



**Testimony of Community Food Advocates  
2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Elementary & Secondary Education**

**Presented to the New York State Senate Committee on Finance and the New York State  
Assembly Committee on Ways and Means**

Submitted by:  
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Thank you for the opportunity to offer our response to the FY2025 Executive Budget proposal before the Senate Committee on Finance, the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Chair Krueger and Chair Weinstein, on behalf of Community Food Advocates.

Community Food Advocates (CFA) works to dismantle barriers to food access. We build creative and strategic coalitions that advocate to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to healthy, affordable, plentiful, and culturally appropriate foods within an equity-centered food system. We co-lead [Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids](#), along with Hunger Solutions New York, representing a [diverse coalition](#) of over 285 anti-hunger, education, health, agriculture, and equity-focused organizations, alongside students, parents, school administrators, and other concerned New Yorkers. Together, **we are advocating for New York State to establish and fully fund statewide universal free school meals in the FY2025 state budget.**

**We are grateful for the Senate and Assembly leadership on this issue and are thankful for New York's historic investment in school meals. We appreciate Governor Hochul's sustained funding in the FY2025 Executive Budget.** The FY2024 investment of \$134.6 million for the state expansion of free school meals in the 2023-2024 school year resulted in 347,000 additional students in 1,200 additional schools being able to access meals at no cost to all students through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The Executive Budget proposal includes \$145.6M toward continued funding for the subsidy, an \$11 million increase from last year's budget, to ensure all eligible schools will receive funding.

**While we have taken a great leap forward, we have further to go to finish the job. More than 320,000 students across more than 650 schools were excluded from the state's expansion of free school meals.**

**An additional \$90.4 million is needed to close the gap and fully fund statewide school meals in the FY2025 Final Budget.** The students left behind predominately attend schools in suburban communities with stark income inequalities and high costs of living or in rural areas where poverty is prevalent but less concentrated. Nearly 80 percent of these students reside on Long Island, in the Hudson Valley, and in Western New York.

**There is a misconception that many of the schools left out of last year's investment are affluent.** In fact, those schools have students up to 24% of their student body that are deemed low-income, based on their enrollment in other assistance programs. There are communities where some – but not all – schools in a district are eligible to provide meals at no cost to all students. Children in the same neighborhood, even the same household, may not share the same access to free school meals. This creates confusion and perpetuates stigma and inequity.

**The arbitrary income eligibility for free school meals does not reflect the reality** of cost of living and families' ability to afford to pay full price for school meals for their children. A family of four earning just above \$55,500 – far below a living wage in New York – does qualify for free school meals. As one example, in Westchester County, where over 40,000 students are still being asked to pay for school meals, the [survival budget for a family of four](#) with two school aged children, is \$75,480. In that same county, 23% of [food insecure households with children](#) are above 185% of the federal poverty level, which is the same cutoff for free school meal eligibility.

**Even families who do qualify are often deterred by social stigma and paperwork barriers.** When families do not qualify for school meals, but still cannot afford to pay, school administrators must navigate the reality of school meal debt, which can lead families to disengage from school communications. It also exacerbates financial strain for both families and schools. Schools often draw from their general funds to pay this debt, taking resources away from other educational necessities such as staffing and technology.

**The upcoming budget is a critical opportunity to address a growing hunger crisis.** USDA's annual Household Food Security Report found a [stark increase in hunger](#) nationwide, with nearly [one in five households](#) with children struggling with food insecurity last year, and rates of hunger twice as high among Black and Latino households compared to white households. In New York alone, nearly [one in six children experience food insecurity](#). Universal school meals are a [proven policy](#) to decrease hunger.

**Providing school meals at no cost also supports students' physical and [mental health](#)** and improves academic outcomes. Across all income levels, school meals are among the [healthiest meals children eat: kids who eat school meals consume more vegetables, whole grains, and dairy than their peers](#). Students who participate in school meals are also better prepared for academic success. They show improved [attendance](#) and classroom behavior, and perform better on [standardized tests](#) in [reading and math](#).

**Universal free school meals is a common sense policy with widespread support.** [Seventy-seven percent of New York voters](#) support the state fully funding Healthy School Meals for All. This overwhelming support holds across party lines, ideology, income, geography, race and age, including 63 percent of Republicans.

**Healthy School Meals for All is also good economics, and supports Farm to School.** Providing meals at no cost makes New York more affordable. It means families have the assurance of 40 meals a month for each child, saving families an estimated \$150 per month per child in food costs. Research shows that [every dollar invested in school meals provides two](#)

[dollars](#) in health and economic benefits. A fully funded universal school meal program provides schools with stable revenue, increased buying power, and more staff capacity to foster relationships with New York farmers, bringing more nutritious, local food to cafeterias across the state. National and state-level agriculture organizations have joined the call for statewide Healthy School Meals for All because of the positive impacts on children, families, and agriculture, particularly family farms.

**New York must act now to establish statewide school meals at no cost.** Federal action is not expected in the foreseeable future. Attempts to pass a child nutrition reauthorization bill have repeatedly stalled in Congress. Instead, states are stepping up, establishing statewide universal school meal policies because hungry children cannot wait. Our neighbors in Massachusetts and Vermont have already implemented [permanent, statewide school meals for all policies](#), as have California, Colorado, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico. Many additional states are currently considering similar legislation.

The State Budget is a statement of priorities. We hope we can count on the Legislature to once again stand up for New York families and prioritize fully funding a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for ALL New York Kids. We strongly urge the Legislature to maintain the \$145.6 million included in the FY2025 Executive Budget proposal to maintain this year's expansion and include an **additional \$90.4 million allocation to close the gap and fully fund statewide school meals at no cost in the final budget**. This will ensure no student is being asked to learn on an empty stomach.