

**Examining Innovative Practices to Improve Child Nutrition**

Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee Hearing 10:00 AM, October 8, 2009  
2175 Rayburn HOB, Washington, DC

Increasing School Breakfast Program Participation through Grant Funding for Universal  
In-Classroom Breakfast Programs

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The Nutrition Consortium of NYS is a statewide, non-profit, anti-hunger organization dedicated to alleviating hunger in New York State through increasing access to and participation in the federal nutrition assistance programs. The three programs we primarily focus on are the Food Stamp Program (FSP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and School Breakfast Program (SBP). We commend the House Subcommittee for Healthy Families and Communities, under the leadership of Chairwoman Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy, for holding this hearing on innovative strategies to ensure children have access to school meals.

**To improve the educational achievement and health of children across NYS and the rest of the country, and to help achieve President Obama's commitment to ending childhood hunger by 2015, it is imperative that the upcoming Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act provide grant funding for high-need schools to implement universal (served to all students at no-charge) breakfast programs that incorporate in-classroom breakfast or other alternative service methods.**

Throughout NYS, almost 90% of low-income children who qualify to eat free or reduced-price school meals eat school lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Unfortunately in NYS, participation in the SBP is much lower than in the NSLP. Only 37% of low-income children eating school lunch are also eating school breakfast. In Nassau County, only 29% of low-income children eating school lunch are also eating school breakfast.

Why is this? Research proves that students do not eat school breakfast due to persistent "access barriers" which prevent them from participating. Short breakfast periods, buses that arrive to school late, pressure to get to class on time, lack of awareness, and stigma all discourage children from eating school breakfast. These barriers are all associated with the traditional model of serving breakfast in the cafeteria before the school day begins.

With breakfast in the classroom, and other alternative breakfast service models, schools move breakfast out of the cafeteria and incorporate the meal as part of the school day, making it easily available to all students. However, despite the tremendous success of universal in-classroom breakfast programs, only a small number of schools utilize these methods. Based on 8+ years of

working to convince schools to adopt in-classroom and other alternative service methods, the Nutrition Consortium of NYS found that the most effective way to get schools to do so is by offering start-up funding.

Many school food service directors are interested in switching from the traditional cafeteria model to innovative school breakfast service methods, but lack support from school administrators, teachers, and custodial staff to implement this change. The Nutrition Consortium of NYS found that offering a small amount of start-up funding (\$5,000-\$10,000) is sufficient to garner the support of school administrators for implementing a classroom breakfast program, and allows the schools to pay for start-up costs such as equipment and labor.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Nutrition Consortium of NYS administered the Academics and Breakfast Connection (ABC) Pilot, which provided grant funding for 20 upstate schools to start universal breakfast in the classroom programs. Westbury School District in Congresswoman McCarthy's district in Nassau County, one of the featured speakers at today's hearing, was part of this pilot. Funding for the Academics and Breakfast Connection Pilot was secured by the Nutrition Consortium of NYS from the Indirect Vitamins Purchasers Antitrust Litigation Settlement administered by the New York State Attorney General. Urban, suburban, and rural schools of varying sizes and socio-economic characteristics received grant money to implement breakfast in the classroom. As part of project, schools reported SBP participation rates and various physical, social, and academic indicators before and after the pilot was implemented. The Harvard Medical School analyzed results and the Nutrition Consortium of NYS published these tremendously positive findings in a report entitled, "Academics and Breakfast Connection Pilot".

In all pilot schools, SBP participation more than doubled. Participation from low-income students increased from 34% to 58% (as compared to the school year prior to implementation). There were also notable differences in other indicators: tardiness and absenteeism decreased; disciplinary office referrals decreased; and visits to the school nurse decreased. An overwhelming majority of school principals and teachers surveyed agreed that classroom breakfast made an important contribution to the educational process.

In addition, school faculty perceptions about breakfast in the classroom changed. Faculty and staff were initially concerned about the time and clean-up involved with classroom breakfast. Before the pilot began, 58% of teachers reported they were hesitant about the program. By the end of the school year, 85% of the teachers surveyed felt that classroom breakfast made a positive impact in the classroom. Similarly, 50% of custodial staff members were initially reluctant to switch to classroom breakfast, but by the end of the school year, 77% supported the program.

Due to the tremendous success of the ABC Pilot, in 2007 the Attorney General used some of its remaining money from the initial settlement to award the Nutrition Consortium of NYS

additional funding for universal classroom breakfast start-up grants. The Nutrition Consortium of NYS received more than 100 letters of intent for the start-up grants, which were for amounts of up to \$5,000 per school. More than 30 completed applications were submitted, but due to limited money available, the Nutrition Consortium of NYS awarded funds to nine schools.

At the present time, there is no funding available for schools in NYS to start universal classroom breakfast programs. The Nutrition Consortium of NYS believes that the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act should include funding for this purpose, since there is a documented interest and a record of success. If funding was available for universal classroom breakfast start-up grants, there would be many schools across NYS that would apply and switch to this style of breakfast service. Start-up grants would thereby increase the number of low-income children participating in the SBP, improve educational and health outcomes in school children, and reduce the prevalence of childhood hunger.

The benefits of children receiving morning nutrition through the SBP are well-documented. In November 2008, the Sodexo Foundation summarized recent peer-reviewed and/or scientific literature published in refereed journals about the benefits of school breakfast. The Sodexo report categorized the benefits of the SBP into three major areas: cognitive and academic benefits; health benefits; and behavioral and psychosocial benefits.

According to the report, in terms of cognitive and academic benefits, school breakfast participation resulted in improved concentration, alertness, and energy in children. The SBP was also associated with improved overall academic performance including higher math, reading, and standardized test scores. In regard to health benefits, school breakfast elicited better overall diet and eating habits, improved nutritional status, and reduced illness in children. In addition, children who ate school breakfast displayed improved psychosocial well-being, better disciplinary and social behavior, as well as reduced aggression and incidence of school suspension.

School breakfast participation not only promotes positive indicators in child well-being and contributes to a more positive school environment, but it also helps parents and adult caregivers. Especially in these economic times, breakfast at school provides parents/adult caregivers an affordable option for feeding their children in the morning. With busy morning schedules, parents/adult caregivers working non-traditional hours, and children not being hungry early in the morning, school breakfast is an opportunity for children to get morning nutrition.

In addition, the SBP has significant financial implications for school districts in NYS and Nassau County. Since a majority of the SBP is federally-funded, each school breakfast served draws down federal funding. Ultimately, the more children who eat breakfast at school, the more federal dollars enter NYS. According to projections from the Nutrition Consortium of NYS, if 60% of NYS' low-income children eating school lunch also ate school breakfast rather than the

current 37%, NYS would receive an additional \$53.4 million in federal funding each school year. Further, if 60% of Nassau County's low-income children eating school lunch also ate school breakfast (instead of the current 29%), Nassau County would draw down an additional \$2.2 million in federal funding.

Educational and financial benefits aside, increasing access to the SBP through expanding in-classroom breakfast programs is critical to ending childhood hunger in this country. We heard an incredible example of this from a food service director in upstate New York, who began a classroom breakfast program in the 2007-2008 school year through the start-up grant funding. Like many school districts, there was some initial resistance from teachers in this particular school about switching from cafeteria breakfast to classroom breakfast. One day, this particular food service director received a message from a teacher. The note said, "Thank you for this program. At first, I didn't think it was necessary. I was concerned about the time it would take from teaching. This Monday, I had a student come up to me after breakfast and say, 'I'm so glad I got to eat breakfast today! I didn't have anything to eat all weekend.' I now understand how crucial the classroom breakfast program is to my students. I never would have realized this student was hungry and not getting fed at home, and I am sure there are so many others out there just like him."

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act provides tremendous opportunity to strengthen the SBP and ensure children throughout the United States and NYS have access to morning nutrition to grow, learn, and play. In addition to providing funds for schools to implement in-classroom universal breakfast programs, the Nutrition Consortium of NYS also recommends that Reauthorization include the following provisions related to school meals: increase meal reimbursement levels, fund SBP outreach and promotion; eliminate the reduced-price category for school meals; and eliminate the letter method as an acceptable means of direct certification for school meals.

To view the Nutrition Consortium of NYS' Academics and Breakfast Connection (ABC) Pilot Report, please go to:

<http://www.nutritionconsortium.org/childnutrition/documents/abcfinal.pdf>

For the Nutrition Consortium of NYS' most recent report on the School Breakfast Program in NYS, please go to: <http://www.nutritionconsortium.org/childnutrition/documents/2007-2008ShinewithSBReport.pdf>

For the Nutrition Consortium of NYS' new report on Direct Certification for School Meals in NYS, please go to: <http://www.nutritionconsortium.org/childnutrition/documents/DirectCertificationNYS09.pdf>