



Testimony of the Healthy School Meals For All New York Kids Coalition

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 the Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids coalition.

[Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids](#) is 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.

In a tough budget year, we appreciate Governor Hochul's decision to sustain funding for New York's historic expansion of free school meals in her FY2025 Executive Budget. This investment allowed for significant progress toward statewide free school meals in SY 2023-2024, enabling more than 1,200 additional schools to offer meals at no cost to all students through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). By providing a state subsidy to make it financially feasible for all CEP-eligible schools to participate in the provision, New York expanded access to free school meals to more than 347,000 additional students across the state. We are grateful the Executive Budget proposal includes \$145.6M toward continued funding for the subsidy, an \$11M increase from last year's budget, to ensure all eligible schools will receive funding.

We thank the Legislature for your advocacy to secure this meaningful investment for New York's children and families in the FY2024 state budget, and encourage continued funding for the CEP subsidy in the FY2025 state budget.

Still, this funding falls short of a true statewide Healthy School Meals for All policy.

More than 320,000 students across 659 schools were excluded from the state's expansion of free school meals. 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.

While the FY2024 expansion of free school meals made it possible for all qualifying schools to participate in CEP, it still does not reach all communities with high need. CEP relies heavily on SNAP and Medicaid participation rates to determine school eligibility. This is an undercount of poverty, as many struggling families do not qualify for federal assistance programs or face

barriers to applying. In many circumstances, schools with as many as one in five economically disadvantaged students do not meet the strict CEP eligibility standards.

Without a permanent, statewide free school meals program, families in these communities must navigate a burdensome application process as children are means-tested for access to meals. A family of four earning just above \$55,500 – far below a living wage in New York – is over-income for free school meals. Even families who do qualify are often deterred by social stigma and fear, especially in communities perceived as “wealthy”. 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.

This broken system perpetuates stigma and undermines trust between schools and families. It also creates confusion in communities where some – but not all – schools in a district 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 inequitable dynamic is unacceptable. The only way to ensure equitable access to school meals is by providing school breakfast and lunch at no cost to *all* of our state’s students, regardless of their zip code. Providing meals at no cost would also make New York more affordable, saving families an estimated \$150 per month per child in food costs.

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.

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 can and 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 this important proposal in the final budget. New York must **fully** fund a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for **All** program. To this end, the Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids coalition strongly urges the Legislature to maintain the \$145.6M included in the FY2025 Executive Budget proposal that sustains last year's CEP subsidy **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. Doing so will expand access to free school meals to the remaining 320,000 students in more than 650 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 close the gap.