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## It's a Hit: Breakfast in the Classroom

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The 8-year-olds in Elizabeth Apostolidis's classroom at Public School 70 were talking business over their Crispix and bananas. Seen the newest Batman movie yet? Nasty weather outside, huh? What's with that gross apple-cinnamon filling in the bagels?

It was the kind of quality conversation among friends rare in the old days, when P.S. 70's third graders ate breakfast in the rowdy cafeteria or skipped it entirely. Now, under a pilot program that will expand to 299 schools across the city over the next two months, breakfast is served at the students' desks.

"It makes me more relaxed while I do work in class," said Adam Khay, who raved about the string cheese. "We can talk to our friends that might be our best friends at our own table."

Sitting on the other side of the desk, Rhythm Thamid said, "It makes me feel energetic."

The morning feasts, handed to students in bags as they stampede through the doors of the school in Long Island City, Queens, are meant to increase the number of children who eat what nutritionists consider the most important meal of the day.

Since 2003, the city has offered free breakfast to all students, rich and poor; about 1 in 5 eat it. Among students from low-income families who qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, 21 percent participate in the program, a level some educators have attributed to the stigma associated with showing up early for breakfast in the cafeteria.

[Studies have demonstrated that students who eat breakfast](#) tend to perform better on exams, and similar programs in Newark and in cities in Maryland and upstate New York have shown improved attendance among students who take advantage of breakfast in class.

New York City began experimenting with the program last year at schools with high numbers of poor students. After the city received positive feedback from the pilot schools, it decided to expand the program, which is at 48 campuses this year.

“It’s very important to us that all children are at an optimal position to learn so we can push student advancement forward,” said Kathleen Grimm, deputy chancellor for finance and administration. “We think it’s a terrific — terrific — way to ensure that our children are getting proper nutrition in the morning.”

Serving breakfast in the classroom instead of the cafeteria does not cost additional money, Ms. Grimm said. The price tag for the city’s universal free-breakfast program is about \$700,000 a year (it would be far higher if more students participated). The federal government and the state reimburse schools for meals served to students from low-income families.

At P.S. 70, breakfast in the classroom begins at 7:45 a.m., giving students 25 minutes to down some whole-grain bread, fruit, milk and cereal before the school day officially begins. Some schools have chosen to make breakfast a part of first-period instruction, taking attendance while students eat, in hopes of getting more children to come.

Students at P.S. 70 on Friday said that eating breakfast at their desks was fun and that the food was delicious. Some said it was nice to be away from the shouting, screaming and flying mini-muffins in the cafeteria. But others missed the aroma — and taste — of turkey bacon, waffles and other hot cuisine from the cafeteria.

“It makes me full and happy,” Carol Osseili, 8, said as she patted her stomach. “I’m ready to study and learn.”

All 1,052 students at P.S. 70 qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The in-class breakfast program is limited to third, fourth and fifth graders, and the cafeteria still serves breakfast to children in the lower grades and to students who prefer a hot meal.

The school’s principal, Donna C. Geller, said the meal service had significantly boosted the number of students eating breakfast at P.S. 70. About 200 pupils are eating in their classrooms, she said, and more than 200 others get breakfast from the cafeteria.

Ms. Geller said teachers have come to embrace it after short-lived complaints that it cut into class-preparation time. Maria Hernandez, the mother of a fourth grader, said the program had taken a

little bit of the frenzy out of the morning rush, and that parents had noticed that students were more eager to wake up each morning and get to school.

“They get to come in, unwind and socialize with friends,” Ms. Hernandez said of the children. “For some reason, they like school food better than home food now.”

(Some students confessed that they ate breakfast at home and sneaked in a second meal at school.)

Joel Berg, executive director of the [New York City Coalition Against Hunger](#), said that if the classroom breakfast program succeeded in New York it could blossom in other states, too. He said advocates for better nutrition are asking Congress to finance similar programs next year.

“Any program that feeds hungry children, improves education, reduces tardiness and absenteeism is clearly an overwhelming public good,” he said.

With a few minutes to go before first period started, the handful of pupils eating breakfast in Ms. Apostolidis’s class on Friday were checking out the goofy pictures on the breakfast sacks: a sandwich performing Shakespeare, a milk carton playing a saxophone and a carrot flaunting a tutu.

One early concern was that bringing food into the classroom might prove distracting. But Ms. Geller said that worry had not materialized.

When the clock struck 8:10, the children hurried to the garbage bins. Within five minutes, the crumbs were out of sight, their hands were on their hearts, and they were reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.