

Testimony for Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids Campaign

Presented to the New York State Senate Committee on Finance and the New York State Assembly Committee on Ways and Means

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Thank you for the opportunity to offer my response to the 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 campaign.

My name is Sarah Keen and for the past eight years I have served as Food Service Manager for the Schuylerville Central School District. Throughout my 11 year career working in school food service I have seen first-hand the critical role school meals play in nourishing children, as well as the unfortunate reality that many families struggle to put food on the table. School districts are the best equipped to serve healthy, nourishing meals at the most economical cost thanks to their collective buying power. Public health initiatives that nourish children always yield a positive return on investment, and Healthy School Meals for All has been estimated to generate [at least a 2x return in economic and health benefits](#). I beg you to include Healthy School Meals for All in the upcoming New York State budget. Our children simply cannot wait.

During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school year, breakfast and lunch were free in school for all students thanks to USDA waivers. When those waivers expired this year, families in our community were devastated by what it meant for their grocery bill. A family of four making just \$51,339 is above the income limit to qualify for free or reduced price meals. However, this family does not make close to a living wage according to the highly referenced [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#). Even worse, a single parent with 1 child making just \$33,875 would be above the income limit for free/reduced school meals. That same parent still has to put a roof over their head, feed and clothe their child, and cover all other living expenses. I have had to deny MANY single-parent families meal benefits this year and their stories are heart breaking. They don't understand why the school district can't help them when they are struggling to make ends meet, and frankly I don't understand either.

In my small school district of 1,386 students, we regularly carry an unpaid school meal debt of around \$600. Every week my staff and I spend hours sending emails, mailing letters, and making phone calls to these families in an attempt to collect the debt. At the end of the year, the school general fund must cover the unpaid debt, so we do our best to keep it in check. Again, the stories are heart breaking. "I'm waiting to get paid". "Rent was due so this will have to wait". "I didn't get any overtime this month so things are tight". "We just had to replace the hot water heater". "His father is supposed to pay for school lunch." And children are caught in the middle of all this. Younger students often don't realize their meal debt is accruing because school districts are prohibited by law from discussing finances with students. But older students know, and they often choose to go hungry rather than continue growing a bill they know their parents can't afford. Teachers and community members sometimes contribute to our Sunshine Fund which helps forgive some of these balances, but the administrative burden of fairly distributing those donations and keeping meal debt under control

is horrendous. Every hour spent tracking down meal debt is an hour not spend sourcing local foods, developing healthy new recipes, or any number of other activities to improve our meal program.

The answer is simple: Healthy School Meals for All. Do not continue throwing money at school meal programs with strings attached. Supply Chain Assistance Funds, while helpful, require cumbersome paperwork and recordkeeping that districts simply do not have time to manage. Additional money is available through Local Foods For Schools grants, Equipment Grants, and Farm to School Grants but again, the applications alone, not to mention the paperwork to actually receive the money once approved, make these programs unfeasible for many districts. We have so many different pots of money to manage and cannot use them for the single most important goal of our program: feeding every student who needs a meal, every day, regardless of their family's financial circumstances. New York is prioritizing equity in schools and ensuring all students have adequate transportation, technology, wifi, etc, but there is nothing equitable about the current school meal system. The antiquated free/reduced/paid model is heavily flawed and allows so many children to fall through the cracks, especially in areas where rural poverty is prevalent. So many districts such as my own have large pockets of need, yet with only 30% of students qualifying for free/reduced price meals we are unable to take advantage of programs like Community Eligibility Provision to feed all students at no cost.

Please do not wait any longer. Follow the actions of states like Colorado, California, and Maine who have already codified Healthy School Meals for All. The cost of this program is minimal in the grand scheme our State's budget, but the payoff will be enormous.

Sincerely,

Sarah Keen
Food Services Manager