

## Eligible students missing breakfast

### Meals

#### Report: Fewer than a third of qualifying NY children partake in free or lower-cost morning meal at school

**JOSEPH SPECTOR, LINDSEY RIBACK AND JUSTIN MURPHY**

STAFF WRITERS

Even as an increasing number of children in Monroe County and New York state qualify for free or reduced-price meals at school, thousands of them are not actually receiving and eating their breakfast, according to a new analysis.

The report from Hunger Solutions New York, released earlier this month, showed that fewer than a third of New York children who are eligible for free or reduced-priced breakfast actually participated in the program. That rate is 42nd among the 50 states in providing students with free or reduced-price breakfast; the national average for participation is 56 percent. Sixty-three percent of students in New York were eligible for free or reduced-price breakfast last school year, but just 30 percent of them participated, meaning more than 1.1 million children may have gone hungry some mornings.

Participation rates varied widely by

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**Karen Higgins works the register at Gates Chili's Neil Armstrong Elementary School as students use their accounts to buy breakfast.**



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**Sixty-three percent of students in New York were eligible for reduced-price or free meals last school year, but just 30 percent participated.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**Students at Neil Armstrong Elementary School in Gates can get breakfast and bring it back to their classroom. Breakfast is offered to any student, those who qualify for free meals and those who pay. Jayden DeGrande, a first-grader, looks at what's offered in the school cafeteria, before grabbing cereal. Behind him in line is Jaraiya Jenkins, a kindergartner. Participation rates in the breakfast program vary widely by district in Monroe County.**

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district in Monroe County. The Rochester City School District, with by far the most poor children, had 55 percent participation. Charter schools in general had greater rates, as high as 94 percent at Urban Choice Charter School.

Some suburban districts with high poverty rates, though, had paltry participation: 29 percent in East Irondequoit, 25 percent in East Rochester, 32 percent in Rush-Henrietta. And some districts don't even offer breakfast to all of their students.

Those participation percentages fell well short of the goals set by advocacy groups, which encourage schools to have 70 percent of eligible students having breakfast at school.

“We know with our high poverty rates that breakfast is important,” said Dina Faticone, director of Healthi Kids in Rochester, an initiative of Common Ground Health. “It’s the best way to get them off to a good start and ready to learn.”

### **Why so low?**

The two main reasons for the low participation rate are a lack of access and a stigma around eating breakfast at school, according to Jessica Pino-Goodspeed, an author of the report. She explained that while schools may offer free breakfast, it may be before the school day begins, requiring students to arrive early to get their morning meal. Solutions include continuing to offer breakfast “after the bell” or offering breakfast in the classroom — which some states and schools in New York have implemented.

To address the stigma of eating breakfast at school, Pino-Goodspeed suggested schools that have a large number of children eligible for free or reduced meals offer breakfast at low cost to all its students. To do that, districts can take advantage of federal provisions that allow schools to provide free breakfast to all children regardless of income, she said. “That really addresses the issue of stigma, which is a big reason why kids don’t participate. And once it is free for all, it really helps eliminate that perception that breakfast is only for poor kids,” Pino-Goodspeed said.

Faticone, of Healthi Kids in Rochester, said school administrators and teachers sometimes discourage participation if they’re concerned about having a mess in the classroom or over-burdening the janitorial staff. The city school district has undertaken several promising initiatives to increase participation rates. Twenty-one elementary schools have breakfast in the classroom, and five of them have “first-class breakfast,” where they get additional hot food items.

As a result, other urban districts, including Buffalo, have looked to Rochester as a model, Faticone said.

“We already know there’s an issue and this report really just confirmed it,” she said. “The barriers to participation are many and the district has really strived to find innovative ways to deliver breakfast, but there’s still a ways to go.”

### **Showing improvement**

New York has shown steady improvement — even as the number of students eligible also climbed. In the 2007-08 school year, for example, 52 percent of students in New York were eligible, yet just 26 percent participated, the report said.

In fact, New York ranked ninth in the nation for improvement over the last two school years, according to the Food Research & Action Center.

The state Education Department recognized the increase and said it continues to promote the importance of breakfast in schools. “We know that students who eat healthy meals have a much greater chance for success in the classroom and in life,” Jonathan Burman, a spokesman for the state Education Department, said in a statement. “That’s why the department visits schools throughout the state to promote the benefits of participating

in child nutrition programs.”

Newburgh, one of the poorest districts in the state, was highlighted in the report as boosting the popularity of breakfast.

Two years ago, it started making breakfast available during the morning in the classroom for all of its nine elementary schools.

Getting older students to eat breakfast at school is a bit more challenging because they often arrange their own transportation to school, and have the option of buying food from a restaurant or corner store.

For grades six to eight, Newburgh started a “grab-and-go breakfast” program through kiosks and in the cafeteria. At its high schools, the district also had a “Second Chance Breakfast” by extending breakfast service through third period. “The trick in high school is offering multiple venues for breakfast, allowing them to take it to the classroom, making it free for everybody,” Caitlin Lazarski, the district’s director of food service, said in the report.

In every district, the meals are the same for all students, regardless of their income, and schools cannot identify students who get free or reduced-price meals. Students can register for the program through the school. There was a different result when it came to lunch: 66 percent of students eligible ate lunch at New York schools. But just 46 percent of the students who ate lunch at a free or reduced price also ate breakfast, the state report said. The income eligibility for free school meals is \$31,590 for a family of four. For reduced-priced meals, which can cost as little as 25 cents to the student, the income eligibility is \$44,955 for a family of four.

### **Webster, Brighton don’t serve breakfast to all**

Across the state, there is a great deal of variation in participation rates among districts. In the Vestal schools in the Southern Tier, for example, 29 percent of the students eligible for the program participated, while 60 percent did in Steuben County’s Bradford schools.

Some of the lowest rates were found in the Hudson Valley. In Dutchess County, 96 percent of Poughkeepsie students were eligible for free or reduced breakfast — yet just half of them ate breakfast, the report said. Still, that’s an increase from 37 percent who did so in the 2014-15 school year. In Yonkers, just 17 percent of eligible students got free or reduced-price breakfast, even though 68 percent of all students were eligible. In Peekskill, where the largest percentage of students were eligible in Westchester County, just 22 percent of the 79 percent of students eligible in the district participated, the report said. The problem is proportionally worse in Monroe County’s suburban schools. Fewer students there qualify for free or reduced-price meals, but they’re no less hungry or deserving. Though school nutrition programs are supposed to pay for themselves, kinks in the funding stream often lead to districts having to subsidize them from the general fund. Partly for that reason, two districts — Brighton and Webster — did not offer breakfast at all until recently. “We weren’t interested in taking on another program that would run a deficit and need to be subsidized from the general fund,” Webster Assistant Superintendent for Business Brian Freeman said. “And on the parent surveys, there wasn’t a lot of interest.” In the spring of 2016, though, the district tried providing breakfast at Webster Schroeder High School and Willink Middle School. It didn’t lose money, and schools reported anecdotally that fewer children were going to the principal or social workers during the day complaining of being hungry, Freeman said. At the same time, parents expressed interest at two elementary schools. The result is that the district

is now serving breakfast at six of its 11 schools.

In Brighton, the district began offering breakfast to students this year at Twelve Corners Middle School. Otherwise, though, the district reported little parent interest: 88 percent of families surveyed in 2016 said their children would not eat breakfast at school if it were offered. While local efforts at boosting participation are concentrated in the city, Faticone said suburban districts need to consider the needs of their poor students as well. “Because traditionally breakfast numbers have been so low in those districts, putting resources into innovation hasn’t been a priority,” she said. “But the kids in those districts who are eligible need that breakfast just as much as the kids in the city.”

### **New York and other states**

West Virginia, according to the Food Research & Action Center, had the highest rate of participation in the nation — with 84 percent of eligible students eating breakfast each day. There’s a reason, the group said: West Virginia is one of four states — Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico being the others — who require some or all of their schools to offer breakfast “after the bell.”

The law will take effect next year in Illinois. Federal funding covers a majority of the cost of school meals for low-income students, but New York’s low participation means it didn’t get about \$71 million available last school year, Hunger Solutions New York said.

The state School Boards Association said it is working on the federal level to increase schools’ flexibility related to current health requirements for school meals, which has increased costs. The group is also seeking an increase in the state’s reimbursement for school lunches. “If districts are going to preserve and promote school meal programs they need adequate resources to provide them,” said Al Marlin, a spokesman for the School Boards Association.

*JSpector@Gannett*

*.com*

*LRiback@Gannett*

*.com*

*JMURPHY7@Gannett*

*.com Lindsey Riback is a staff writer and Joseph Spector is chief for USA TODAY Network’s Albany Bureau.*



**Aseel Saeed and Alina Chircioglo, kindergartners at Gates Chili’s Neil Armstrong Elementary School, eat breakfast in their classroom before lessons start.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ @TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**Alina Pullen, a fourth-grader at Gates Chili’s Neil Armstrong Elementary School, finishes up her breakfast at her desk.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ @TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER **“Once it is free for all, it really helps eliminate that perception that breakfast is only for poor kids.”**

**JESSICA PINO- GOODSPEED**

AN AUTHOR OF REPORT FROM HUNGER SOLUTIONS NEW YORK

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