



Testimony Prepared for the
**Joint Legislative Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget for
Elementary/Secondary Education**

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I would like to extend my gratitude for the opportunity to address this Joint Legislative Hearing as it relates to budgeting for the Elementary & Secondary Education portion of the FY25 Executive Budget. The New York State School Nutrition Association is an organization of school nutrition employees, managers, directors, registered dietitians, nutritionists, and industry partners from across the state committed to ensuring that all students have access to healthy meals. I stand here representing the more than 3,500 voices of these passionate school food professionals to urge the members of this Joint Legislative hearing to ensure that funding for Healthy School Meals for All be included in the FY25 state budget.

The Problem

June 30th, 2022 saw the ending of federal waivers that allowed school districts to provide free meals to all students during the pandemic. School meal programs saw increased meal participation, no student debt, and the ability for programs to reinvest in themselves to make much needed improvements during these waivers. When the 2022-

2023 school year started over 726,000 students in NY lost their access to free breakfast and lunch in schools.

While the pandemic may be over, families across NY are still recovering financially. The loss of free breakfast and lunch to these families has been devastating. School lunch programs that do not qualify for the Community Eligibility Provision and operate on the income-based system are experiencing levels of student debt much higher than in years prior to the pandemic. This debt must be covered by the school district at the end of the year. The administrative burden that student meal debt places on school lunch program and the district is entirely too cumbersome. Families that are forced to make tough financial decisions receive letter upon letter reminding them of their debt, and phone calls from the school district, just piling on to the daily stress of just trying to get by.

In NY, a family of four making \$56,000 does not qualify to receive free meals in school based on the current regulations. Therefore, a family that doesn't even make a living wage in our state, doesn't have access to free meals. These families who cannot afford their basic needs, now must go into debt with the school district to ensure that their children can have a healthy breakfast and lunch at school. Even worse, there are students in our cafeterias choosing not to charge their breakfast or lunch because they do not want to add to the already troubling financial situation of their families. As a chef, who has made it my life passion to feed the students of NY, it is one of the biggest gut-wrenching scenarios of my career, and as a father of 3 students in NY schools I am absolutely heartbroken that there are children who are going hungry while at school. With the expansion of the federal CEP program we are thankful that so many new school districts have been able to give free meal access to more students. However, it now highlights that need to take care of the students and schools left behind.

Students who are hungry cannot learn. Children receive their healthiest meals in schools, so it is imperative that we allow equal access to these meals to all students. Healthy Meals for All supports learning, boosts tests scores, and improves both attendance and classroom behavior.

Healthy Meals for All Policy Solution

Healthy Meals for All policy will provide free breakfast and lunch at no cost to students, regardless of their income level, ensure that those meals are nutritious, and maximize federal reimbursement by fully leveraging existing federal provision and SNAP outreach.

A statewide universal free meal program will allow school lunch programs to focus our energy on doing what we are most passionate about: feeding hungry NY students. As many directors operate with their hands tied behind their backs while dealing with growing student debt, Healthy Meals for All would erase all of that, cafeterias across NY would become a place where **ALL** students can come together to eat, have fun, and nourish their minds and bodies.

Federal funds cover a large part of school meal costs in NY, drawing down \$1B annually under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. To establish the Health Meals for All program NY would fund school lunch costs that are not covered by federal reimbursements, this annual investment is anticipated to be 77.4 million dollars in addition to the \$134 M CEP expansion. An annual investment into the successful future of all NY students.

The Impact

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget was presented with the goal of making NY more affordable for NY families and to combat growing mental health issues. Ensuring budget funding for Healthy Meals for All would do just that. Families would save on average \$150 per child a month with universal free breakfast and lunch in place. The stigma attached to the free/reduced meal pricing structure creates unwarranted stress on not just students, but families who are just trying to make ends meet.

With the federal government lowering the CEP threshold to 25% more schools are being able to offer universal meals, and the CEP expansion funds are allowing those programs to be able to choose that option. However, there are still school districts left behind, that need NY to step up and fund Healthy School Meals for All NY so that 326,000 students still without access to universal meals become part of the equation. These rural and suburban school districts not qualifying for the federal program still have large pockets of marginalized students that need assistance. Families in these areas are not poor enough to qualify for assistance, but as a result of high costs of living, inflation, and a tough economy struggle to make ends meet. As a result, these schools see higher levels of student meal debt, students choosing to not participate in the food program so not to put more economic hardship on their families. The divide between those that have and those that have-not is growing larger in these areas. How is the equitable? How is this fair to our New York children? There is not an income requirement for transportation, technology equipment, textbooks, or any other service in our school systems, so I ask why then when it comes to hunger and nutrition, a basic human right, do we attach an income base threshold on who has access to healthy meals at no cost. This needs to end today!

Healthy Meals for All would make sure that no child in NY falls through the cracks and goes hungry. The stigma associated with having income based free meals would be erased. There would be equal access to meals for all of our students in NY. Children who attend districts that are allowed to provide free meals under federal programs are three times less likely to experience food insecurity. Healthy Meals for All would reduce the widening racial disparities in nutrition, health, education, and achievement. Students face so many challenges daily in their education, we should be giving them every opportunity possible to succeed, and it starts with a healthy diet.

Conclusion

New York State School Nutrition Association calls upon all NY legislators to be part of the solution in picking up where our federal government has fallen short. Eight states around the country have already stepped up and funded Healthy Meals for All, with four of those states being our neighbors in the northeast. New York is falling behind when it comes to feeding our students. It would be a disservice to our children to continue to avoid the hunger issue in our schools. Ensuring budget funding for Healthy Meals for All is an investment to all our children's futures. With Healthy School Meals for All in the FY25 State Budget we can end stigma, end administrative burdens, end student debt, and most importantly end child hunger in schools. As a proud NYSNA member, school nutrition professional, constituent, and most importantly a father, I can not express enough the need for Healthy Meals for All to be included in our FY25 state budget. Our schools, families, and students can no longer wait. We saw historic investment in school meals last year, let's carry that momentum, and fully fund Healthy School Meals for All in New York.