

December 3, 2021

The Honorable Kathy Hochul  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

We are a diverse coalition of anti-hunger, education, food, and nutrition organizations and associations writing today to ask you to take action in the FY 2023 Executive Budget to include Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids. This would ensure that every K-12 student in New York has equal access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school to support their health and academic success.

Providing healthy school meals at no cost for every student in New York State – regardless of income – is a critical investment in the health and well-being of New York’s students, ending child hunger in schools, and building equity in our education and health system.

### **Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids is Essential for Recovery**

The health and economic crises brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have made the federal school meal programs more important than ever. A record number of New Yorkers do not have enough to eat, and it is likely that the economic recovery for families who struggle to put food on the table will take years.

The federal school meal programs have played a central role in reducing hardship during the pandemic. Since March 2020, USDA has provided waivers to schools, allowing them to serve meals at no cost to all students. These meals have been a lifeline for struggling families, but the waivers are set to expire at the end of this school year, leaving over 2,000 schools and nearly 800,000 students in New York State without access to free school meals for all.

The ability to serve all students a nutritious meal, regardless of income, should not be rolled back as we begin to recover from the worst of the pandemic. Access to school meals should be a fundamental value in all of our schools. It is proven successful in combating childhood hunger, improving children’s health, and creating more equitable opportunities for academic success. Research shows school meals improve academic achievement, standardized test scores, cognitive function, and attendance. Consumption of school meals is also linked with greater food security, reduced obesity rates, and improved physical and mental health outcomes. Schools that implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) - a federal option that allows high-poverty schools to offer meals at no cost for all - report improved student behavior and decreased suspension rates.<sup>1</sup> As we work to recover from the vast economic and educational impacts of COVID-19, there has never been a more important time to continue free school meals for all, allowing more students and schools to reap these benefits.

## **New York is Ready for Healthy School Meals For All NY Kids**

New York's strong investments in school meals have set the stage for Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids. During your leadership as Lieutenant Governor, New York established policies that eliminated the collection of school meal debt. The State also invested to eliminate students' reduced-price copayment, eradicating a significant barrier to school meals for families above the income limits for free meals, but still struggling to meet basic needs. Statewide Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids complements these policies by eliminating school meal debt altogether, further supporting families earning less than a living wage, and providing stability for struggling school nutrition programs.

New York also leads the nation in strong uptake in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Currently, over 3,600 New York schools – serving a total of 1.7 million students – use CEP to draw down federal dollars to offer school meals at no cost for all of their students. The more eligible schools that operate CEP, the more cost effective a statewide Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids program becomes. With nearly 70% of New York's schools already offering free meals for all, New York is strategically positioned to level the playing field for the remaining 2,000 schools.

### **Who Gets Left Behind under the Current Structure**

While many New York schools – predominantly our larger, urban school districts – offer meals at no cost for all through CEP, 270 schools in our state are eligible for CEP but not participating, often because they are unable to make it work financially. Many of these schools are our smallest school districts in rural communities, where poverty is less concentrated but still prevalent. Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids is an equalizer, especially for these small districts where students face amplified stigma and schools struggle to maintain financially viable programs under the current tiered payment structure.

In addition, there are schools that do not qualify for CEP but still serve significant numbers of low-income students who fall through the cracks of the current system. In New York, children qualify for free school meals if their household's income is at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, which translates into an annual income of \$49,000 or less for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year. A livable salary for a family of four in New York is over \$74,000<sup>ii</sup>, even without taking into account regional differences in the cost of living. This discrepancy between eligibility and the living wage means that many families who are struggling to make ends meet do not qualify for free school meals.<sup>iii</sup> Even among eligible families, students can be missed and not certified for free school meals, creating an undue burden of school meal debt for families and schools. Stigma further inhibits access, especially among teenage students, who often drop out of school meal programs as they get older. This is exemplified in many school districts throughout the state that see their rates of free or reduced-price eligible students drop significantly from elementary to high schools.

All school districts in our state now face impossible fiscal decisions with their limited school budgets, while also being tasked to nourish our children each school day. We have heard from school districts that the financial and administrative burden of shifting back to a tiered payment system after the waivers are lifted will likely collapse their school meal programs that are already operating at a deficit throughout the pandemic. Statewide Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids would allow these schools to avoid the impossible choice between providing meals to all children and resources for their education.

### **New York Must Act Now to Avoid a Hunger Cliff**

There has never been a more important time to invest in school meals. After June 2022, over 2,000 schools and nearly 800,000 students across our state will lose access to free school meals for all. Earlier this year, California and Maine passed state legislation to avoid this hunger cliff. New York can – and must – be on the leading edge of this issue by including Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids in the FY23 State Budget.

New York can accomplish this by supplementing the cost of providing school meals that is not covered by the federal government, so schools are fully reimbursed at the “free rate” for all meals they serve. The total cost to the state is dependent on many factors, including estimates of increased participation, and potential cost savings from effectively leveraging federal provisions like CEP and implementing best practices to draw down maximum federal reimbursements. Most significantly, proposed federal investments in the Build Back Better Act could lower – if not eliminate – the cost of a Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids program in New York. As written, the bill would increase federal reimbursements to CEP-eligible schools by over \$64 million, and allow states to adopt CEP statewide.

While changes at the federal level could make Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids more cost-effective for our state, New York must act now regardless of federal action. The state can develop a sustainable program by fully leveraging existing federal resources, including by maximizing CEP among eligible schools, and improving our state-level direct certification system to capture all children who automatically qualify for free school meals based on their participation in another federally-approved program, like SNAP, or other qualifying circumstances. The state can also support local best practices to strengthen school districts’ direct certification processes and encourage robust SNAP outreach to ensure eligible families are participating.

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 strongly believe that like textbooks and transportation, school meals should be a part of a child’s education in New York.

Sincerely,

**Statewide Organizations and Associations:**

Alliance for Better Health  
Alliance of NYS YMCAs  
Association of School Business Officials  
Church Women United in New York State  
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York  
Education Council Consortium  
Hunger Free America  
Hunger Solutions New York  
New York School Nutrition Association  
New York State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
New York State Council of School Superintendents  
New York State Network for Youth Success  
New York State Public Health Association  
New York State School Boards Association  
New York State School Counselor Association  
No Kid Hungry New York  
NYS American Academy of Pediatrics  
NYS PTA  
NYSUT  
Restaurant Opportunities Centers UNITED  
Rural Schools Association of New York State  
Slate Foods, Inc.  
WIC Association of NYS, Inc.

**Community-Based Organizations and Associations:**

Abundant Life Ministries  
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), NYS  
Chapter 3 Nutrition and Obesity Committee  
Betts Branch Library  
BIFAC  
Bridgehampton Child Care & Recreational Center  
Bronx Impact  
CAPTAIN Community Human Services  
Center for Agricultural Development and  
Entrepreneurship (CADE)  
Central Islip Civic Council  
Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council (CPAC)  
Charles Street Block Association  
Child Care Council of Suffolk, Inc.  
Children's Museum of the East End  
Christ Jesus Baptist Church, Inc.  
City Harvest  
Citymeals on Wheels  
Citywide Leadership Team  
Community Food Advocates

Community Housing Innovations, Inc.  
Council of School Supervisors and Administrators  
CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute  
Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation  
District 75/President of D75 President's Council  
Early Childhood Quality Council  
Edible Schoolyard NYC  
Empire Justice Center  
Equity Advocates  
Food Bank For New York City  
Food Bank of Central New York  
Food Bank of the Southern Tier  
FoodCorps  
Foodlink Inc  
Francis Lewis High School PTA  
Health and Welfare Council of Long Island  
Healthi Kids Coalition  
Horizons at Warner/University of Rochester  
Keeping Ladies and Men Motivated  
L4L Coalition  
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education &  
Policy, Columbia University  
Long Island African American Chamber of  
Commerce  
Long Island Cares, Inc.  
Long Island Center for Independent Living, Inc.  
(LICIL)  
Long Island FQHC, Inc  
Lunch 4 Learning Coalition Parent Caucus  
Macedon Public Library  
Mental Health Association of Nassau County  
Ministerio Jesuscristovive, love without barriers  
Nachas Health & Family Network, Inc.  
NANA's House (Never Alone, Never Afraid Inc.)  
Naomi Berrie Diabetes Center  
Niagara Falls Public Library  
Partners in Nutrition LLC  
PATH Pakistani Americans of the Town of  
Huntington  
Queens High School Presidents' Council  
RASCAL  
Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York  
Resurrection House, Inc.  
Rochester Area Community Foundation  
Rural Health Network of SCNY  
South Hempstead Baptist Church Food Pantry  
St. Bernard Parish Social Ministry

St. Peter's Episcopal Church Love Pantry  
Suffolk County Food Policy Council  
Teens for Food Justice  
The Children's Agenda  
The Community Place  
The Solidarity Group Inc  
The United Federation of Teachers (UFT)  
UJA Federation of NY  
United Health Services Hospitals, Inc.  
United Way of New York City  
United Way of the Greater Capital Region  
Universe City NYC  
Wellness in the Schools  
Youth Enrichment Services, Inc

**Schools:**

Ada Exempted Village school  
Alden Central School District  
BATAVIA CSD  
Broome Tioga BOCES  
Clyde-Savannah Central School District  
Comsewogue School District Board of Education  
Copenhagen Central School  
Copiague UFSD  
Dansville Central  
Evans Brant Central School District  
Farmingdale UFSD  
Friedberg JCC  
Fulton City School Nutrition Program  
Geneva City School District  
Greece Central School District  
Greenwich Central School  
Hadley-Luzerne CSD  
Hampton Bays Union Free School District  
Hannibal Central Schools

Haverstraw-Stony Pt CSD  
Huntington Union Free School District  
Ithaca School Food Service  
Jamestown Public Schools  
Long Beach School District  
Mechanicville City School District  
Millbrook Central School District  
Mohonasen CSD  
Newark Central School  
North Colonie Central School District  
Northport - East Northport School District  
Notre Dame High School  
Phoenix Central School District  
PSMS 5  
Red Creek Central School  
Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts  
Riverhead CSD  
Saranac Lake CSD  
Shenendehowa Central Schools  
Springville-Griffith Institute CSD  
St. Amelia School  
St. Catherine's Center for Children  
St. Regis Falls Central School  
Three Village CSD  
Tupper Lake Central School  
University Preparatory Charter School for Young Men  
Warrensburg CSD  
Waterford-Halfmoon UFSD  
West Babylon Schools  
West Islip Union Free School District  
West Seneca Central School District  
Whitson's Culinary Group, Huntington  
Whitson's Culinary Group, Islandia  
Yeshivat Shaare Torah

Cc:

Betty Rosa, Commissioner, New York State Education Department  
Richard Ball, Commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets  
Senator Michelle Hinchey, Chair, Senate Agriculture Committee  
Senator Liz Krueger, Chair, Senate Finance Committee  
Senator Shelley Mayer, Chair, Senate Education Committee  
Senator Rachel May, Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources  
Senator John Liu, Chair, New York City Education Committee  
Senator Robert Jackson, Chair, Committee on Cities 1  
Senator Jeremy Cooney, Chair, Committee on Cities 2  
Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, Chair, Assembly Agriculture Committee

Assemblyman Michael Benedetto, Chair, Assembly Education Committee  
Assemblyman Edward Braunstein, Chair, Assembly Cities Committee  
Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara, Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on the positive impacts of the School Nutrition Programs, read the [Food Research & Action Center's School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning](#); [Breakfast for Learning](#); [Breakfast for Health](#); and [The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior](#).

<sup>ii</sup> Nadeau, Carey Ann. "Living Wage Calculator—Living Wage Calculation for New York." *Living Wage Calculator*, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology., <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/36>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Pérez, Allyson, and Crystal FitzSimons. "The Case for Healthy School Meals for All." *Food Research and Action Center*, June 2021, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolMealsForAll.pdf>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2021.