



Testimony of

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Before the  
New York City Council  
Committee on Education

Hearing Regarding  
Proposed Resolutions 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 Proposed 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

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Good afternoon. My name is Louise Feld and I am the Policy Associate for Food and Economic Security at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 68-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chair Jackson and the members of the Committee on Education for holding this hearing today, as well as all of the New York City Council members for their continued commitment to helping our City's children and families access healthy, fresh food.

CCC supports Proposed Resolutions 910-A and 911-A, which, respectively, call upon the New York State Legislature and Governor Cuomo, and the New York City Board of Education, to support the Breakfast in the Classroom program (BIC) in all New York City schools. The BIC program provides in-classroom breakfast to children at the start of the school day, and is a proven way to help ensure that children eat a healthy breakfast each and every weekday morning.

In recent years, guaranteeing children's access to a nutritious breakfast at school has become even more pressing, as a staggering number of New York City's families have faced increased poverty, and an accompanying inability to consistently purchase healthy foods. According to recent U.S. Census data, in 2010 the City's child poverty rate reached 30 percent, after experiencing an overwhelming 10.8 percent growth since the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Also by the close of 2010, over 1.8 million New Yorkers were receiving SNAP (or "Food Stamp") assistance, including 30 percent of New York City families with children – a 53 percent increase in the share of New York City families participating in the program in a three-year period.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in 2011, almost three-quarters of New York City's over one million public school students qualified for free or reduced-price School Meals, because their families' incomes fell at or below 130 percent and 185 percent, respectively, of the federal poverty level.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this clear need, and although New York City public schools offer free breakfast to all students regardless of their income-eligibility status, New York City's school breakfast participation rates are troublingly low. Last month, CCC released *The School Breakfast Program in New York City Public Schools: Results from a Parent Survey Concerning Student Participation*, a report which details our findings from a CCC-conducted survey of New York City parents whose children were attending public elementary and middle schools.<sup>4</sup> Almost 100 parents were surveyed for the project. Only 21.3 percent of parents surveyed reported that their children had eaten breakfast at school every day during the previous school week, and a quarter of survey respondents stated that their children had failed to eat breakfast anywhere (home, school, or on the way to school) every day during that same time period.

Moreover, New York City's school breakfast participation rates have been shown to pale in comparison to those of other American cities. According to the Food Research and Action Center's (FRAC) 2012 report entitled *School Breakfast in America's Big Cities*, during the 2010-2011 school year, for every 100 eligible low-income New York City public school children who

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> New York State Education Department, "New York State Report Cards." Last accessed June 13, 2012. <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/reportcard/>.

<sup>4</sup> A copy of the report is attached herein.

participated in the National School Lunch Program, only 33.9 ate in-school breakfast.<sup>5</sup> Among the 26 major American cities that FRAC studied, New York's 33.9 percent school breakfast participation rate was the lowest, trailing some of the best-performing cities, such as Newark (87.2 percent) and Detroit (86.8 percent), by over 50 percentage points.<sup>6</sup>

CCC strongly believes that support for, and expansion of, the BIC program in New York City's public schools will improve children's access to, and consumption of, this necessary meal. BIC is the best strategy to increase children's participation in the School Breakfast Program, as it helps to reduce the many barriers that otherwise prevent students from eating breakfast at school. For example, BIC relieves busy parents of the burden of rushing their children to school early in the morning, before the school day begins, in order to guarantee that their children receive breakfast. BIC also eliminates the stigma some children feel when eating a free meal in the cafeteria prior to the beginning of the school day. Because BIC eliminates these obstacles, it results in more children actually eating breakfast, which is critical to their healthy development and ability to achieve academically.<sup>7</sup> Further, studies have shown that students who regularly eat breakfast in their classrooms have better attendance and behavior, as well as improved cognitive functioning and academic achievement on standardized tests.<sup>8</sup> In short, BIC increases children's consistent access to a much-needed healthy breakfast, and ultimately has a positive impact on their overall physical well-being and school performance.

Unfortunately, while the New York City Department of Education Office of School Food has made progress in implementing and expanding the BIC program in New York City schools, too few New York City public school students benefit from BIC. In March 2012, while about 400 of New York City's public schools participated in the BIC program, only 80 of these schools provided BIC in every single classroom. The remainder offered BIC in differing numbers of classrooms, with some only providing it in a single class, or for one particular grade level.

In light of these numbers, parents' survey responses about how often and where their children were eating breakfast, and the national data about New York City's school breakfast participation rates, our report recommended that the number of schools participating in BIC be vastly increased through a city-wide mandate of the program. We recognize, however, that taking BIC to scale in the City's enormous school system will take time and effort. We therefore recommended commencing expansion efforts in high-poverty areas. Specifically, we suggest beginning expansion in targeted neighborhoods in the Bronx, which is home to one of the most

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<sup>5</sup> Food Research and Action Center, "School Breakfast in America's Big Cities: School Year 2010-2011." January 2012. Last accessed June 13, 2012. [http://frac.org/pdf/urban\\_school\\_breakfast\\_report\\_2012.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/urban_school_breakfast_report_2012.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> According to "School Breakfast in America's Big Cities: School Year 2010-2011," Newark and Detroit require BIC in almost all of their K-8 schools. *Ibid.*, at 7.

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Food & Nutrition Service, "Strategies for School Breakfast Program Expansion, Breakfast in the Classroom." Last accessed January 27, 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/expansion/expansionstrategies.htm#classroom>; Food Research and Action Center, "Breakfast in the Classroom Fact Sheet." Last accessed January 27, 2012. [http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/universal\\_classroom\\_breakfast\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/universal_classroom_breakfast_fact_sheet.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Ortiz, B. (Jan. 2011). "Why Breakfast in the Classroom Should be in Every Classroom." Presented at the conference "What Must New York Do Now to Prevent Obesity? A Symposium of Good Ideas from the Field," New York Academy of Medicine, New York; see also Turque, B. (2009, Nov. 16). Meal program aims to keep kids hungry for learning *Washington Post*; Callaci, D. Breakfast in the Classroom a Hit. Retrievable at <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/breakfast-classroom-hit/>.

food insecure Congressional Districts in the country, and, according to our findings, had fewer children consistently eating breakfast each day. We are pleased that the Council shares this approach to the expansion of the BIC program, as both Resolutions suggest prioritizing the establishment of BIC in schools with high percentages of children who qualify for free and reduced-price school meals.

Our report also made several additional suggestions that, if implemented, would help increase children's access to, and participation in, school breakfast, and would serve to support the expansion of the BIC program. For example, we recommend increased parent education and outreach about BIC, and the School Meals Program in general. Such efforts should include focused educational sessions about the benefits of BIC and how BIC can be established in one's own school, as well as information about the array of breakfast options and School Meals services that exist. Further, we ask that schools work to better communicate with parents about where their children's school breakfast is provided or located, and about what foods children are offered, so that parents can make informed decisions about their children's breakfasts. Since a school's principal will be equipped to determine the appropriate manner in which to conduct parent education and outreach for his or her school, this recommendation is consistent with the Resolutions' acknowledgements that principals should be granted the authority to determine how a school administers and participates in the BIC program.

Finally, we suggest more research is needed in order to further provide support for the BIC program. The necessary research includes an exploration of parent, student, teacher, and principal experiences with BIC. As expected, given the limited number of schools participating in BIC and the size of our survey sample, we only found a few survey respondents whose families had experiences with the BIC program. Almost all of those surveyed whose children received BIC, however, were extremely positive about the program. Much stands to be gained with regard to education and planning, simply from listening to those who have successfully engaged in BIC.

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In sum, CCC supports the proposed Resolutions, and we are eager to work with the City Council to accomplish their goal of providing BIC in every New York City classroom. Given the poverty and food insecurity with which so many New York City families currently struggle, a program such as BIC, which helps all children access a healthy breakfast and increases children's participation in the School Breakfast Program, must be supported. We thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for the Council's commitment to improving children's access to breakfast.