

Testimony on behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest

Prepared for the Joint Legislative Budget Committee Hearing on Elementary & Secondary Education

Submitted by:

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Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony to the Executive Budget proposal before the Senate Committee on Finance, the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Chair Krueger, and Chair Weinstein in support of providing free breakfast and lunch for every New York student. My name is Meghan Maroney, and I am the Campaign Manager for Federal Child Nutrition Programs at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a national science-based consumer advocacy organization. CSPI has worked on school food for decades. Prior to the passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school meal nutrition, CSPI worked with state and local advocates to pass school nutrition policies across the country. CSPI is also a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards. Following the Trump Administration's 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting their rule thrown out. CSPI advocates for access to healthy meals for all students at the federal, state, and local level. We recently supported the first-of-its-kind ballot initiative to pass statewide healthy school meals for all in Colorado and are part of the Healthy Meals for All New York Kids Coalition.

Today, I'm urging the legislature to adopt healthy school meals for all NY kids in its final budget. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds allowed students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income. Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates alike, Congress allowed this to expire in summer 2023. Several states, including California, Maine, Colorado, Vermont, and Massachusetts have moved to ensure free access for students statewide. Meanwhile, an estimated 726,000 students at nearly 2,000 schools in New York have lost access to free meals.

Current eligibility criteria for free school meals leave far too many behind, including middle class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, for a student to receive free meals, their household income cannot exceed \$36,075 annually for a family of four. Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the costs of school meals. For those that do qualify

for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevents some students from participating. Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of income like we do in the cafeteria. We willingly provide books and transportation regardless of family income.

School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, should be treated no differently.

School Meals Promote Nutrition

School meals are an excellent source of nutrition. In fact, a 2021 study found that school meals are the single most healthy source of nutrition for children—more nutritious than grocery stores, restaurants, worksites, and others.ⁱ A systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that free meals for all are positively associated with school meal participation, and in most cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.ⁱⁱ By negating the need to stand in line to pay for meals, healthy school meals for all allow children more time to eat their meals, which could result in less wasted food.

Healthy School Meals for All Support Equity

Healthy school meals for all remove stigma from children participating in the program and provide equitable access to healthy meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease, and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer.ⁱⁱⁱ Healthy school meals for all provides assurance that children will receive free meals at school, even if their family income fluctuates in and out of typical eligibility requirements for free meals. Healthy school meals for all ensure that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or children who are experiencing homelessness, have recently immigrated, have caregivers who may struggle with administrative paperwork, or are in foster care do not fall through the cracks.

A hungry child can't learn. Please ensure that children have the nourishment and dignity they need to learn and thrive by including healthy school meals for all New York kids in the budget. Thank you for your consideration.

Thank you for your consideration,



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ⁱ Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003- 2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.

ⁱⁱ Cohen, J, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients* 2021; 13(3):911.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gutierrez, E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.