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Testimony of

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for the

Committee on Education

on

Resolution 910-A calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign legislation supporting breakfast in the classroom in every school in New York City

and

Resolution 911-A calling upon the New York City Department of Education to support breakfast in the classroom in every school in New York City

June 20, 2012

on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairperson Jackson, Council Member Levin and members of the Education Committee. My name is Triada Stampas and I am the Senior Director of Government Relations at the Food Bank For New York City. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council in support of proposed Resolutions 910-A and 911-A, which call for the support of Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) in all New York City public schools.

First, the Food Bank thanks the City Council for your longstanding attentiveness to school meals issues and your advocacy for expanding access to free school meals. Over the past several years, Speaker Quinn and many Members of the City Council have worked to promote BIC to schools in their respective districts and citywide.

In addition, the Food Bank thanks the City Council for your ongoing efforts to address the issue of hunger and ensure all New Yorkers have access to affordable, nutritious food. The City Council's consistent support for increasing enrollment of eligible households in the Food Stamp Program, advocacy to protect federal nutrition assistance programs in this year's Farm Bill, as well as funding to expand the supply of food available at emergency food programs are especially appreciated and needed as the recession has left elevated levels of food poverty in its wake.

Food Bank For New York City works to end hunger and food poverty by increasing access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. Approximately 1.5 million New York City residents rely on our programs and services. We distribute food and provide support services to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food programs citywide; manage nutrition education programs for schools and community-based organizations (CBOs); operate income support programs including food stamp outreach & enrollment assistance and one of the largest Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) programs in the country; and conduct research to inform community and government efforts to end hunger in New York City.

Most relevant to today's hearing topic, the Food Bank also convenes the New York City School Meals Coalition, a multi-sector stakeholder group that works together to increase participation in school meals. Active participants in the School Meals Coalition include the City Council, the Office of the Food Policy Coordinator, the Department of Education's Office of SchoolFood, the United Federation of Teachers, the Council for School Supervisors and Administrators, Local 372 of District Council 37, anti-hunger and child welfare advocates, and community-based organizations. The Coalition's two main areas of focus are expanding access to universal school meals, and increasing participation in school breakfast, primarily through Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC). For the past two years, the Coalition has come together to develop a multi-pronged strategic action plan for increasing BIC participation that includes various forms of parent and school-based outreach, public education and stakeholder involvement.

Approximately three-quarters of the City's nearly 1.1 million public school children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.¹ The more than 700,000 students eligible for free school meals come from homes where the household income is, at most, 130 percent of the poverty level (almost \$24,100 for a family of three).² For those eligible for reduced-price meals, household income is no more than 185 percent of the poverty level (almost \$34,300 for a family of three).

As these numbers suggest, food poverty disproportionately affects households with children. In New York City, almost one-third (30 percent, or 523,000) of children are living below the federal poverty level (approximately \$18,500 for a household of three), well above New York City's average of 20 percent.³ Many of their families struggle to afford food. In 2011, 43 percent of New York City households with children reported difficulty affording needed food, considerably higher than the citywide average of 35 percent.⁴ It should come as little surprise that this struggle is even more acute for low-income families: more than half (54 percent) of households with children and annual income less than \$25,000 had difficulty affording needed food; and these households were more likely than average to forgo purchases of healthy food, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, to stretch their grocery dollar.⁵

For these families, the nutritious meals provided every school day are an irreplaceable lifeline. On any given school day in our city, nearly 500,000 children receive a free school lunch; almost 50,000 have a reduced-price lunch for which they pay only a quarter.⁶ School breakfast, unlike lunch, is free for all New York City students. School meals meet nutrition guidelines set by the federal government and by the City of New York to ensure each meal is healthy, balanced and meets the needs of growing minds and bodies. While two thirds of all students (67 percent) receive a school lunch on an average day, fewer than one in four students (23 percent) participate in the school breakfast program.⁷ An analysis of New York City school meals participation data by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) finds that low participation is a phenomenon even among lower-income students; in the 2010-2011 school year, only 34 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price school lunch participated in school breakfast.⁸

WHY IS NYC'S SCHOOL BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION SO LOW?

Every one of New York City's public schools offers universal free breakfast in the cafeteria thirty minutes before the start of the school day. Given low breakfast participation, however, it is clear that factors other than cost are inhibiting participation. Chief among them are stigma, inconvenience and lack of awareness.

Eating Breakfast in the Cafeteria before School Starts Signals One Is Poor

Although school breakfast is free for all students, the way it is served – in the cafeteria before the start of the school day – effectively identifies low-income students and segregates them from their better-off peers, contributing to the stigma that attaches to poverty.

¹ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Consolidated Claims Report, November 2011.

² *Ibid.*

³ *2010 American Community Survey*. (2011). U.S. Census Bureau.

⁴ *Hunger Experience 2011: Sacrifice and Support*. Food Bank For New York City. January 2012.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Consolidated Claims Report, November 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *School Breakfast in America's Big Cities: School Year 2010-2011*. Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). January 2012.

Getting to School Early for Breakfast Inconveniences Families

Many families' childcare arrangements and work commutes are scheduled around getting their children to school by the start of the school day. Arriving at school half an hour early can upset these arrangements, particularly if there is only one adult in the home or children of different ages who attend different schools and/or a child care program.

Offering Breakfast before the Start of the School Day Can Render It Invisible

Because breakfast is in the cafeteria, a part of the school building that most parents and students do not see at the start of the school day, many families may be unaware that school breakfast is free and available to them. Recent evidence suggests this is true: the Department of Education sent a targeted mailing of postcards advertising school breakfasts to approximately 750,000 public school households in January 2012; by February 2012, breakfast participation was up eight percent compared to the same point the previous year.⁹

BREAKFAST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY

Ensuring every child receives a nutritious breakfast is a priority of the Food Bank and every member of the School Meals Coalition. An overwhelming scientific consensus exists that skipping breakfast and experiencing hunger inhibits children's ability to learn, and that regular breakfast consumption improves academic performance, student behavior and child health and wellbeing.¹⁰

Recent, reliable data about breakfast skipping among school-aged children is lacking, though both anecdotal reports and research suggest that a considerable number even of young schoolchildren arrive to school without having had breakfast. A study by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene that included seven elementary schools that offer the traditional cafeteria breakfast service found nearly one in six students (15 percent) reported having no breakfast the day they were surveyed.¹¹ The study did not ask whether students had had dinner the night before.

Child hunger can be difficult to detect, even to those adults who have daily contact with children. A group of students at PS 241 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, who in December 2008 wrote letters to Santa Claus asking for food to keep their families from waking up hungry every morning shocked the principal, teachers and community members so much they reported it in the *Daily News*.¹² In outreach to principals and teachers about increasing school breakfast, we regularly discover school officials do not know how many of their students are coming to school without breakfast. Rigorous research into this issue is clearly needed.

BREAKFAST IN THE CLASSROOM ADDRESSES KEY CHALLENGES

⁹ Letter from New York City Department of Education Chancellor Dennis Walcott and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Commissioner Thomas Farley to Food Bank For New York City (among other organizations). May 14, 2012.

¹⁰ For a recent overview of the scientific literature, see FRAC's fact sheets "Breakfast for Learning" (Fall 2011; <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/breakfastforlearning.pdf>) and "Breakfast for Health" (Fall 2011; <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/breakfastforhealth.pdf>).

¹¹ "In-Class Breakfast: Impact on Breakfast Skipping and Eating in Multiple Locations." G. Van Wye, H. Seoh, *et al.* New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

¹² "Santa letters from children at Brooklyn elementary school break hearts." Rachel Monahan. *New York Daily News*. Dec. 22, 2008.

Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) is a way to provide all students with the opportunity to have a healthy breakfast in a way that addresses many of the challenges associated with low participation in the school breakfast program. With BIC, a bagged breakfast is delivered to first-period classrooms for distribution to students. Breakfast is eaten in the classroom at the start of the school day, typically when attendance is being taken.

In 2007, the Bloomberg Administration announced a goal of 300 schools participating in BIC. That goal was met last year, and as of March 2012, approximately 385 New York City public schools were offering BIC in at least one classroom; more than 80 schools offered it school-wide.

BIC Does Not Identify or Segregate Poor Students

Because breakfast is served to all students in first period classrooms, no family need endure the shame or stigma associated with cafeteria breakfast – all students who want or need a breakfast can have it.

BIC Does Not Interfere with or Disrupt Families' Morning Schedules

Because BIC is offered at the start of the school day, it does not require families to change existing arrangements for transportation or child care.

REALIZING BIC'S FULL POTENTIAL

The Department of Education's Office of SchoolFood has worked hard to reach the goal set by the Administration in 2007, and the staff of the Office of SchoolFood continue to provide support to schools that choose to participate in BIC.

As currently implemented, however, BIC's potential is not fully realized. For one thing, its reach is limited. BIC is available in fewer than one in four schools (approximately 23 percent) and accounts for less than 18 percent of breakfasts served.¹³ It should come as little surprise that urban school districts that offer BIC more broadly, including districtwide, reach low-income students much more effectively. Newark (NJ), Houston (TX) and Washington, DC all offer broad BIC programs and boast breakfast participation of 65 percent or more among low-income students who participate in school lunch.

For another thing, its implementation is inconsistent. In some schools, BIC is offered schoolwide; in others, only in a few classrooms. This can create confusion for families when one child is in a classroom that offers BIC but another does not. When schools make the decision to implement BIC, the Office of SchoolFood works with cafeteria staff on-site to make sure implementation is smooth, but similar support is not provided to administrative staff so that communications to parents and students are clear and consistent.

Currently, principals have the authority to decide whether and how broadly to adopt BIC in New York City public schools, and while this is appropriate – not all schools are adequately equipped with refrigeration, have the electrical capacity or lack other capital needs – the reality is that without strong institutional support for BIC, expansion of the program hinges on the best efforts of the non-profit sector. While the non-profit community has made great strides to coordinate

¹³ As reported by the NYC Department of Education Office of SchoolFood at the June 19, 2012 School Meals Coalition meeting, 385 schools are participating in BIC, and in March 2012, BIC accounted for approximately 41,500 of the 237,000 breakfasts served.

efforts through the School Meals Coalition and has been able to attract federal support from the USDA Hunger Free Communities grant for this work, the existing funding falls short of meeting the needs of all schools to participate in this program. This is not a long-term solution.

Resolutions 910-A and 911-A offer two mechanisms for institutional support for BIC expansion – State legislation, or proactive institutional support from the Department of Education. Either, or both, could lead to major gains in school breakfast participation, especially among our most vulnerable students. The Food Bank supports both Resolutions and calls for their passage.

Thank you.