

Written Testimony presented by  
**Mohonasen Central School District**  
2072 Curry Road  
Rotterdam, NY 12303

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

**New York State Joint Legislative Hearing**  
**Elementary & Secondary Education**  
February 8, 2023

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"A nation's children are the foundation for the future," says Mohonasen High School Senior Yuliano Camarena.

***"So why do we let our future starve?" he asks.***

Surely it is not true. Surely, students in New York State do not suffer from inadequate nutrition.

Unfortunately, it is true. It occurs far too often. For many schools, including Mohonasen Central School District, it is a growing problem, one faced by rural, suburban, and urban communities.

During the Covid pandemic, the federal government did something remarkable: they *fully* funded school meals, both breakfast and lunch. It made a positive difference and served as a bright spot during a difficult time.

Alas, it was not a permanent solution. After the pandemic, the federal government declined to do the right thing. They opted not to continue funding free, healthy school meals, and our students suffer the consequences. Today, too many of them go hungry.

"The research is clear. Students who are hungry are not able to focus academically and retain information, and as a result, are at a disadvantage academically. Student athletes and those participating in extracurricular activities, are also compromised by being hungry and having inadequate nutrition," says Diane Blinn, Student Assistance Counselor, and Autumn Wallace, Social Studies Teacher, at Mohonasen High School.

Ms. Blinn and Ms. Wallace also oversee a food pantry at the high school, and they see first-hand the increasing, and often desperate, needs of many families struggling with access to food. Yet, even with generous donations from the local community, the need can quickly outstrip the resources available to the school's food pantry. Access to free, healthy school meals would dramatically ease that burden on the food pantry.

Their work in the food pantry is focused on this fact:

***Students cannot function optimally, and live their best lives, without adequate nourishment.***

Meeting those needs is increasingly difficult. In just the last two decades, the number of families qualifying for Free and Reduced School Lunches at Mohonasen has more than *tripled*, increasing from 13 to 44 percent.

More recently, the impact of losing full federal funding for school meals has been immediate and striking. Our district's unpaid student meal debt has increased to more than \$20,000 with more than a fifth of our students' families unable to keep up with paying for school meals.

More worrisome, though, the number of school meals being served, especially breakfast, has plummeted. We have experienced a 50 percent decline in high school students eating breakfast. Quantified another way, we are serving 5,040 fewer breakfast meals per month and 5,780 fewer lunch meals per month as compared to last year. That means that large numbers of students start the school day hungry, and they continue to be hungry throughout the day. It is a recipe for academic and extracurricular failure.

The data paints a stark picture, but the challenges of food insecurity cannot be understood through statistics alone. To fully comprehend the importance of free, healthy school meals, one must sit across the table from students who have faced or are dealing with food insecurity. Their stories are heartbreaking.

Too many Mohonasen students face hunger. Some frequently miss multiple meals and quickly discover that their days are spent in a daze or exhaustion. Learning becomes an impossibility for them. Others choose to give their food to a sibling, sacrificing their meals rather than seeing a younger brother or sister go hungry. Still other students take on the mantle of joining a parent as a critical wage earner for their family, just to ensure food can make it to the table.

With the recent additional challenges brought on by inflation, the bags of groceries become lighter every week, and the stresses on families grow larger.

Of course, there is a significant cost to funding free, healthy school meals. Yet that cost should be compared to the costs of tackling academic shortfalls and the increasing need

for social, emotional, and mental health services brought on by hunger. Furthermore, funding free, healthy school meals provides the opportunity to streamline bureaucratic processes and will ensure no student feels the stigma associated with food insecurity.

In fact, the cost to New York State is estimated at \$200 million, or just about 0.1 percent of the state budget. In comparison, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent every year on sports stadiums, film and music production, and economic development projects. We are not critical of such projects. However, if we can afford such things, certainly we need to invest in the future athletes who will enter those stadiums, the future performers who will share their talents on Broadway, and the future workforce who will turn those economic development projects into thriving communities.

To make that investment a reality, we must provide our students with opportunities for success. That starts with free, healthy school meals.

We cannot afford to wait a minute longer. We cannot allow one more student to forgo a meal, to face a test with a stomach screaming for sustenance, or to walk on an athletic field without being properly fueled.

We cannot wait for the federal government to step up and resolve this problem. New York State *must* step into the gap and meet our students' most basic needs.

We are very happy to see the commitment to school funding as implemented in recent years in the state budget and introduced by the Governor this year. One major gap remains: free, healthy school meals. We rely on the Legislature to correct this oversight.

***Feed them, and they learn.  
Feed them, and they thrive.***

Respectfully submitted: February 8, 2023



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Mohonasen Central School District



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