



# New York City School Focus Groups

## Advocacy Findings

The New York City No Kid Hungry campaign, in partnership with a coalition of NYC non-profit, advocate and agency partners at the School Meals Coalition Outreach Working Group, is working to build awareness about the school breakfast program and ultimately increase participation in approximately 60 schools in Washington Heights. In order to learn more about why school breakfast participation is low, New York City No Kid Hungry invested in qualitative focus group research.

In January 2013, the New York City No Kid Hungry campaign hired Global Strategy Group to conduct focus groups with parents from the Washington Heights area of the city to determine their awareness about the School Breakfast Program and learn more about barriers to participation and marketing best practices. The following is an overview of the advocacy findings from this research project.

## BACKGROUND

In 2010, 70 percent of the residents in Washington Heights were Hispanic and 60 percent of residents earned less than \$50,000 a year.<sup>1 2</sup> More than 18% of residents in the community were food insecure.<sup>3</sup>

Research finds breakfast is important for academics, behavior and health. Despite these benefits, for a variety of reasons, many families have difficulty providing breakfast for their children every morning. Limited budgets, tight schedules and hectic mornings can mean that children skip breakfast or the breakfast they consume is not a balanced, healthy meal.

The School Breakfast Program can help, but currently less than half of low-income children who eat a school lunch also eat school breakfast. This means that on any given day more than 10.5 million low-income children may be going without a balanced school breakfast.<sup>4</sup>

The New York City No Kid Hungry campaign, in partnership with a coalition of NYC non-profit, advocate and agency partners at the School Meals Coalition Outreach Working Group, is working to build awareness about the school breakfast program and ultimately increase participation in approximately 60 schools in Washington Heights. In order to learn more about why school breakfast participation is low, New York City No Kid Hungry invested in qualitative focus group research.

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Two focus groups were conducted on January 15, 2013 among Hispanic parents. The groups were separated by language preference and were broken out into English-dominant Hispanic Parents and Spanish-dominant Hispanic Parents. The groups consisted of:

- A mix of mothers and fathers of children ages 4-15 years old;
- All parents have at least one child who attends school in Washington Heights;
- The majority of parents have not completed a college degree;
- Most parents report an annual household income of less than \$50,000; and
- 90% currently participate in at least one federal assistance program.

## CURRENT TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION

Parents participating in the focus groups access federal programs, including Head Start, the National School Lunch Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Most families believe assistance programs provide a necessary benefit to the community and are eager for more assistance programs in their neighborhood, specifically noting a need for afterschool programming for children and citing costs as the main barrier to participation in afterschool activities. Parents recommend the school lunch program because it saves money. Parents want programs that keep kids busy, help the family budget and ensure kids receive proper nutrition.

## OVERALL BREAKFAST FINDINGS

Breakfast is a vital part of a family's day. For most parents, their primary concern is that their children start the day with a healthy meal. Parents agreed that school food is often healthier than what is served at home and that families do not always have enough income to give their children good daily nutrition. Parents estimate they spend between \$25-30 on breakfast at home during the week. The main reason students are not currently participating in school breakfast is because parents were unaware that in Washington Heights, school breakfast is free and available all students.

Parents agreed that eating a healthy breakfast is important for children, explaining that schools ask parents to ensure children eat breakfast during school testing week. Parents agree that by eating a healthy breakfast, children are:

- More energetic
- More alert and focused
- Less prone to headaches
- Performing better on tests
- Behaving better in class

## LESSONS LEARNED

Parents want their children to eat a healthy breakfast every day. They recognize that by eating a school breakfast, children will have access to a nutritious meal and start the school day better prepared to learn. However, most parents do not know that in New York City, their children can receive a free breakfast every day. By clearly communicating that school breakfast is free to all students, providing concise information on how to participate in the school breakfast program, and providing parents with breakfast menus in advance, students are more likely to participate in school breakfast.

1. [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/puma\\_demo\\_08to10\\_acs.pdf#mn12](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/puma_demo_08to10_acs.pdf#mn12)
2. [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/puma\\_econ\\_08to10\\_acs.pdf#mn12](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/puma_econ_08to10_acs.pdf#mn12)
3. [http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap/overall-food-insecurity-estimates/~/\\_media/Files/a-map-2010/NY\\_AllCountiesMMG\\_2010.ashx?.pdf](http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap/overall-food-insecurity-estimates/~/_media/Files/a-map-2010/NY_AllCountiesMMG_2010.ashx?.pdf)
4. [http://frac.org/pdf/Scorecard\\_SY2011-2012.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/Scorecard_SY2011-2012.pdf)