



NEW YORK

Testimony for the New York State Assembly and New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education

**January 26, 2022
Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chair Weinstein, Chair Kruger, Chair Benedetto, Chair Mayer, and the members of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee. My name is Rachel Sabella and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on the proposed state budget and specifically its impact on elementary and secondary education.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national anti-hunger organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty. Using proven, practical strategies, our No Kid Hungry campaign builds public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, No Kid Hungry has provided emergency grants across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico to help school districts, food banks and other community organizations feed kids during this crisis. In addition to our grant-making, we have advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by this crisis – including national child nutrition waivers that offer flexibility to meal providers, expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Pandemic EBT – while offering strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations. No Kid Hungry also launched a text line and website to help families locate meals.

Since 2011, our No Kid Hungry New York campaign has helped connect millions of children across the state to child nutrition programs including school breakfast and summer meals.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUNGER AND POVERTY IN NEW YORK STATE

Food insecurity looks different in every household. For some families, the pantry is completely empty. In others, parents skip dinner a few nights a week so their kids can have something to eat in the evening.

No matter how food insecurity manifests, much is at stake for these children, families and the communities where they live. When kids don't get the consistent nutrition they need each day throughout the year, it's harder for them to grow up healthy, educated and strong. Consistent access to nutrition is linked to cognitive and physical development, better long-term health, higher test scores and better education outcomes.

Unfortunately, because policies and practices entrenched in our laws and society leave millions of children behind, especially in those in rural and tribal communities and communities of color, the promise of opportunity remains unfairly out of reach for far too many children. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these existing deep-rooted disparities, increasing the severity of a myriad health and economic crises and pushing millions more families into poverty and hunger throughout the country. In New York, the new reality created by the pandemic has made it harder for children to access no-cost meals provided by schools and community organizations. **As a result, 1 in 5 kids may face hunger in New York State – the number grows to 1 in 4 kids in New York City.**

HOW THE NEW YORK STATE BUDGET CAN ADDRESS CHILD FOOD INSECURITY

Since the start of the pandemic, the federal government has provided resources and additional financial support to families and communities. The Child Tax Credit was expanded to support the most vulnerable families and the Pandemic EBT program was created to provide families with a grocery benefit to replace the meals children would have received when attending school in person. Unfortunately, many of these programs are set to expire or narrow their focus over the next 6 months.

A crucial resource for kids and families throughout the pandemic has been the ability for all school districts in the state to provide no-cost meals to each student. However, the waivers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provide this flexibility are set to expire on June 30, 2022. At this time, school districts will have to revert to a system of charging many students for meals. This regression is one of the many reasons why it is more important than ever for New York State to step up and help families put food on the table.

A key way that New York State can take decisive action now to help communities continue to provide free school breakfast and lunch to all students is by creating a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Incentive. CEP is a federal provision that enables high-poverty schools and districts to provide free meals to all students. Schools where at least 40% of students are directly certified for free meals are eligible to operate CEP. Research shows that CEP is an effective tool to safeguard children from food insecurity: households with students attending CEP schools were nearly three times less likely to be food insecure, as compared to households with students attending a school eligible for, but not participating in CEP.

CEP also promotes equity by ensuring all children have equal access to nutritious meals. Despite its benefits and the opportunity to provide free meals universally to students in eligible schools, not every school and school district that are eligible for the program participate in it. For some districts at the lower end of eligibility, the current federal reimbursement structure does not fully cover the costs of running the program, keeping them from adopting CEP and offering free meals to all students.

Additionally, many eligible but non-participating schools are in some of our smallest rural communities where amplified stigma with receiving public assistance may lead to artificially lowered rates of need.

With a CEP Incentive, funding from New York State would make up the difference between a schools' CEP reimbursement rate and the 100% free-meal federal reimbursement rate, ensuring all CEP-eligible schools are fully funded to provide free school meals in high-poverty communities. **Under a CEP Incentive, 270 eligible but non-participating schools would be financially incentivized to opt in to CEP, potentially reaching 120,000 children with free school meals.** These schools would join the 3,633 high-poverty schools in New York that offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge through CEP, including the Big 5 districts, Brentwood, Utica, Middletown, and Newburgh.

As the economic impact of the pandemic is expected to be with us for many years, free meals targeted to high-needs communities would overcome these barriers and help New Yorkers across the state.

We recommend New York State invest \$34 million into a CEP Incentive that would help school districts provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. It's also important to note that a state investment would draw down up to \$8 million in additional federal reimbursements so it makes financial sense for the state to embark on this program now.

CONCLUSION

New York State can take this bold step to provide more children with school breakfast and school lunch through a CEP Incentive. School meals reduce hunger, improve nutrition, support positive development and behavior, create more equitable opportunities for health and academic success among students, and build stronger communities. As we continue to rebuild from the COVID-19 crisis, providing no-cost school meals to thousands more young people will help New York State grow back stronger.

No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the Legislature, Governor Hochul and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.