

SUMMER MEALS: WE CAN INCREASE PARTICIPATION

FIVE BIG IDEAS FOR 2016 AND BEYOND



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Executive Summary

The federal Summer Meals Program remains greatly underutilized in New York City. Although the program is free to all youth under the age of 19 and has no paperwork or eligibility criteria other than age, the program reaches fewer than 16% of the estimated one million eligible youth. While the New York City Department of Education (DOE), the program's major sponsor and administrator, and the Mayor's Office of Food Policy made significant strides toward increasing program accessibility and public visibility over the past two years, participation remains extremely low. Many of our youth live in severe poverty and rely on school meals to meet their basic nutritional needs; these needs are just as pressing, if not more so, during the summer recess.

Several previously identified barriers to participation must be addressed: the dearth of open Summer Meals sites in low-income communities; late identification and announcement of sites; insufficient publicity, particularly among immigrant and non-English speaking communities; and little encouragement for summer school students to participate in breakfast and lunch at school. In addition, we must think creatively about the most effective ways to increase participation and make tangible improvements in the administration of the program. This report proposes recommendations that address both points.

Our top 5 strategies for increasing participation are as follows:

1. Build breakfast and lunch into the summer school schedule;
2. Pilot a "Summer Pools Initiative:" Assign dedicated SchoolFood service employees to oversee meal distribution at select sites, include Summer Meals at Astoria and Riverbank Pools;
3. Increase funding for school-based extracurricular and recreational activities to attract youth to open school and park sites;
4. Implement a comprehensive community-based publicity campaign to compliment the current citywide advertising campaign and increase public visibility by implementing outreach strategies outlined on page 5 of this report; and
5. Expand the number of refrigerated trucks or similar mobile services such as "ice cream" carts and station them at playgrounds in parks and NYCHA complexes with high concentrations of youth.

We recommend implementing the above strategies in concert with a few administrative changes outlined in the pages that follow in order to build a stronger Summer Meals program in 2016 and beyond. One full-time dedicated Summer Meals SchoolFood staff person will be needed to coordinate these efforts and infuse the program with new energy. The Summer Meals Program provides crucial services to youth and has tremendous (untapped) potential to serve hundreds of thousands of New York City families. The city must make the small investment needed to ensure greater programmatic reach, efficiency and sustainability.

Methodology

Our recommendations are informed, in part, by findings from an intensive, two-month community assessment of the New York City Summer Meals program. Four college interns joined Community Food Advocates in July 2015 and observed 127 open sites in 22 school districts throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Neighborhoods in districts with a high number of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments with children were prioritized.

In order to assess NYCHA residents' access to Summer Meals sites, interns began each day at a NYCHA residence and surveyed the nearest open sites to determine how far children would have to walk. When a NYCHA residence had a Summer Meals program, that site was visited first. Because participation at open NYCHA sites tends to be low overall (see Appendix, Table 1), interns were instructed to look for potential barriers to participation and map nearby open sites where youth may be going instead. Interns conducted interviews with summer meal site coordinators, participants and community members whenever possible and appropriate to elicit feedback and suggestions for programmatic improvement. Interview questions and site observations were guided by a qualitative assessment tool created by Community Food Advocates.

Introduction

For the first time in 20 years, we have a mayoral administration with a deep commitment to eradicating poverty in New York City and we have a healthy economy. Yet, we also live in a city of pronounced and increasing income inequality and a skyrocketing cost of living. Approximately 30% of youth live in poverty in New York City, and close to 750,000 (75%) school-age youth from low-income families are eligible to receive free school meals. Many of these youth rely on free breakfast and lunch during the school year and, without the Summer Meals Program, their families have difficulty providing two wholesome meals each day during the summer recess.

The City's Office of Food Policy has provided leadership to the Summer Meals Program in an effort to reach additional youth; nevertheless participation has remained about the same for the last decade. This report offers both immediate and far-reaching recommendations and creative strategies to substantially increase program participation.

How the Program Works

The federally funded Summer Meals Program provides free breakfast and lunch to all youth under the age of 19 during the summer recess, regardless of family income or immigration status. In New York City, the program operates from the end of June until the Labor Day weekend, providing free meals to tens of thousands of New York City youth. The program is easy to access; there are no forms to fill out, and participants are not asked for identification or proof of residency. All youth under the age of 19 are eligible to receive free meals. There is no minimum age requirement. Federal funds pay for food, labor and administrative costs. The

program is an “entitlement,” meaning there is no funding cap; federal reimbursement is generated to pay for the number of children served.

There are two categories of sites where summer meals are provided: open sites and closed sites. While the latter are not open to the public (and are beyond the scope of this report), the former include public school buildings, swimming pools, some parks, some libraries and NYCHA residences and a few mobile trucks. Any child under 19 may receive a meal at an open site simply by showing up during designated meal times. Open sites operate in low-income communities where at least 50% of students are eligible for free or reduced price school meals (i.e. those with family income below 185% of the federal poverty level). Almost every neighborhood in New York City qualifies as an open site area.

A Brief History of Summer Meals: Past Successes and Lessons Learned

Participation in the Summer Meals Program in New York City peaked between 1998 and 2001 at 200,000 youth eating lunch each day, based on the combined average daily participation for the months of July and August. By 2003, participation fell sharply to 142,695 youth eating lunch per day—a 29% decrease. While it is difficult to isolate and pinpoint the primary causes of the decline in participation since 2001, it is likely that contributing factors are government disinvestment in youth recreation programs and lack of support for promotional, community-based events, such as local barbeques and activities and incentives for youth participants.

Although the number of open sites increased to 426 in 2015 from 377 in 2014, program participation is roughly the same as it was last year and is still far below its former peak. In 2015, school sites, city swimming pools and refrigerated trucks, respectively, were the three largest average daily meal providers for summer lunch (see appendix, Table I). Given the success of these sites, four of our top 5 strategies seek to enhance and expand upon their operations. Public school sites serve 70% of total summer lunches and are the only sites that can serve hot meals; however school sites are currently underutilized and should be reaching tens of thousands more children. Similarly, refrigerated trucks and pools have the capacity to reach additional participants; yet congregate meal¹ requirements pose challenges at many sites that have the potential, but lack the facilities, to reach significant numbers of youth. In addition, insufficient staffing levels, inadequate storage facilities and lack of publicity keep participation low at swimming pools.

The following recommendations seek to address barriers at these open sites and may have the greatest impact in increasing participation. Strategies regarding recreational funding and publicity, both of which directly affect program appeal and visibility, are also included.

¹ A federal regulation that requires supervision of the consumption of food prohibits Summer Meals participants from eating meals off-site.

Top 5 Immediate, Far-Reaching Strategies for Increasing Participation and Why They Matter

1. Build breakfast and lunch into the summer school schedule.

Many summer school students do not participate in the Summer Meals Program because their school day ends before lunch is served. Most students are unable or unwilling to remain at school for lunch upon dismissal, either due to scheduling conflicts or for fear of being identified by their peers as the student who needs free meals. If summer school students could break for lunch and go to the cafeteria as a group before resuming classes, participation would increase significantly. As for breakfast, summer school students would greatly benefit by having it served in their classrooms, yet most principals refuse to permit this option. Grab and go service may be effective for older students.

2. Pilot a “Summer Pools Initiative;” assign dedicated SchoolFood staff to oversee meal distribution at select sites, include Summer Meals at Astoria and Riverbank pools and increase public visibility by implementing the outreach strategies outlined above.

Pools attract a large number of children during hot summer days. Thousands of children attend New York City’s 47 pools each day in July and August. However, for the past three years, pool sites only served a combined average of about 6,000 meals per day (see appendix, Table 1).

Overseeing summer meal service is an additional burden imposed on pool staff who are already stretched thin. If a SchoolFood employee were staffed at each major pool site with the potential to serve at least 200 or more children per day, the number of meals served would increase without taxing pool staff. To generate excitement and public visibility, pool sites should launch a “summer initiative” featuring two or more well-publicized community events with low cost Summer Meals giveaways such as pens, baby floaties, etc. The inclusion of Summer Meals at the Astoria and Riverbank pools would both significantly increase participation and raise the profile of the program in these communities.

3. Restore and/or increase funding for school-based extracurricular and recreational activities to attract youth to open school and park sites.

Most youth, especially teenagers, do not wish to visit their local school in the summer. They are keenly aware that walking into a school building to obtain a free meal signifies low socio-economic status and is heavily stigmatized. If youth have the opportunity to meet with friends in organized activities at a school site, they are much more likely to participate in the Summer Meals Program.

Similarly, there is little incentive for youth to spend time at neighborhood parks sites with few structured activities. Parks Department site coordinators noted that the majority of the children that frequent parks are enrolled in summer camps. Individual

participants are rare, mostly because there are few group activities. When asked for their recommendations on how to improve the Summer Meals Program, park site coordinators repeatedly suggested increased funding for low cost items such as jump ropes, board games and soccer balls for youth. Observed sites with small chess boards, sprinkler systems, etc. had the highest number of participants who were not affiliated with a summer day camp.

4. Implement a comprehensive, citywide publicity campaign.

We acknowledge and applaud the Department of Education and the Mayor’s Office of Food Policy’s significant publicity efforts this past year. Attractive and informative public announcements were placed in buses, subway stations and billboards throughout the City and, for the first time, participants could view a list of nearby sites through an interactive and up-to-date smart phone application. However, these innovations must be complimented with holistic outreach strategies, particularly among immigrant communities, and build upon existing resources. Our five-part plan is as follows:

a) Adequate translation and promotion in non-English speaking communities
Translate flyers and signage into all 9 high-priority DOE languages and distribute versions as appropriate. Additionally, the DOE should make use of local, multi-lingual and ethnic media to promote Summer Meals.

b) Increased visibility and clarity
Each site should be supplied with a banner. The time(s) and dates of operation should be listed clearly for each site so that it is visible to passersby at all times.

c) School-based publicity
In June, every public school student should receive Summer Meals promotional material to bring home to their parent or caregiver. The DOE should institute emails and robocalls to parents.

d) Community-oriented distribution
The DOE and advocacy organizations should create and distribute flyers enumerating sites by neighborhood (i.e. within reasonable walking distance of where flyers are posted). Borough-wide—and even district-wide—flyers are cumbersome, and it is difficult for busy parents to quickly identify nearby open sites. Although the SchoolFood website and mobile application offer site suggestions based on the user’s location, not all parents and children have unlimited access to the internet. Flyers and signage must be both comprehensive and reader-friendly.

Each June, volunteers, advocacy organizations and/or paid School Food staff should post signs in local storefronts, churches and community centers and distribute flyers extensively at nearby NYCHA apartments and playgrounds. Site coordinators should be supplied with neighborhood-based flyers and encouraged to conduct additional local outreach throughout the duration of the Summer Meals Program. (Anecdotally, we’ve

found that many site coordinators are unaware of other nearby open sites. Because each site operates in a vacuum, site coordinators are ill-equipped to serve as resources to the community. Supplying each site coordinator with an up-to-date list of neighborhood sites can remedy this information gap.)

Lastly, the City should consider creating Summer Youth Employment (SYEP) positions dedicated to local outreach and engagement in underserved communities. When possible, SYEP eligible youth should be placed within their own communities. If local youth are tasked as ambassadors of the Summer Meals Program, their friends and peers will be more likely to participate.

e) Year-long outreach staff at DOE

At least one paid, full-time, year-long outreach coordinator is needed to develop and compile materials and implement outreach strategies in preparation for the summer. Program materials and open site lists are finalized far too late in the school year.

5. Expand the number of refrigerated trucks or similar mobile services such as “ice cream” carts and station them at playgrounds in parks and NYCHA complexes with high concentrations of youth.

At its peak in 2014, four refrigerated trucks served a combined average of 6,910 youth per day. Refrigerated trucks are a critical resource for the Summer Meals Program, reaching youth in densely populated and underserved areas. We recommend increasing the number of refrigerated trucks or similar mobile services such as “ice cream” carts and stationing them in well-attended parks and NYCHA playgrounds.

The federal congregate eating policy is a barrier to the expansion of refrigerated truck service as it is difficult to find areas with sufficient seating where a truck can park². The City should conduct additional research to determine appropriate places to send refrigerated trucks, and invest in supplemental refrigerated carts for small parks and public squares.

Enhancing Program Administration

In addition to the five strategies outlined above, we recommend the following administrative changes, prompted, in part, by conversations with various site coordinators at both school and non-school-based sites.

² In order to ensure that youth have greater access to free meals, changes to the congregate meal regulation should be considered.

Training and troubleshooting

Site coordinator training at non-school sites must be expanded beyond food safety matters to include troubleshooting assistance. Many of the site coordinators we interviewed did not know who to contact to change the number of meals ordered, report a late meal shipment, obtain promotional materials (such as banners or flyers) and/or basic equipment (one site coordinator could not serve meals because they did not have access to gloves or a garbage can), or organize proper staffing in the event of a planned or unplanned absence. Site coordinators should be provided with appropriate contact information in the event of operational issues, walked through basic on-the-job problem solving, and have a strong sense of the program's chain of command.

Site coverage in the event of absences

Well-attended park sites unexpectedly suspend all meal service if the site's certified food handler is out, transferred to another site, or away on vacation. Youth and caregivers recalled showing up to open sites that they visited previously or identified online only to find the park attendant's station shuttered with no posted notice or explanation. The Department of Education should work closely with the Parks Department and other non-school sites to develop a mechanism to account for staff absences and arrange for site coverage.

Operational Strategies to Boost Program Appeal and Public Perception at Non-School Sites

During our field observations, site coordinators and participants raised concerns regarding the hours of meal service, food appeal and food quality upon delivery at non-school sites. While seemingly ancillary concerns, programmatic inconsistencies and inconveniences erode participant trust and alter public perception of the program. The following recommendations offer low-cost solutions to frequently observed problems.

Food appeal

Many coordinators at satellite sites complained about the lack of variety of the cold meal service and reported significant decreases in participation as the summer wore on, which they attributed to children's frequent complaints about receiving the same "assorted deli sandwiches"³ each day. SchoolFood should add variety to cold sandwiches as well as the assortment of fruits and vegetables.

Many site coordinators were unaware that DOE does not serve pork and they erroneously told children and caregivers to throw the sandwich meat away if they were concerned that it was pork. Site coordinators were surprised when our interns informed them that DOE has a "no-pork" policy. This policy should be visible on all menus and explicit in site coordinator training and correspondence.

³ We learned that some of the "assorted deli sandwiches" are outsourced to a vendor rather than made in-house by the local school; this may have affected quality and variety.

Hours of program operation

Site coordinators consistently stated that lunch should be served later in the day (1:00pm – 2:00pm), particularly at parks and NYCHA sites, in order to reach more children. Many youth frequent parks, pools and libraries in the afternoon long after summer lunch hours have ended. The DOE should strongly consider tailoring the hours of meal service to the needs of the community.

Food delivery

Site coordinators, particularly at NYCHA sites, reported that soggy paper bags, crushed food or milk and late delivery (especially at the beginning of July) were persistent problems. Youth and caregivers who arrived at the publicized time for lunch waited for meals well beyond the scheduled service time (many of whom eventually left without a meal); others were served flattened sandwiches. More attention should be given to the condition of meals at the point of service.

Conclusion

The Summer Meals Program can and should go much further in meeting the nutrition needs of NYC's children when school is out: Students in summer school classes should expect to eat breakfast and lunch in their classrooms or the lunchroom; swimming pools and parks should be adequately staffed to offer recreation programs and serve meals at popular sites; mobile serving carts should be placed in playgrounds and beach sites; and a coordinated, neighborhood outreach campaign (in addition to last year's successful citywide publicity efforts) should be launched to ensure that all New Yorkers know about the program and how to obtain access.

Through these few activities and a small investment by the city, tens of thousands of additional children could be participating in this vital federal program.

Appendix

Table I

Summer Meals Comparisons by Site Type
July 2012 to July 2015 Lunch Participation

Open Sites	Codes	July 2015		July 2014		July 2013		July 2012	
		Number	ADP*	Number	ADP	Number	ADP	Number	ADP
Schools	1, 1A	194	57,521	170	59,362	156	54,412	151	53,614
Pools	3D	47	6,589	47	6,627	47	6,564	46	6,178
Parks	3C	58	2,759	29	1,287	53	2,189	28	1,230
NYCHA	3E	76	3,067	76	3,272	75	3,387	82	3,569
Libraries	3F	46	1,390	44	1,342	25	870	23	780
Soup Kitchens	3G			7	404	11	486	12	469
Truck	3J	5	2,930	4	6,910	3	4,536	2	1,617
Total		426	74,256	377	79,204	370	72,444	344	67,457
Closed sites									
High Schools	2, 2A	12	3,068	14	3,734	8	2,448	7	2,095
Special Ed. non-public	4, 5	138	10,841	133	9,948	126	9,937	130	9,565
Restricted "open"	6	36	2,274	55	3,980	48	3,447	37	2,558
Production sites	7A,7B,7C	226	25,111	208	24,711	204	25,488	187	22,065
CBOs	3,3A,3B	86	11,443	76	11,931	80	11,999	71	10,835
OST	3H	280	23,134	232	18,699	244	19,590	259	22,174
Big Apple	3I	54	6,423	68	8,172	46	6,273	25	3,955
Day Camps	3K	7	737	6	927	7	1,252	9	1,531
		7	369	16	782	14	727	14	694
Total		846	83,400	808	82,794	777	81,161	738	75,472
Grand Total		1,272	157,656	1,185	162,088	1,147	153,605	1,083	142,929

*ADP = Average Daily Participation

Table II

**Summer Meal Participation
July 2015, by School District**

School District	Summer Breakfast, ADP*	Summer Lunch, ADP	Free/RP Eligible March 2015**	% low income students eating summer lunch***
1	1,590	2,992	9,467	0.32
2	3,862	7,504	32,976	0.23
3	2,378	4,056	12,835	0.32
4	1,872	3,294	13,120	0.25
5	1,835	3,548	12,912	0.27
6	2,508	4,308	19,085	0.23
7	2,537	4,397	20,998	0.21
8	3,570	5,736	22,011	0.26
9	4,631	7,575	26,343	0.29
10	4,524	8,318	41,155	0.20
11	4,862	7,306	32,680	0.22
12	3,467	5,300	20,072	0.26
13	2,126	2,958	16,450	0.18
14	2,335	4,039	18,480	0.22
15	2,226	4,858	17,554	0.28
16	1,050	1,981	7,752	0.26
17	2,220	4,393	22,578	0.19
18	1,501	3,149	13,859	0.23
19	2,714	4,681	22,477	0.21
20	4,536	7,206	33,909	0.21
21	2,650	4,231	17,064	0.25
22	2,036	3,523	18,761	0.19
23	1,699	2,753	9,533	0.29
24	3,558	5,968	31,382	0.19
25	3,269	8,221	22,710	0.36
26	2,803	5,004	15,518	0.32
27	3,335	4,930	28,762	0.17
28	2,992	5,228	27,699	0.19
29	2,093	3,431	15,660	0.22
30	3,073	7,589	27,386	0.28
31	5,005	7,946	31,937	0.25
32	1,374	2,108	11,898	0.18
Total	90,231	158,531	675,023	0.23

*ADP = Average Daily Participation

**March data is a better reflection of eligibility than other months of the school year

***These percentages only count registered children who apply for free or reduced price school meals in their schools. However, many more non-school-age children are also eligible for summer meals, bringing the citywide percentage to only 16.