



**Testimony of Lisa Levy, Director of Policy, Advocacy & Organizing
New York City Coalition Against Hunger**

Before The New City Council Committee on Education

Preliminary Budget Hearing

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I am Lisa Levy, Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Organizing at the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. I am testifying on behalf of the city's more than 1,100 soup kitchens and food pantries – and the more than 1.4 million New Yorkers who live in households that can't afford enough food. I want to first thank Chair Dromm and the Education Committee for inviting me here today.

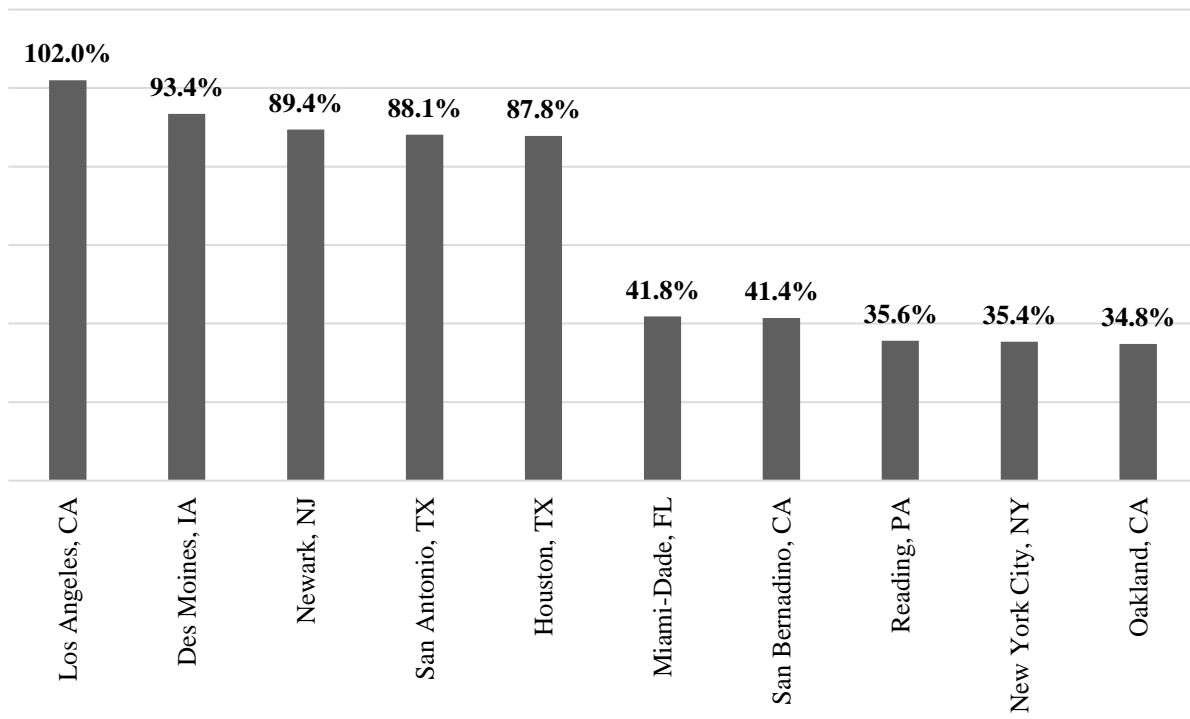
Breakfast After the Bell is the Best Way to Reduce Child Hunger

For the one in five children in New York City who live in households that cannot afford enough food, school meals are a critical component to fighting child hunger. New York City has made great strides to get children to eat school meals, but we are still behind.

The City has great opportunity to improve nutrition among food insecure and hungry children, decrease childhood obesity, and receive more revenue from the federal government for the Department of Education (DOE). The City can quickly and easily achieve these outcomes by expanding the provision of breakfast after the bell (BATB).

Each day, schools across New York City offer universal free school breakfasts. They require no paperwork, forms, hassle, or cost to the students. Despite the simplicity of this process and the outreach efforts of the DOE's Office of SchoolFood to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP), New York City's participation has significantly lagged. According to a January 2015 report by the Food Research Action Center (FRAC) on school breakfast participation in 62 large urban school districts across the country, New York City ranked second to last, with only 35.4% of the students receiving free or reduced-price (FRP) lunches also receiving free breakfasts.

Low-Income Students Participating in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) per 100 in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) of Top Five and Bottom Five Large City School Districts



That’s right, out of 62 big cities, New York City is second to last. It’s bad enough when we lose to Boston or Philadelphia in basketball, football, hockey, or baseball, but it’s downright unforgivable when we lose to them so badly in feeding our children.

Having learned first-hand of Newark’s success with in-classroom breakfast, in 2008, New York City launched a pilot project to try out in-classroom breakfasts in a number of schools. At one pilot site, Public School 68 in the Bronx, every student ate breakfast together during their first-period class. The pilot worked better than anyone could have anticipated. The school’s principal has said that before the pilot, an average of 50 children came to school late every day, so many that she had to assign extra staff to writing out late slips. When they started serving breakfast in their classrooms, kids came in early just for the meals, and now only about five kids a day are late—a 900 percent decrease in tardiness. The principal also mentioned that absenteeism and visits to school nurses also dropped, and in the afternoons, kids fell asleep in the classrooms less frequently. This is obviously not only good nutrition policy but also good education policy.

Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest school district in the country behind New York City, piloted breakfast in the classroom in twenty schools during the 2011-2012 school year, then began a three-year phased implementation that began in 2012-2013. The percentage of all students eating breakfast has increased from 37.4% to 55.7%, and today, even more students eat breakfast than lunch at school. Over the three-year implementation, LAUSD projects that the increased breakfast participation will bring in an additional \$16.6 million in revenue (after expenses) from Federal reimbursements for

breakfasts served. This additional revenue was not only distributed as discretionary incentives to schools that implemented breakfast in the classroom and had over 70% meal participation, but it also saved the jobs of 900 SEIU workers and provided additional hours for part-time workers. Breakfast takes about 15-20 minutes on average, which teachers use as an opportunity to teach math, science, and health. In Los Angeles, breakfast in the classroom has been a big win for everyone involved.

Given that most school districts must now have a complex system in place to collect forms and data on the income of each student's parents to determine the eligibility of each child for either free, reduced-price, or full-cost meals, when a district adopts a universal breakfast or lunch policy, not only does it reduce the stigma faced by children and thereby increase participation, it also reduces the paperwork and bureaucracy, saving the school district time and money. When kids eat breakfast in a classroom as part of the school day instead of in a cafeteria a few hallways away before school begins, they have more time to focus on their studies and are protected from the stigma of having to leave their friends to go to a special breakfast room "for the poor kids." Given that textbooks are widely understood to be a critical educational tool, public school districts typically lend them out free of charge to all students. The time is ripe for the nation to view school meals in the same way. Free breakfast and lunch should be universal in all classrooms around the country.

The facts also prove that breakfast after the bell, whether served in the classroom or via "grab and go" kiosks, is effective in increasing the number of children who eat school breakfast. As reported in the FRAC school breakfast study, "districts serving breakfast in the classroom have the highest participation rates." Evidence in our own city is consistent with this finding: at 23 schools offering BIC school-wide in January 2012, the breakfast participation rate was 68% of all students.

By expanding breakfast in the classroom or the "grab and go" model in hallways, the Department of Education can:

Improve nutrition among food insecure and hungry children – Nearly three in four New York City public school students qualify to receive free or reduced-price school meals, and approximately one in five children in New York City – about 435,899 – live in households that do not have an adequate food supply throughout the year. For children in families that are struggling to afford food, and thus often skip eating breakfast entirely, the single most effective health intervention is to provide nutritious school breakfasts. Breakfast in the classroom is endorsed as an effective hunger intervention in an article in the *Journal of School Health* titled Breakfast and the Achievement Gap Among Urban Minority Youth, stating, "High quality breakfast programs that allow students to eat breakfast in the classroom are especially needed for youth who are not likely to get good nutrition the rest of the day."

Improve educational outcomes - Higher breakfast participation also improves attendance, grades and behavior, and decreases trips to the nurse's office. A study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* reports that "evidence suggests that breakfast consumption may improve cognitive function related to memory, test grades, and school attendance." Children who eat school breakfast attend an average of 1.5 more days of school and average 17.5% higher math test scores than children who do not eat breakfast at school.

Decrease childhood obesity – Research has linked regular breakfast consumption with lower rates of obesity. A study by Dr. Phillip Gleason and Dr. Allison Dodd found "school breakfast participation was

associated with significantly lower body mass index...[and] may be a protective factor, by encouraging students to consume breakfast more regularly.” Additionally, an analysis of 47 studies about the breakfast habits of children and teens came to the conclusion that “breakfast eaters generally consumed more daily calories yet were less likely to be overweight.”

The USDA’s nutritional guidelines for school breakfast reduce the minimum calorie requirement while significantly improving the nutritional content, presenting a real opportunity for DOE to offer students a leaner, more nutritious breakfast. At a young age, it is important to instill good behavior in regards to eating. “Considering that behavior change is central to preventing obesity, the effectiveness of short-term interventions may be biased and even regressive whereas effective long-term interventions are more promising.” Breakfast in the classroom provides just such an opportunity to change behavior around what is often called the most important meal of the day.

Further evidence of long-term behavior affecting BMI comes from a 10 year study in the journal *Obesity* called, Longitudinal Patterns of Breakfast Eating in Black and White Adolescent Girls. One of its conclusions was, “Among girls with a high BMI at baseline (age 9), those who ate breakfast more often had lower BMI at the end of the study (age 19). In other words, eating breakfast more often was associated with decreased BMI at the end of the study, but only among girls who had relatively high BMI at the beginning of the study.”

Receive more revenue from the federal government – According to FRAC’s analysis, the New York City Department of Education would have collected an additional \$51 million in federal funds, and served an additional 181,672 low-income students, if it met a 70:100 [FRP Breakfast: FRP Lunch] ratio during the 2013-2014 school year.

Conclusion

We believe that only a progressive, proactive, and effective approach will be successful in expanding breakfast after the bell and universal school lunch. We hope we can count on the Education Committee, the rest of the City Council, and Mayor de Blasio’s entire administration to make these programs happen. The 610,000 low-income New York City children who do not eat breakfast at school are counting on each of you.

Thank you.