

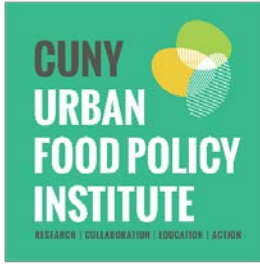
**Testimony to NYC Council Committee on Education, Preliminary Budget Hearing - Education
by Janet Poppendieck, CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, March 21, 2017**

I am testifying today on behalf of the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, located at the CUNY School of Public Health and Health Policy. At the CUNY School of Public Health, we recognize that nutritious food is essential to health, and that school food programs can and do play a vital role in shaping the health of our children and youth. For those who participate, they provide balanced meals and displace the consumption of less healthy alternatives. For those who fail to participate, they provide nothing at all.

Ending the school food means test—converting to universal free provision—will especially benefit three groups of students. First, it will benefit students who are not income eligible but are still in need. School food eligibility standards are uniform throughout the nation, but costs of living are not. An eligibility threshold that makes sense in Brownsville, Texas, with a Cost of Living Index of 85.8 will exclude many students in real need in Brownsville, Brooklyn, a borough where the Cost of Living Index is 181.7. A threshold that works in Manhattan, Kansas, where the Cost of Living Index stands at 95 will not be appropriate for our Manhattan, where it is 216.7. A family of three struggling to get by on \$39,000 per year in New York City is nearly two thousand dollars over the eligibility cut off for free meals, but can not readily afford the paid meal charge of \$1.75, even though it is a bargain. Eliminating the charge will bring the benefits of healthy, nutritious, federally subsidized meals to thousands of children who cannot now afford them, and their families will benefit from the resources freed for other expenses.

A second group that will benefit is composed of children of immigrants whose families have been unwilling to submit applications due to fear of being labeled a “public charge” or fear of government in general. Many of these children are in fact income eligible, but their eligibility has not been established. In the current climate of fear and uncertainty, this barrier to participation is growing. A draft executive order leaked from the Trump administration in January would have expanded the programs that can lead to a “Public Charge” designation to include SNAP, and community organizations serving the poor are reporting that immigrant families are voluntarily withdrawing from the SNAP program. I can think of no action that the Council could take that would give more meaning to our claim to be a Sanctuary City than to remove the necessity for families to submit applications to obtain free school lunches. And of course, these lunches will become even more important to the well-being of our children if parents are in fact deterred from receiving SNAP.

A third group of students who will particularly benefit are children who are eligible to eat free, but who are deterred from participating by the stigma associated with school food, or by the threat of teasing and bullying by their peers. Eliminating the means test will gradually eliminate the stigma.



As the older students who have been infected with this stigma move on, school meals will become the norm, and school lunch can realize its potential as a nourishing respite in the school day, a true part of education instead of a bothersome interruption. And, of course, students who have been eating school lunch despite the stigma will also benefit, no longer consuming a meal seasoned with shame.

New York City has tried to reduce stigma by converting to a swipe card system, but this innovation has brought its own problems. Parents in the “paid” category are billed for the meals, but in many cases, they have difficulty paying. A recent op-ed in the *Staten Island Advance* pointed out that owing money to the schools deters parents from participating in parent-teacher conferences and other school events. The attempt to collect the outstanding school food debt falls to principals and their staffs—a time-consuming distraction from their core mission—and has generally not been very successful. Community Food Advocates estimate that the City succeeds in collecting between \$8 million and \$10 million of the approximately \$28 million owed annually by parents. The missing \$18 to \$20 million will more than offset the funds needed to move the entire system to universal free meals. That is, under the federal Community Eligibility Program, the City could be reimbursed for the great majority of these meals.

Once the entire system is converted to universal, the confusion over eligibility will be eliminated and we can do what New York does so well, harness the power of our advertising industry to get the word out to parents that it is no longer necessary to give kids a dollar for a bag of chips at the corner store, and to kids that school food can be “cool.”

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