



Testimony of Healthy School Meals For All New York Kids Campaign

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 Executive Budget proposal before the Senate Committee on Finance, the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Chair Krueger and Chair Weinstein, on behalf of the Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids campaign.

[Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids](#) is a [diverse coalition](#) of over 250 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 fund statewide universal free school meals in the FY 2024 state budget.

The expiration of federal funding for universal free school meals this year has been devastating for New Yorkers. Across the state, 726,000 students at nearly 2,000 schools lost access to the meals they depend on to thrive in the classroom. As inflation drives grocery prices to historic highs, this loss also hits families and school districts hard.

Hunger inhibits a student's ability to learn. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus and engage, have lower school attendance than their peers, and are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems. As food insecurity compromises children's capacity to develop, socialize and learn, it sets the stage for poor health and economic consequences later in life. These challenges affect all students and they [disproportionately impact](#) Black and Latino children.

School meals are a critical tool to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. Providing free healthy meals to all students safeguards children from hunger and promotes good nutrition. School meals mitigate food insecurity among low-income students, and are also the [healthiest meals children consume](#), across all income levels. Beyond reducing hunger, convergent evidence links participation in school meals to positive education and health outcomes. Participation in school meals [improves](#) students' attendance and behavior, reduces tardiness, and prepares them for academic success; students who eat breakfast at school perform better on standardized tests, and score higher in spelling, reading, and math. Additionally, participation in school breakfast reduces visits to the school nurse, improves [students' mental health](#), and reduces their risk for anxiety and depression. Together, this suite of positive impacts underscores the importance of school meals for students' long-term development, in the classroom and beyond.

Means-testing for free school meals leaves too many children behind. The return to a tiered payment system creates undue barriers to school meals for many New Yorkers, including:

- *Children whose families struggle to meet basic needs, but do not qualify for free school meals.* A family of four making just \$51,400 is over-income for free school meals. Statewide, an estimated 470,000 children are not income-eligible for free school meals, despite living in households earning less than a living wage. New York schools are reporting unprecedented increases in school meal debt as more families than ever struggle to pay, but do not qualify for free meals.

This year, school nutrition directors anticipate their debt will surpass pre-pandemic levels – an estimated \$24.9 million statewide. School meal debt burdens local school districts administratively and financially, as schools become de facto debt collectors – jeopardizing critical relationships with parents – and must reconcile uncollected debt at the end of the school year, often at the expense of general funds that could support other important educational supports.

- *Children in small rural and suburban schools that are unable to provide free meals for all using existing federal options.* While 59% of New York schools offer free meals for all through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows high poverty schools to offer free meals to all students, these schools are predominately in larger, urban school districts. Smaller rural and suburban schools in areas where poverty is prevalent but less concentrated are often ineligible for CEP. Overall, New York’s schools have maximized federal options available for universal meals; [91.9%](#) of eligible CEP schools are participating in the provision. For those who remain eligible but unenrolled, CEP is out of reach financially.
- *Children who qualify for free school meals, but fall through the cracks due to stigma and administrative barriers.* When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, [many decline to participate](#), despite their hunger. Participation drops as students get older and more aware of stigma. Stigma, administrative burdens, and literacy and language barriers also keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications.

New York must establish and fund a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for All program.

Over the last ten school years, New York has rolled out universal school meals through CEP in over 3,600 schools statewide. During the pandemic, we piloted a statewide universal meals policy through federal waivers that extended free school meals for all to schools without CEP. The results were clear: far more children ate breakfast and lunch at school, supporting their learning and development; families benefited from grocery savings amid rising food costs; and schools no longer used valuable administrative and financial resources to address unpaid school meal debt. Now, equipped with the knowledge and experience from these successful pilots, New York has an opportunity to reimagine the way school meal programs operate. By devoting an estimated \$275 per student—about 0.1 percent of our budget—to feeding our kids, we can advance equity for students, families, and schools. This is a concrete step toward supporting students’ education and health while also improving school nutrition finances and operations.

Universal free school meals is an evidence-based policy with widespread support. Nearly 90 percent of New Yorkers support this policy. Nationally, California, Maine and Colorado have passed permanent School Meals for All policies and Vermont, Massachusetts and Nevada have established free school meals for all students for the 2022-2023 school year. Many additional states are currently considering similar legislation. While advocates continue to push for a nationwide policy, federal action is not expected in the foreseeable future, as attempts to pass a child nutrition reauthorization bill have repeatedly stalled and Congress failed to include any provisions to expand access to school meals in their recent spending package. Even within the White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health – intended to outline ambitious goals for action – a federal universal school meals policy is not expected until at least 2032. Hungry children can’t wait; New York must act now.

Closing

As representatives from local and state organizations that see firsthand the impact of poverty and food insecurity in New York, we know how life-changing free school meals for all could be for students, their families, schools, and communities. We also know that lack of consistent access to healthy food not only puts students at a disadvantage, but also undermines investments in education, including the state’s

historic Foundation Aid funding. While critical, that funding is separate from school meal program budgets – New York schools need both investments to support student success.

School meals are one of the government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children. In New York, federal funds cover the majority of school meal costs, drawing down over \$1B annually under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. A state investment in this established infrastructure is not only strategic – its reach is unmatched.

The Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids coalition strongly urges the legislature to adopt this proposal in its final budget. Doing so will expand access to free school meals to an additional 726,00 students in nearly 2,000 schools across the state. Like textbooks and transportation, school meals should be an inherent part of a child's education – it's time for New York to step up.