



MAIN OFFICE: 39 Broadway, 10th fl, New York, NY 10006, T: 212.566.7855 F: 212.566.1463
WAREHOUSE: Hunts Point Co-op Market, 355 Food Ctr Dr, Bronx, NY 10474, T: 718.991.4300, F: 718.893.3442

Testimony prepared by

Triada Stampas

for the

Committee on Education

on

The Department of Education's School Food Policies and Procedures

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on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairperson Jackson and members of the Education Committee. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today regarding the school meals program, and thanks the City Council for your continued leadership in addressing food and hunger issues in New York City. The Food Bank also wishes to thank the Department of Education for its efforts over recent years to improve school meals and expand access through initiatives like Breakfast in the Classroom.

Food Bank For New York City works to end hunger and food poverty by increasing access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. 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) program in the country; and conduct research to inform community and government efforts to end hunger in New York City.

Households with children are especially vulnerable to food poverty. Poverty afflicts one in five US children (20 percent), a rate higher than the 14 percent of US residents living below the

federal poverty level.¹ A similar pattern holds true for New York City: more than one quarter (27 percent, or 505,000) of NYC children live in poverty, as compared to the citywide average of 19 percent. Indeed, children comprise approximately one third of New York City residents living below the federal poverty level despite making up only 23 percent of the population.²

More than two out of five (44 percent) New York City households with children struggle to afford food – more than the citywide average of 37 percent – and approximately one in three (30 percent) has been reducing food quantity or quality to get by over the past year.³ One in five New York City children relies on food from soup kitchens and food pantries, and while a large portion (79 percent) of households that access emergency food programs and have school-age children participate in the school lunch program, only 59 percent participate in the school breakfast program, and even fewer (39 percent) participate in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP, or Summer Meals).⁴

Ensuring vulnerable children are receiving school breakfast and lunch, as well as summer meals, is an essential support for those struggling to put food on the table. School and summer meals:

- lessen demand for emergency food;
- allow families to stretch their food stamp (SNAP) benefits and tax credits farther; and
- reinforce nutrition education by providing children additional exposures to and opportunities to consume nutritious food.

Working to connect low-income families to the federal school and summer meals programs, the Food Bank's Eat to Learn Initiative is interwoven into our three-pronged approach to ending food poverty. Through this initiative, the Food Bank For New York City:

- convenes the New York City School Meals Coalition, which includes representatives from the New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood, the unions that represent teachers, principals and cafeteria workers; government officials; community-based organizations; advocates; and other stakeholders who work to increase participation in school meals;
- conducts direct outreach to schools;
- engages our network of approximately 1,000 community-based member programs; and
- conducts parent and student outreach.

HOW THE CITY COUNCIL CAN HELP IMPROVE SCHOOL AND SUMMER MEAL ACCESS

In the 2009 school year, more than 750,000 children, or 75 percent of the city's total student population, were enrolled in free or reduced-price school meals, meaning their maximum annual household income was 185 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$40,800 for a family of four).⁵

¹ American Community Survey 2009, US Census Bureau.

² *Ibid.*

³ NYC Hunger Experience 2010. Food Bank For New York City.

⁴ NYC Hunger Safety Net 2007: A Food Poverty Focus. Food Bank For New York City.

⁵ New York City Department of Education Consolidated Claims Report. June 2009.

School Breakfast

Despite the fact that school breakfast has been free and universal since 2004, breakfast participation has not seen substantial increases; the combination of stigma and inconvenience prevent many children from eating school breakfast as it is traditionally served, in the cafeteria 30 minutes before the start of the school day. Regular breakfast consumption has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes for children, including better academic performance, fewer disciplinary problems, better attendance, and diminished likelihood of obesity and other diet-related diseases. Alternative models of meal delivery, most notably Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC), have been proven to substantially increase breakfast participation, but while approximately 240 of the City's 1,600 public schools (or 15 percent) currently offer it in at least two classrooms, only 21 of those participate school-wide.⁶

Recommended Action:

- *Conduct outreach to schools to expand BIC.* Principals are empowered to decide for their schools whether to adopt alternative breakfast service models like BIC or grab-and-go bagged breakfast (a more popular option in high schools). City Council Members can leverage their relationships with local schools to engage principals and other key stakeholders (teachers, parents, etc.) in the importance of breakfast and how to increase school breakfast participation in schools. In coordination with the Food Bank and other School Meals Coalition members, City Council Members have hosted district-wide BIC information sessions that have been successful in persuading schools to implement BIC.

Universal School Meals

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) offers children from low-income households free or reduced-priced school meals, but the application process and the stigma associated with being identified as poor act as barriers to participation, particularly among older students. Indeed, the differences in participation are stark: during the 2008-2009 school year, for example, approximately 35 percent of high school students ate a school lunch on any given day; as elementary school students, however, that same cohort's average daily participation was 83 percent.⁷ Universal School Meals (USM) eliminates both the stigma and the administrative burden that depress participation.

The recently passed "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act" (Public Law 111-296) creates paperless USM options and continues an existing application-based USM model in the NSLP. The paperless USM models provide free meals to all students in low-income, high-need schools without ever requiring an application. Federal reimbursement for the meals served is based on "community eligibility," calculated in one of two ways:

1. indexing it to the proportion of students eligible for free school meals through direct certification – a process whereby homeless children, children in households receiving food stamps (SNAP) and/or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and now children in foster care automatically qualify for free school meals; or
2. basing it on a demographically based statistical profile of income distribution within school populations. This option requires guidance from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which will give approvals on a pilot basis.

The existing USM model, Provision 2 of the NSLP, bases federal school meal reimbursements for a four-year cycle on applications collected in the first year. While successful in increasing participation over the course of a single cycle – between School Years 2002 and 2008,

⁶ As of Dec. 17, 2010.

⁷ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data, 2002-2009.

participating New York City elementary through high schools collectively saw a 68 percent increase in participation⁸ – the requirement to collect applications after four years without having to do so acts as a barrier to continued participation and has resulted in a steady diminishment of participating schools. Recent budget cuts have cut the number of schools participating in Provision 2 as well: last year, 136 schools were identified for removal from Provision 2, most for reasons of financial viability.⁹

Recommended Actions:

- *Advocate for quick implementation of community eligibility USM provisions for all qualifying public schools.* The Department of Education should transition to USM every public school in New York City that can participate in USM under the community eligibility provisions in P.L. 111-296 in a financially viable way as expeditiously as possible. A school-by-school analysis of average federal reimbursements under the community eligibility provisions should be undertaken immediately to identify all viable schools.
- *Pursue pilot authorization to develop a demographically based USM model.* Approximately 75 percent of New York City public school children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, indicating a high level of need. Community eligibility for USM based only on directly certified students fails to capture all the other students eligible for free meals, and all the students eligible for reduced-price meals. A statistical model of the income demographics of the public school population would produce a more accurate basis for meal reimbursements and could result in higher federal reimbursement amounts, and more schools able to participate in USM.
- *Stop further cuts to USM.* As part of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 budget, SchoolFood's budget reductions led to the loss of more than 130 schools from a universal school meals program known as Provision 2. In this economy, budget cuts to free school meals are insensitive to the needs of low-income families. The City Council should guard against FY 2012 budget cuts resulting in the loss of additional schools from Provision 2.

Summer Meals

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP, or Summer Meals) provides universal breakfast and lunch to all children age 18 and under at schools and other sites in low-income neighborhoods during the summer. It is meant to take the place of school meals for low-income children when school is out. Nevertheless, participation in NYC lags at approximately 25 percent of school lunch participation among low-income students,¹⁰ below the statewide average of 30 percent.¹¹

Recommended Action:

- *Conduct outreach about summer meals sites in local communities.* This and every June, City Council Members should make sure families in their communities know about the availability of summer meals, as well as location of all open summer meals sites in their districts.

⁸ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data, 2002-2008.

⁹ According to the New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood, the threshold level for financial viability for USM in a school is an average lunch reimbursement of \$2.25.

¹⁰ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data.

¹¹ "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2010." Food Research & Action Center. (Jun 2010).

SUMMARY

The Food Bank For New York City appreciates the City Council's focus on school meals issues – as part of a coherent set of services upon which low-income New Yorkers rely in order to put food on the table, school and summer meals are a critical component to ending food poverty – and will support the City Council in efforts to expand access to this crucial support. Thank you.