

School Lunch Lack; Fixing Diesel-Fueled School Buses

by Lynda Crawford
Monday, August 04, 2003 12:00 AM -

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One recent summer morning two different groups held back-to-back news conferences at City Hall on issues related to children – one about lunches (or the lack of them) during summer school, and the other about air-quality standards (or the lack of them) for diesel-fueled school buses.

Summer Meals

The [Coalition To Take Back Our Schools](#) supporting community groups were at City Hall to protest the decision by the Department of Education to cut breakfast and lunch programs from summer schools with fewer than 200 students in attendance. These meals, part of the [summer food service program](#), are federally funded and designed not only to feed children in mandatory summer school programs but also low-income children in the vicinity of the schools whose families cannot afford to feed them.

Posters and brochures encouraging families to bring children to local schools for FREE breakfast and lunch were widely circulated on subways, buses, and in food stamp offices. Many parents of students attending summer school found out only after putting them on the school bus for the first day of summer school that their children would not be provided with the meals.

"It's false advertising," said Carmen Santana, one of the organizers of the rally from the Coalition to Take Back Our Schools. Santana's own children are attending a summer program in Queens where the meals were eliminated without notifying parents.

In the past, the cutoff for serving meals in the summer program was for schools with 100 or fewer children. As a result of the minimum being raised to 200 students, 44 elementary and middle schools, and 26 high schools, were not serving breakfast or lunch, affecting about 10,000 children, according to Santana. (An official from the Department of Education was not able to confirm the number of children affected, but disputed that it was that many.)

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Milda Romalez, a member of the community group [Make the Road by Walking](#), spoke softly in Spanish through an interpreter about her reasons for being present at the rally: "I represent the parents of the children of Bushwick, Brooklyn. So many parents cannot afford feeding their children before school. If they are not fed in summer school, they go hungry. How can children learn on an empty stomach?"

Funds for the Summer Food Service Program are paid for by the federal government and schools are reimbursed, per child, per meal, with higher reimbursements in the summer than during the school year.

"The summer food service program is a win-win situation for children and the city," said Deena Kolbert of Community Food Resource Center. "Families don't have to fill out forms, there are no application procedures. People are hired to serve the meals at the schools over the summer so it provides jobs to the community; it's win-win."

But the Department of Education didn't see it this way. Reportedly, it wasn't economically viable to operate cafeterias and staff them to service small numbers of children. Even though funds are eventually reimbursed, the Department of Education must lay out the money first and, in this economic climate, even meals for children are no longer sacred.

"Denying these children free lunch is a violation of their rights," explained Elizabeth Sullivan from the [Center for Economic and Social Rights](#), an international human rights organization.

"It violates the right of students to a quality education (they are not receiving the food they need to learn), the right of parents and community members to participate in decision making regarding that education (they were not notified or consulted about the decision), and the right to food."

According to Paul Rose, a spokesperson for the Department of Education, "at no time were students deprived of the opportunity to enjoy a school meal." Children from the cutoff schools were just required to walk or take public transportation to schools that did offer breakfast and lunch. But families, uncomfortable with having their kids traveling a half mile away for meals, found this plan unsatisfactory.

In response to parent feedback, three weeks into the summer program, and a few days after

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the rally, the Department of Education did begin delivering meals to the schools that had their kitchens shut down: cereal, milk, orange juice, and a blueberry muffin for breakfast; a slice of cheese on a roll with lettuce and tomato, three-bean salad, a fruit, and milk for lunch.

"I'm very happy we were successful in getting something for these kids," said Carmen Santana. "A lot of these children are the neediest in the city."

Protecting Kids from Diesel Emissions on School Buses

State Senator David A. Paterson assembled a press conference at City Hall in July to announce his intention to introduce legislation to protect kids from the dangerous diesel fumes on school buses. "There are over 5,000 school buses transporting our children back and forth to school in the city," said Paterson. "My children ride on them. And we now know that the air quality inside these buses is worse than the air quality outside. With the skyrocketing rates of asthma, this puts the health of these students in jeopardy."

Paterson distributed copies of "[No Breathing in the Aisles](#)," a report conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Clean Air Coalition, and the University of California at Berkeley, that monitored the air on diesel-fueled school buses in California and found levels on the buses to be four times greater than in the air outside the bus, and up to 46 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's cancer risk level. Many of these same types of school buses, without pollution control devices, are on the road in New York, spewing diesel particulate matter into the buses, the majority of which are fine particles, especially harmful to children.

Paterson expressed sympathy for the hardships private bus companies face in finding the resources to retrofit their buses with filters and switch to low sulfur diesel fuel. He also spoke encouragingly about negotiations currently taking place between bus operators and the [New York Power Authority](#) who offered last year to retrofit 1000 city school buses with diesel particulate filters which would reduce emissions significantly.

But despite his sympathies, Paterson was issuing an ultimatum: School bus companies must retrofit their engines and purchase lower quality of sulfur fuel. "If that is not the case, we don't

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want any of our young people on their buses."

The state bill would mandate that buses transporting New York City school children must be retrofitted with either diesel particulate filters which, combined with a switch to using ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel, would reduce emissions by 90 percent, or diesel oxidation catalysts which would reduce emissions on older buses by up to 30 percent.

"I understand that there are costs involved for the bus companies," said Senator Paterson, "but the costs to treat children with asthma are higher than costs to retrofit."

Paterson was joined by Councilmember David Yassky from Brooklyn, who said he was going to introduce legislation through the City Council in support of Paterson's bill. "One in ten New York City school kids has asthma" said Yassky. (That number is one in four in Harlem) "When you put a child with asthma on one of these buses, it can pose a serious health risk. We must have these retrofits with low sulfur diesel fuel by September. If it is not in place by September, it will be a shameful thing."

"There is no reason why New York City school children have to breathe so much diesel soot, given that cleaner fuels and engines are available," said Rich Kassel, Senior Attorney from the Natural Resources Defense Council, who also took the podium in support of Senator Paterson's bill.

"It's a really simple issue," explained Kassel. "Diesel exhaust triggers asthma attacks, cancer, and premature death. But the problem can be fixed by doing four things:

- (1) retire the oldest, dirtiest buses;
- (2) replace them with the cleanest available bus fuels and technologies;
- (3) retrofit remaining diesel buses using low sulfur diesel fuel and particulate matter filters or traps;
- (4) reduce idling of all buses so kids aren't exposed while waiting to board the bus."

The issue of idling was also underscored by Rebecca Kalin, director and founder of the [Asth](#)

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[ma Free School Zone](#)

. "Until we get through this quagmire," said Kalin, "there is only one solution and that is to make asthma free zones around our schools where idling is not permitted.

"There is currently a NO IDLING law on the books, said Kalin, "but it is routinely ignored." In fact, in a [Yale study](#) on school bus emissions, levels of fine particulate matter were very high inside an idling bus that was loading and unloading students, and highest when the bus was idling with the windows open, particularly if more than one school bus was lined up, allowing exhaust from one bus to enter another.

Attempts were made to speak with school bus company representatives, but they were not available at press time. We were informed a few weeks ago, however, that the delays in retrofitting New York City school buses have nothing to do with cost but instead have to do with a failure of the exhaust systems to meet the required temperatures on the buses tested.

Recently, the New York Association for Pupil Transportation, a New York State school bus organization that does not include New York City bus companies, announced that they would voluntarily retrofit at least 5,000 school buses a year over the next three years. This [agreement](#) between the Environmental Protection Agency and New York Association for Pupil Transportation is part of the EPA's Clean School Bus USA program and also includes a pledge from the bus association to reduce idling by at least 50 percent. These initiatives will affect approximately 2.3 million school children.

Unfortunately, none of them in New York City. The state agreement is "an important first step in ramping up voluntary commitments for dirty yellow school buses to clean up their act," said Kizzy

Charles-Guzmán from the West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. But now, suggests Charles-Guzmán, the Department of Education needs to "stop signing contracts with school bus fleets that refuse to provide clean and safe transportation for our children."

"It is our children suffering from these respiratory diseases," said L. Ann Rocker from the North River Community Environmental Review Board, Inc. "It's not right for us to be

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continually forgotten."

Lynda Crawford wrote the social services topic page for Gotham Gazette, and has written for City Limits, New York Woman, The New York Observer, and The New York Daily News.