



Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of the implementation of a universal free school breakfast policy on meals program participation, attendance, and academic achievement. In 2003, New York City made school breakfast free for all students regardless of income, while increasing the price of lunch for those ineligible for meal subsidies. Using a difference-in-difference estimation strategy, we derive plausibly causal estimates of the policy's impact by exploiting within and between group variation in school meal pricing before and after the policy change. Our estimates suggest that the policy resulted in small increases in breakfast participation both for students who experienced a decrease in the price of breakfast and for free-lunch eligible students who experienced no price change. The latter suggests that universal provision may alter behavior through mechanisms other than price, highlighting the potential merits of universal provision over targeted services. We find limited evidence of policy impacts on academic outcomes.

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1. Introduction

School meals are receiving increased policy attention as a potential lever for improving the nutrition and academic performance of low-income children. There is considerable evidence that nutrition, and eating breakfast in particular, is important for cognitive functioning and academic success (Benton & Parker, 1998; Greier et al., 2007; Pollitt, Cueto, & Jacoby, 1998; Wesnes, Pincock, Richardson, Helm,

& Hails, 2003). A recent study of the National School Lunch Program in the mid-20th century found that participation yielded long-term positive effects on educational outcomes (Hinrichs, 2010). Nonetheless, not all students participate in the school meals program, including many who are eligible for free or reduced price meals. Further, participation in school breakfast is often substantially lower than for school lunch, leading policy makers to explore strategies to increase take-up (FRAC, 2012; Moore, Hulsey, & Ponza, 2009).

Low participation in school meal programs has been attributed to a number of factors. First, for those not fully subsidized, price is inversely related to participation and research suggests families are more sensitive to the price of school breakfast than the price of lunch (Maurer, 1984; Gordon et al., 2007). Second, students may be reluctant to participate due to the stigma associated with a subsidized

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meal; that is, they may perceive school meals as “just for poor kids” (Mitcherova & Powell, 2009; Poppendieck, 2010). Third, school meals may simply be unappealing to students, due to high nutritional standards or low quality (Poppendieck, 2010). Healthy meals also often compete with snacks and vending machine offerings that are high in sugar and fat content. Finally, in the case of breakfast, meals are often served before school hours, requiring students to arrive early in order to benefit from the program.

To increase take-up, policy makers have adopted a range of strategies. In 2010 President Obama signed the *Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act* which, among other things, aims to expand enrollment in the school meals programs by allowing qualifying schools in high-poverty areas to provide free meals to all students without requiring students to demonstrate eligibility. New York City and several other large urban districts have gone further, making breakfasts free for all students regardless of family income. On the one hand, this strategy of universal provision has the potential to increase costs relative to a policy that narrowly targets eligible students. On the other, it can lower administrative and transaction costs associated with a targeted program, and may increase overall participation. Even students who were always eligible for free meals may be affected, if universal provision reduces stigma or improves the quality of school meals.

This paper uses school and student-level data from the New York City public schools to estimate the impact of universal free breakfast on meals program participation and academic outcomes. We exploit a discrete policy change that occurred prior to the 2003–04 school year that made school breakfast free for all students, while increasing the price of lunch for those who pay full price. By exploiting within- and between-group variation in school meal pricing before and after the policy change we derive plausibly causal estimates of the impact of the policy on program participation. Our causal interpretation is strengthened by a difference-in-difference comparison with schools that already provided free meals to all students. Using student-level data we then explore the resulting effect on student attendance and test scores. Importantly, beyond studying the effects of a reduction in the price of breakfast for paying students, this analysis examines the total effect of universal provision. That is, we are interested in whether universal provision raises participation beyond that which would be expected from a price reduction alone. Such effects may arise, for example, through a reduction in stigma or an increase in service quality.

We find that the provision of universal free breakfast resulted in a modest increase in participation for all program eligibility groups. Increases observed for those who were already eligible for free meals suggest that universal provision may have effects beyond those associated with the reduction in price. The concurrent increase in the price of lunch had no noticeable effect on the lunch participation of non-subsidized students. Consistent with the relatively modest change in meal participation—about one week’s worth of participation

for all groups—we find limited impact of the policy change on educational outcomes. Our estimates, however, are focused on the short-run impact; we cannot rule out the possibility of longer-run effects of the program. For instance, it may be that a reduction in stigma or improvement in service quality associated with universal provision takes more time. To date, little is known about how long it takes such mechanisms to operate.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the federal breakfast and lunch programs, and the implementation of the universal free breakfast program in New York City. We then outline our conceptual framework and review prior literature that informs our approach to the relationship between the price of school meals, meal participation, and academic outcomes. We describe the data for this analysis, our strategy for estimating the impact of the policy change on meal participation, and on school attendance and test scores. Finally, we provide our results and a series of robustness checks, and offer discussion and conclusions.

2. Policy context

In 1946 Congress passed *The National School Lunch Act* with the multi-pronged goals of providing “a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities” (Ralston, Newman, Clauson, Guthrie, & Buzby, 2008). The School Breakfast Program (SBP), which began as a pilot through *The Child Nutrition Act* of 1966, became permanent in 1975. Both the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and SBP are administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service which makes grants to state education agencies that in turn operate the program through agreements with local school districts or individual schools.

School meals programs affect a large number of children, with more than 31 million children participating in the NSLP each day, and more than 11 million participating daily in the SBP in FY 2009 (USDA, 2009a, 2009b). The total cost of these programs in 2009 reached \$2.9 billion for the SBP and \$9.8 billion for the NSLP (USDA, 2009a, 2009b). Notably, only a fraction of the children who receive school lunch also receive breakfast. For instance, Moore et al. (2009) report that in a nationally representative sample, students eligible for free or reduced-price meals participate in lunch about 70 percent of the time compared to approximately 30 percent for breakfast (see also FRAC, 2012).¹

While any child at a participating school may purchase a meal through the national school meals program, students from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty line pay nothing for lunch or breakfast (“free-meal eligible students”) and those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the

¹ Reported school breakfast participation rates apply only to students in schools that actually offer school breakfast.

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