



**Joint Legislative Hearing on the 2018-19 Executive Budget Proposal**

**New York State  
Primary and Secondary Education Budget Hearing**

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2018  
ALBANY, NEW YORK

WRITTEN TESTIMONY PREPARED BY:

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Thank you very much for holding this hearing, and for the New York State legislature's strong support of our schools, the welfare of our children, our state's farm and food industry, our state programs that enhance farm viability and for helping farmers steward and protect the irreplaceable natural resource that is our state's farmland.

I am pleased to present written testimony on behalf of American Farmland Trust (AFT). AFT is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect five million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1990, AFT's New York State Office works to save the land that sustains us across the state.

Five years ago, AFT launched the collaborative initiative, "Farm to Institution New York State" (FINYS), along with other school, college, farm, food and public health organizations across New York with the collective goal of strengthening New York's farm and food economy and improving the health of its citizens. FINYS encourages institutions to adopt the goal of spending 25% of their food budget on food from New York farms, with a focus on fresh and minimally processed food. A new report released by American Farmland Trust and the New York Academy of Medicine entitled, "The Public Plate in New York State: Growing Health, Farms and Jobs with Local Food," underscores the opportunity that exists when publicly-funded institutions, including K-12 schools, purchase more food from New York farms. The report found that if institutions were to spend 25% of their food dollars on New York grown food, it would inject an additional \$200 million into the state's economy and improve the health of 6.6 million New Yorkers.

As part of the FY2018-19 Executive Budget Proposal, Governor Cuomo allocated \$10 million to create an incentive for K-12 schools to buy 30% of their food from New York farms, while also doubling funding for the Farm to School Grants program to \$1.5 million. AFT and the statewide New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition, which includes school, food, farm, public health, environmental and anti-hunger organizations, sees these proposals as significant ways to benefit both our farmers and the health of our children, and strongly supports inclusion of this funding in the FY2018-19 enacted State Budget with only two minor, yet important, adjustments.

### **FARM TO SCHOOL PRESENTS AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

According to the New York State DOH, 1 in 3 New York children and teens under the age of 18 are overweight or obese, record highs. At the same time a 2012 report from the State Comptroller revealed that NY state's Medicaid program spends over \$300 million on healthcare costs related to obesity in children. As adults, we all know that diet is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, and teaching children early helps them develop healthy habits for the rest of

their lives that can improve health outcomes. What we may not realize is that up to 2/3 of a child's daily nutrition comes from school meals.

Currently in New York State, K-12 schools spend over \$350 million annually on food for school lunches. They serve these meals to 1.7 million students daily, with nearly 1.7 million students participating in the School Lunch Program, nearly 700,000 students participating in the School Breakfast Program, and over 400,000 participating in the Summer Food Service Program statewide. There are also nearly 1 million New York children, who do not have consistent access to the food they need to live an active, healthy life. For these food insecure children, school breakfast, lunch, summer and after-school meals can often provide their only daily dependable source of food.

Farm to School is an effective way that many schools have identified to serve more fresh food to students, while improving health and educational outcomes and teaching students the importance of a healthy diet for the rest of their lives. Increasing the amount of healthy, fresh local food in our schools through Farm to School programs is also an effective way to improve the diet, health and educational outcomes of children from low-income families. According to the 2015 USDA Farm to School census, 43% of New York State schools currently participate in Farm to School activities: over 1,000 New York schools serving almost 300,000 lunches/year. States with increased access to fresh food have seen a drop in their obesity rates—in Arkansas, after implementing the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program, child obesity rates dropped from 20% to 17%, and Mississippi saw similar declines. Additionally, a recent UC Berkeley study revealed that improved nutrition can positively affect learning, and that students at schools that contracted with a healthy school lunch vendor scored higher on statewide achievement tests<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, Farm to School programs provide some hope in battling the health and hunger crises our children face while also positively impacting childhood education.

Studies have revealed that further benefits of Farm to School and the educational components that often accompany these programs include:

- Improvement in early childhood and K-12 student health behaviors, including choosing healthier options at school meals, consuming more fruits and vegetables through farm to school meals and at home (+0.99 to +1.3 servings/day), consuming less unhealthy foods and sodas, reducing screen time and increasing physical activity.
- Increase in ability and interest in incorporating healthier foods into family diets and guiding children in early childhood and K-12 to make healthier choices along with positive changes in shopping patterns reflecting healthy and local foods.
- Increase in knowledge and awareness about gardening, agriculture, healthy eating, local foods, nutrition, growing cycles, seasonality and other STEM concepts
- Improvements in food service staff motivation and morale, increase in knowledge and interest in local food preparation and seasonal recipes and increase in interactions with teachers to strengthen classroom and cafeteria connections
- Increase in opportunities to combat racial and economic inequities in the school food system

## **FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO EAT THE HEALTHY FOOD SERVED TO THEM**

While media attention on improved school meals has focused on plate waste, Farm to School programs, which aren't limited to the cafeteria, have proven to be more effecting in helping children choose healthy options. School gardens, nutrition education, class trips and hands on learning help excite kids about eating more healthy, local food. Due to this type of education, one school food service director in Watertown, NY reported that their salad pilot saw participation rates jump by 10% in just one day, and food waste decreased. Students in Watertown now voluntarily take and eat salad without any additional education.

Furthermore, an analysis of three large studies by the Pew Charitable Trust found that under improved nutrition rules, food waste actually *declined* in schools in CT and TX. Specifically, compared with 2012, children ate nearly 13% points more of their entrees and 18% points more of their vegetables by the last year of the study and food waste *declined* as a result. The researchers also found that greater variety, often brought forth by Farm to School programs, led to healthier choices. Each additional fruit option offered was associated with a 9.3% increase in the number of students taking a fruit serving. Similar recent studies in Florida, which looked at schoolchildren's consumption of fruits and vegetables in schools with Farm to School programs, yielded the same results.

## **AGRICULTURE FORMS THE FOUNDATION OF THE NEW YORK STATE ECONOMY**

The production, processing, buying and selling of food has traditionally formed the foundation of all economies and New York is no different. A recent study by Farm Credit East has shown that New York's 35,537 farms generated \$5.4 billion from direct sales, creating an economic impact of \$9.5 billion dollars and jobs for 77,000 New Yorkers. Farms also create business opportunities for farm support services such as electricians, feed and seed dealers, carpenters, farm equipment dealers, truckers, mechanics, bankers, veterinarians and many others.

In addition, farms serve as the cornerstone of the state's \$39.4 billion farm and food economy and are closely tied to New York's food processing sector. Processing milk, fruits, vegetables and grains into cheese, yogurt, baked goods, wine, beer, spirits and other food products creates another 83,000 jobs for a total of over 160,000 steady jobs for residents across New York.<sup>ii</sup>

## **BUILDING FARM TO SCHOOL IN NEW YORK**

In order to have strong, viable working farms in New York, there need to be thriving markets for farmers to sell to, yet access to reliable, lucrative markets remains a challenge for many farmers across the state. Selling more fresh and minimally processed products from New York farms into K-12 schools provides an exciting opportunity to open up new markets for farmers while positively influencing the health of 1.7 million New York schoolchildren.

Many schools are already purchasing fluid New York milk to serve in cafeterias, but new opportunities exist for farmers who raise meat, grow produce or create value added products

to increase their revenue by selling to schools. Research prepared by Cornell shows that in New York, should school demand for just one New York fruit or vegetable item per week increase to 50%, it could generate up to \$9.2 million in new revenue to producers of vegetables, or \$5.3 million to producers of fruit. It could also generate between 80 and 150 new jobs in New York State due to increased economic activity on farms, input suppliers and others employed in distribution.<sup>iii</sup>

The State of New York's Farm to School Grants, have been a good first step to help grow school purchase from farms within New York State. Since the Governor launched New York's Farm-to-School Program in 2015, \$1.85 million has been invested in the program to support a total of 25 projects that benefit 108 school districts across the State. Previous rounds of funding for the Farm to School program have increased access to healthy, New York grown, farm-fresh food for 324,000 students. These dollars are well spent - studies show that each dollar invested in Farm to School stimulates, on average, an additional \$1.60 in local economic activity, and for each job created in Farm to School, 1.67 more are created within the community. However, Farm to School grant funds cannot be used to purchase actual food. As the per-meal reimbursement from the state has not seen a meaningful increase past 6 cents in over 40 years, the reimbursement incentive is crucial in helping schools purchase more food from New York farms.

This lack of sufficient funding to purchase local food, the lack of relationship between schools and farms and the dearth of supply chain infrastructure to support the processing of, distribution to and cooking of local farm foods in schools is hampering the further growth of Farm to School purchases in New York State. This is why the New York Grown Food for New York Kids coalition strongly supports both of the governor's proposals, with only minor adjustment, seeing them as important complementary programs: the Farm to School Grants help schools build market pathways, access the proper equipment and train staff to purchase, cook and serve local food to students while the Locally Sourced Food Reimbursement offers schools a meaningful incentive to actually *purchase* more food from New York farms.

### **STRENGTHENING THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL TO HELP ALL SCHOOLS PROVIDE HEALTHY FOOD TO STUDENTS**

As indicated, we do have concerns about two aspects of this proposal. First, since the current budget language sets the threshold at 30% of the *total* school food budget, high need schools—who are required to provide more breakfasts, after school meals and summer meals than schools in wealthier areas—are at a disadvantage in meeting the 30% threshold. These high need schools have larger total food budgets and will need to expend more money up front, while, in fact, receiving slightly less back in reimbursement from the state than a wealthier school district. The fix to balance this inequality is simple: to amend the budget language to: “at least 30% of the *previous year's reimbursable lunch food purchases*”.

Second, the proposal permits schools to purchase products “from New York State farmers, growers, producers, or processors”. We are concerned by this general inclusion of ‘processors’ as it could permit foods manufactured without any ingredients from New York, or highly processed foods that are less healthy for children. To address this significant concern, we encourage the State Senate and Assembly to clarify this definition of foods from processors to only allow either:

- Fresh or minimally processed foods (based upon the USDA School Lunch standards); or
- With the definition that a majority of the ingredients in processed products must come from New York growers, farmers and/or producers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information. I welcome any questions you might have, and look forward to continuing the conversation about these initiatives and more in the months ahead.

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<sup>i</sup> Anderson, Michael L. *et al.* “School Lunch Quality and Academic Performance.” Published August 8, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Lopez, Rigoberto, Nataliya Plesha, Benjamin Campbell, and Chris Laughton. *Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products, and Commercial Fishing*. Farm Credit East, 2015. The report uses data from 2012, which is the most recent available.

<sup>iii</sup> Brad R., Todd S., and Pam S.. “The Economic Implications of Using New York State Farm Products in School Lunches.” *CARDI Research and Policy Brief Series*. Issue No. 72, April 2016.

# *NEW YORK GROWN FOOD FOR NEW YORK KIDS*

Farm to School programs are an important way to address food insecurity, curb the rise in childhood obesity, support New York's farmers and help our rural communities grow. As part of the 2018 State of the State and FY19 Executive Budget, Governor Cuomo proposed to double the state's investment in the Farm to School grants and allocated \$10 million to quadruple the current meal reimbursement to 25 cents for schools who purchase 30% of meal ingredients from New York farmers. The statewide "New York Grown Food for New York Kids" coalition views these proposals as an excellent step forward and wishes to see them included, with minor adjustment, in the FY19 State budget.

## Farm to School is a Win-Win, Improving the Health of our Children and Supporting New York Farmers

According to the NY Department of Health nearly 1 in 5 children are obese, with 1 in 3 considered obese or overweight—a record high. Schools across New York State serve breakfast, lunch and afterschool meals annually to 1.7 million schoolchildren, and providing more fresh and minimally processed foods to students in schools is an important way to improve health outcomes while teaching healthy habits. For food-insecure children, school meals can be their only daily dependable source of food, therefore Farm to School is an effective way to improve access to healthy food for our most vulnerable children. Farm to School also supports our state's rural economy and the viability of New York farms. Recent studies show:

- Each dollar invested in Farm to School activities stimulates, on average, an additional \$1.67 in local economic activity.
- For each job created in Farm to School, 1.6 more are created within the community.
- Opening K-12 schools as new market channels to farmers helps them diversify their business and mitigate risk while creating markets for products like small apples and pears.

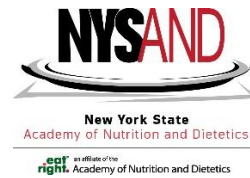
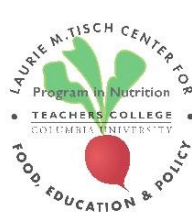
While the State of New York has taken important steps to build Farm to School participation among schools, currently at 43%, more can be done to meaningfully increase the amount of New York grown food purchased by our schools to serve to our kids. New York State's per meal reimbursement for K-12 schools has remained 6 cents for over 40 years, and K-12 schools report a lack of funds to purchase local foods. There is also a dearth of infrastructure, market pathways and human knowledge of how to process, distribute, store and cook farm fresh foods in K-12 schools. All of this continues to suppress the growth potential of Farm to School throughout New York.

## Recommendations:

Currently, an estimated average of 10% of school food funds are spent on local food, making 25% a more immediately attainable goal for school food service directors. Therefore, we recommend the following actions for the FY19 State Budget:

- Appropriating \$10 million to reimburse K-12 schools 25 cents per lunch for schools that purchase at least 30% of their lunch components from New York State farmers, growers, producers and processors, provided that the bulk of ingredients in processed food comes from New York State farms.
- Doubling the Farm to School Grant allocation to \$1.5 million to help schools and other organizations purchase equipment and build the human capital, knowledge and skills necessary to purchase, prepare and promote New York grown foods for New York kids.

# NEW YORK GROWN FOOD FOR NEW YORK KIDS



East End Project

