



New York City Food Policy Center

AT HUNTER COLLEGE

Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION: FISCAL YEAR 2016 PRELIMINARY BUDGET HEARING MARCH 25, 2015

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Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the education segment of the New York City budget. I am here on behalf of the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College, of which I am the Policy Director. The Center was created in 2012 to develop intersectoral, innovative and evidence-based solutions to preventing diet related diseases and promoting food security in New York and other cities. The Center works with policy makers, community organizations, advocates and the public to create healthier, more sustainable food environments and to use food to promote community and economic development. We thank the City Council and the Speaker's office for their support of our center.

The New York City Food Policy Center urges provision in the budget for the expansion of Universal Free School Meals to all New York public schools. Providing a healthy lunch to all of our school children will contribute to the achievement of at least two of the Center's basic goals: the reduction of diet related disease, and the promotion of food security. In the long run, it will advance academic achievement and educational attainment and thus contribute to the development of our city's economy.

Evidence-Based Policy

In September, 2014, the City implemented universal free lunches in free standing middle schools. Although advocates, with the support of the City Council, had sought universal meals city wide, the middle-school-only approach has conferred the benefits of what social scientists call a "natural experiment." The Center, as noted, is committed to evidence-based public policy. The evidence is at hand. Preliminary data for the autumn months show a substantial increase in participation, greater than 8 %, even without extensive publicity. That adds up to more than 800,000 additional meals served (and reimbursed).

Reducing Hunger in the Classroom

This increase in participation is good news for three reasons. **First, it reduces hunger**, also known in the literature as “food insufficiency” or “very low food security.” Nearly a third of students eligible for free or reduced price lunches did not participate last year, and many students who are not eligible are still in need and can not afford the meals, even at bargain prices. Stigma has been a major reason for failure to participate among eligible students, as has fear of the eligibility process among families. ⁱ The universal format and eliminates the necessity for an application. The growth in participation in our middle schools, in the context of flat or decreased participation in elementary and high schools, strongly suggests that the universal approach successfully reduces stigma.

We have known for decades that adequate nutrition is essential for learning; the nutrition/cognition connection is one of the best documented findings in the field of nutrition.ⁱⁱ Recent research has established that even moderate undernutrition and episodic hunger impair cognitive development and correlate with results like lower math scores and difficulty in getting along with other children. ⁱⁱⁱ Too many NYC school children do not eat, or eat only snack foods during the school day. Universal free lunches can help remedy this problem; we should invest in it without delay.

Improving Our Children’s Diets.

Increasing access to school lunch means **improved nutrition for students**. Poking fun at school food has long been a national pastime, but for the many students who eat regularly at school, school lunch nutrition is serious business. New York City led the way in the effort to improve the nutrition profile of school food with the New York City Food Standards, introduced in 2008 and revised in 2011. The federal standards promulgated under the healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 have introduced additional upgrades. A mounting body of research, including very recent studies in rural Virginia and urban Houston, shows that school meals are typically healthier than home-packed meals—and certainly healthier than items purchased at the corner store on the way to school. Specifically, lunches brought from home were higher in calories, fat, saturated fat and sugar, and lower in protein, fiber, and calcium than lunches served at school. ^{iv} Lunches brought from home failed to meet the USDA standards for fruits, vegetables, whole grains or milk and exceeded the sodium limitations, but 90 % contained desserts, snack chips, or sweetened beverages.^v

You may have heard rumors that students are not eating the new healthier menus, but here there is some modest good news. A careful before-and-after study has found that plate waste has not increased, and that students are eating significantly more vegetables and entrée items, and selecting more fruit.^{vi}

Healthier school food is important in combatting Type 2 diabetes and a host of other health problems associated with childhood obesity. ^{vii} When we consider the current and long term costs associated with these problems, in terms of health care, diminished productivity and reduced quality of life, not investing in universal meals seems “penny wise, pound foolish.” Further, the data released earlier this week suggest that with the additional federal reimbursements generated by the Community Eligibility Program [CEP] funding, the costs to the NYC budget may be lower than initially predicted. Healthy school

food is also important for consistency between what we teach and what we do. As universal free school lunches become a citywide reality, we will be better able to integrate the school meal with the curriculum to teach healthy eating.

A Note from our Community. The NYC Food Policy Center is located in East Harlem at the corner of 3rd Avenue and 119th Street. We have a special interest in our community. When a group of graduate students decided to take a look at the implementation of middle school universal meals in East Harlem, they were troubled to find that our local community board district has a large number of middle school students enrolled in Junior/senior high schools, which do not have universal free in their middle school grades. In Manhattan, the non-CEP middle schools, those without the new universal policy, seem to be concentrated in East and Central Harlem and Washington Heights. That is, of 19 non-CEP schools in Manhattan, 10 are located in those three community districts. We understand the logistical difficulty of operating two different policies in the same cafeteria, but feel that our community should not be penalized for having combination junior/senior high schools. The simplest way to resolve this disparity would be to implement universal free school meals throughout the city.

For more information about the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College, visit our website at www.nycfoodpolicy.org or e-mail info@nycfoodpolicy.org.

ⁱ For a summary of research through the 1990s, see Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy, Tufts University School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Statement on *The Link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children* 1998.

ⁱⁱ Katherine Alaimo, Christine Olson and Ed Frongillo, “Food Insufficiency and American School-Aged Children’s Cognitive, Academic, and Psychosocial Development.” *Pediatrics* 2001; 108:44-53.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Janet Poppendieck, *Free For All: Fixing School Lunch in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). especially chapters 5, 6, and 7.

^{iv} Alisha R. Farris et al, “Nutritional Comparison of Packed and School Lunches in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Children Following Implementation of the 2012-2013 National School Lunch Program Standards.” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 2014; 46 (6): 621-626.

^v Michelle Caruso and Karen Cullen, “Quality and Cost of Student Lunches Brought from Home,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 2015; 169 (1) 86-90.

^{vi} Juliana F.W. Cohen et al, “Impact of New U.S. Department of Agriculture School meal Standards on Food Selection, Consumption and Waste.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2014; 46 (4) 388-394.

^{vii} For a summary of the health consequences of childhood obesity see Institute of Medicine, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*. (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press) 2005, especially pages 65-73.