *School Breakfast Program: Children Participating*, 2002.

⁷ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), *School Breakfast Scorecard*, Washington, DC, 2001.

Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Illinois provide state funding for universal free school breakfast programs in certain schools. Maryland has set aside \$1.9 million for a universal free breakfast program. Illinois provides funding for universal free breakfast programs in schools in which 80% or more of the students are eligible for free/reduced priced meals. In contrast, New York State has initiated no efforts to raise participation levels.

The Food Research and Action Center, a not-for-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., reports that two-thirds of states take some advantage of Provision Two and Three of the National School Lunch Act. Under these provisions, reimbursements for meals for a four-year period are provided based on the proportions of free/reduced price meal applications collected in the first base year. During the four years, meals are provided at no charge to all students. Schools do not have to take applications or keep track of meal counts by category, reducing paperwork and increasing participation. The loss of payment is offset by savings from reduced paperwork, reduction of per meal costs due to increased volume and federal funds generated by a “universal” program.

Comparing New York City with New York State

Within New York State, New York City has the highest percentage of low-income students eligible for free and reduced priced meals. While 45% of all New York State students are eligible for free and reduced price meals, 72.3% of New York City students are eligible.

Statewide, 20.7% of eligible students participate in the program. In New York City, only 17.2% of eligible students participate. In other words, New York City has a much higher eligibility rate than the rest of the state but a lower participation rate.

Comparing New York City Boroughs

Students Eligible for Free & Reduced School Meals Programs

	Total # of Applications on file for Free & Reduced Meals	Total # of Students on Register	Percentage of Students Eligible for Free & Reduced Meals
NYC	812,472	1,123,000	72.3%
Manhattan	124,504	172,049	72%
Bronx	203,961	239,732	85%
Brooklyn	268141	355,973	75%
Queens	191,372	290,988	66%
Staten island	25,594	64,258	40%

New York City

There are 1,123,000 registered students in New York City schools. Approximately 812,472, or 72.3%, are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 139,816 or 17.2% of eligible low-income students participate in the program.

Manhattan

In Manhattan, 72% of registered students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 16.8% of eligible low-income students participate in program.

Bronx

In the Bronx, 85% of registered students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 17.6% of eligible low-income students participate in the program.

Brooklyn

In Brooklyn, 75% of registered students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 18% of eligible low-income students participate in program

Queens

In Queens, 66% of registered students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 14.9% of eligible low-income students participate in program.

Staten Island

In Staten Island, 40%, of registered students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Only 22% of eligible low-income students participate in program.

Low Income Students Participating in Free & Reduced School Breakfast Programs

	Free & Reduced Average Daily Breakfast Participation	Total # of Applications on file for Free & Reduced Meals	Percentage of Low Income Students Participating in Free & Reduced Breakfast Meals
NYC	139,816	812,472	17.2%
Manhattan	21,032	124,504	16.8%
Bronx	35,889	203,961	17.6%
Brooklyn	48,732	268,141	18%
Queens	28,555	191,372	14.9%
Staten Island	5,807	25,594	22%

Comparing New York City with New York State Counties

Four of New York City's counties rank highest of all 62 counties in the state in students eligible for free and reduced meals:

1. Bronx County with 85% of its low-income students eligible for the free/reduced meals;
2. Kings County with 75%;
3. New York County with 72%;
4. Queens County with 66%.

Conversely, these four counties have the lowest percentages of eligible students participating in the breakfast program in the whole state, ranking 59 through 62 respectively:

59. Kings County with 18% of eligible participating;
60. Bronx County with 17.6% of eligible participating;
61. New York County with 16.8% of eligible participating;
62. Queens County has the lowest percentage of eligible students participating at 14.9%.

Although Staten Island is the 13th highest in percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals, it is ranked 52nd in the percentage of eligible students participating in the free and reduced breakfast program.

The top-five ranked upstate counties in student eligibility are:

1. Franklin County with 43.1% of its low income students eligible for the free/reduced meals;
2. Sullivan County with 42.8%;
3. Jefferson County with 42.6%;
4. Delaware County with 41.8%;
5. Allegany County with 41.1%.

While the top-five ranked upstate counties in student participation are:

1. Essex County with 43.8%;
2. Chenango County with 40.9%;
3. Rensselaer County with 39.3%;
4. Tompkins County with 38.9%;
5. Franklin County with 38% of eligible low income students participating.

The Nutrition Consortium of New York State conducted a survey in 2002 to determine why participation is better upstate than in New York City.⁸ Reasons included:

- 1. Support of principals and superintendents;**
- 2. Teacher involvement in program operations and promotion;**
- 3. Accommodating bus schedules;**
- 4. Sufficient time period set aside for the breakfast program;**
- 5. Promotional activities designed to increase participation;**
- 6. Breakfast menu variety.**

Eligibility for Free Meals

In the 18 New York City school districts, 80% or more of the students are eligible for free school meals, as are 80% or more of the students in the 466 schools throughout the city. Since more than two-thirds of the City's students are eligible for free meals, a universal

⁸ Nutrition Consortium of New York State, *Factors Impacting Program Participation: Survey Results*, 2002.

meals program could be established in these schools without major budgetary strain on the schools.

4. Model Programs

Universal School Breakfast Program in Minnesota

In 1994, the Minnesota legislature directed the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning to put into operation a universal breakfast pilot program. The participating six elementary schools represented a cross section of Minnesota communities.

These schools served breakfast free of charge to all students. Serving times ranged from 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. Some schools served children straight off the bus in cafeterias, while in other schools; students read or watched educational programming in their classrooms while having breakfast. Menus varied from school to school. Food service personnel and advisory committees worked closely with teachers to create programs that fit smoothly with the daily schedule and could become a regular part of the school day.

A two-year evaluation of the program conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement showed an increase in participation, improved student behavior and general increase in composite math and reading percentile scores.

Serving breakfast to all in these pilot programs had the following positive results:

1. Participation increased from 12% before the pilot project began to 75% and 91% in two of the participating schools;
2. Elimination of the stigma attached to eating breakfast at school;
3. Improvement in discipline: pilot schools experienced a 40–to–50% drop in discipline referrals to the principal's office;
4. Improvement in test scores: increase in composite math and reading percentiles when comparing the test scores of third graders before the universal breakfast program with scores after experiencing the program for two years.⁹

Operation Breakfast Project in Central Falls, Rhode Island

The Central Falls School Department and local community leaders launched a universal free school breakfast program, "Operation Breakfast," in 1994. The program informed parents and teachers about the nutritional benefits of school breakfast, encouraged students to try school breakfast and made participation fun. The program instituted special promotional activities such as parent/teacher breakfasts, breakfast in the classroom, the breakfast club and contests with prizes to participants.

Positive results documented by researchers at Tufts University School of Nutrition Science and Policy included:

⁹ Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Children, *School Breakfast Programs Energizing the Classroom*, Minnesota 1996.

1. 66% increase in participation in the breakfast program;
2. 71% increase in the proportion of children from low-income families participating;
3. 67% decrease in the percentage of chronically tardy children.¹⁰

Universal Breakfast Cleveland Municipal School District, Cleveland, Ohio

The Cleveland Municipal School District made free breakfast and lunch available to all 77,000 students at the 122 schools in the district. The district funded the program through Provision 2. To promote its universal meals program, Cleveland conducted a major public relations campaign, including government, business, school administrators and employees. The district sent brochures to parents promoting the program. Cafeteria managers promoted the program to parents. Prize programs were also used to encourage participation.

Cleveland currently serves almost 325,000 more breakfasts per year in its secondary schools than it did before inception of the program. This is especially noteworthy since participation levels in secondary schools have always been lower due to the unpopularity of school meals among teenagers.¹¹

Maryland Meals for Achievement Classroom Breakfast Pilot Program

Ninety Maryland schools are participating in the Meals for Achievement program, begun as a pilot project in 1998. As a result of its success, the Maryland Legislature provided additional funding to establish the current, expanded program. Maryland provided nearly \$2 million for this program during the 2001-2002 school year, supplementing federal and state funds allocated under the traditional school breakfast program.

Participating schools provide breakfast to all students free of charge, regardless of family income. Students eat at their desks while teachers take attendance and conduct other morning activities.

Researchers at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, who evaluated the program, found the following positive results:

1. A threefold increase in participation—about half the students in these schools are new participants in the school breakfast program;
2. An improvement in the learning environment, with 90% of school staff attributing these improvements to the program;
3. A significant decrease in disciplinary suspensions over the first three months, down from 4.4 days per month to 2.8 a month;
4. An 8% decline in tardiness.¹²

¹⁰ Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy, Tufts University, *Evaluation of Universally-Free School Breakfast Program Demonstration Project*, Tufts University, Medford, MA, January 1996.

¹¹ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), *School Breakfast Scorecard*, Washington, DC, 2001.

¹² Murphy, J.M., M.E. Pagano, *Effects of a Universally Free, In-Classroom School Breakfast Program: Final Report from the Third Year of the Maryland Meals for Achievement Evaluation*, Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School, October 1, 2001.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Nationwide, New York State has one of the lowest participation levels in the school breakfast program. New York City's participation rate is lower still. While the City has the highest percentage of students eligible for free/reduced meals, it has the lowest participation level compared to the rest of the state.

Yet evidence suggests that many New York City school children come to school without an adequate breakfast. A healthy breakfast is critical to a child's health and growth and can improve behavior and academic performance. According to a 2001 New York City hunger study conducted by Food for Survival, "Nearly 80% of households with children are food insecure, with more than one-third physically experiencing hunger."¹³

No child in New York City should begin the school day hungry and unable to learn, especially when the benefits of breakfast are so well documented and when tools such as the School Breakfast Program exist to help alleviate the problem.

The Public Advocate recommends the following:

Increase Participation in Existing Program

Clearly New York City is not doing enough to encourage eligible students to take part in the breakfast program. The Department of Education must raise current participation beyond the 17.2% for children from low-income families. Model programs across the country have shown that improved outreach to parents, student incentives, more appealing menus and better morning scheduling can increase the number of students who take advantage of the breakfast program. New York City must begin instituting such programs immediately.

According to a recently released report by FRAC, New York State is among the states that are sacrificing the most federal funds.¹⁴ Furthermore, Community Food Resource Center of New York City estimates that increasing participation in the school breakfast program by 100,000 students would lead to \$22 million in reimbursement funding from the federal and state governments.

Expand Universal Breakfast Programs in New York City Schools

As of March 2002, New York City already has approximately 310 schools with a universal meals program. The New York City Department of Education's Office of School Food and Nutrition Services should expand this program to establish universal meals in all low-income schools where 80% or more of children are eligible for free/reduced price meals. Doing so will reduce the stigma associated with program participation by eliminating identification of students as free/reduced eligible. It would also reduce paperwork involved in administering school meal programs. New York City

¹³ Food for Survival, Inc., *Hunger in America 2001: The New York City Report*, New York, November 2001.

¹⁴ Food Research and Action Center, *2002 School Breakfast Scorecard*, Washington D.C., October 2002.

has 18 school districts and 466 schools where 80% or more students are eligible for free/reduced meals.

We examined the breakfast participation numbers in the 310 schools with universal meals programs in New York City to determine whether there were universal programs within the city that could serve as models to improve existing programs. Seven schools have breakfast participation rates higher than 50%. For example, The Franklin School (PS 157), an elementary school in Brooklyn had a 51% participation rate. Nathaniel Greene School (PS 36) in Brooklyn had a 76% participation rate. Junior High School 47 of Manhattan had a 60% rate. It should be noted that very low rates also occur in universal breakfast schools.

In working towards improving levels in the City's breakfast program, the Department of Education should examine why levels at some schools are greater and if perhaps use them as models for expansion.

Universal programs alone do not guarantee significant increases in participation levels. Participation in existing universal programs ranges from 0 to 76%. The expanded programs must incorporate the following components to ensure success:

1. Support of principals and superintendents;
2. Teacher involvement in program operations and promotion;
3. Accommodation of bus schedules;
4. Sufficient time period set aside for the breakfast program;
5. Promotional activities to increase participation;
6. Breakfast menu variety.

The programs should also be tracked for successful outreach methods and the affect of the program on student behavior and performance. Successes should be used as the model for further expansion.