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Classroom Breakfasts: a Good Idea, Overdue

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD NOV. 10, 2014

When he was running for mayor, Bill de Blasio had a plan to improve the health and learning of tens of thousands of schoolchildren. It was to require all public schools to serve free breakfast in the classroom, instead of in the cafeteria before school started. The change was needed, he said, because so few eligible children take advantage of free cafeteria breakfasts — either because it is too hard to get to school that early or because participating in the program stigmatizes recipients as needy. Low participation squanders millions of unused dollars in federal aid and leaves too many children hungry.

Mr. de Blasio's predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, who led a city crusade against obesity, had opposed mandatory breakfast in the classroom because he feared it would lead some children to overeat. Mr. de Blasio called that concern "foolish," both for children's health and the city's budget. He was right on both counts, but he has not yet made good on his promise.

Advocates for children have been unsuccessfully prodding the mayor and the schools chancellor, Carmen Fariña, to act. There is no good reason for New York to have fallen behind cities like Newark, a poor city that has a model breakfast program reaching nearly all its children, and Los Angeles, which is in the third year of rolling out its universal breakfast-in-the-classroom program, now the largest in the country. Participation in Los Angeles has soared from 23 percent of students to 75 percent, or more than 431,000 children a day.

There are challenges. Some schools will need more refrigerators.

Teachers may need to sacrifice some time in first period, maybe 15 minutes, maybe longer with the littlest ones, and to figure out best methods of serving quickly, cleaning up and minimizing waste. Those are manageable problems, well worth overcoming for the goal of fighting hunger and poor nutrition. No child should be learning on an empty stomach.

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