

**Testimony of David Sandman, Ph.D.  
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**Submitted to the New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing  
2024 Executive Budget Proposal: Elementary & Secondary Education  
February 8, 2023**

Thank you to Chair Kreuger, Chair Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees for the opportunity to submit written testimony. I am pleased to provide testimony on behalf of the New York Health Foundation (NYHealth). NYHealth is a private foundation that works to improve the health of all New Yorkers, especially people of color and others who have been historically marginalized.<sup>1</sup>

Our Healthy Food, Healthy Lives program aims to connect New Yorkers with the food they need to thrive.<sup>2</sup> Supporting healthier, culturally responsive food in public institutions, like schools, is a core strategy of this program. NYHealth has a long-standing commitment to improve both access to and quality of school meals, with a focus on expanding free, healthy universal school meals for all. One of the Foundation's landmark achievements was when New York City made school lunch free for all students, regardless of income. In 2017, NYHealth grantee Community Food Advocates helped to secure free school meals for New York City's 1.1 million public school children. Other cities, including Rochester, Albany, and Yonkers, also provide school meals free of charge. Yet approximately 30% of public-school students elsewhere in the State lack the same access—even as states large and small, like California and Maine, have already established permanent meal programs for all students.

**The expiration of pandemic-era federal funding for universal free school meals this year has been devastating for New Yorkers.** Across the State, 726,000 students at nearly 2,000 schools lost access to the meals they depend on. As inflation has driven grocery prices to historic highs, this loss also hits families and school districts hard.

Based on a 1,507-person statewide Survey of Food and Health that NYHealth conducted in 2021, we know that approximately half of all food-insecure households with children have children who had gone hungry that calendar year.<sup>3</sup> Three of every four such households cannot afford to feed their children a balanced meal, and more than 80% rely on low-cost foods.

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<sup>1</sup> New York Health Foundation. What we do. <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/what-we-do/>. Accessed February 2023.

<sup>2</sup> New York Health Foundation. Healthy food, healthy lives. <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/what-we-fund/healthy-food-healthy-lives/>. Accessed February 2023.

<sup>3</sup> New York Health Foundation. Food insecurity in families with children. October 2022. <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/food-insecurity-in-families-with-children.pdf>. Accessed February 2023.

Food insecurity has harmful long-term effects on children’s health. Food-insecure children are more likely to have stunted development and asthma.<sup>4,5</sup> They have higher rates of hospitalization, but are less likely to have access to health care. Food insecurity can also permanently affect intellectual and social development.

**Hunger inhibits students’ ability to learn.** Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus, have lower school attendance than their peers, and are at greater risk of mental health problems. As food insecurity compromises children’s capacity to develop, socialize, and learn, it sets the stage for poor health and economic consequences later in life. These challenges affect all students, but they have a disproportionate impact on Black and Latino children.<sup>6</sup>

**School meals are a critical tool to ensure equitable opportunity for all students.** Providing free healthy meals to all students safeguards children from hunger and promotes good nutrition. School meals mitigate food insecurity among low-income students and are also the healthiest source of meals for children across all income levels.<sup>7</sup> Participation in school meals improves students’ attendance and behavior, reduces tardiness, and prepares them for academic success.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup> Students who eat breakfast at school perform better on standardized tests and score higher in spelling, reading, and math. Additionally, participation in school breakfast reduces visits to the school nurse, improves students’ mental health, and reduces their risk for anxiety and depression.<sup>12</sup> Together, this suite of positive impacts underscores the importance of school meals for students’ long-term development, in the classroom and beyond.

**Means-testing for free school meals leaves too many children behind.** The return to a tiered payment system created barriers to school meals for many New Yorkers, including:

- *Children whose families struggle to meet basic needs, but do not qualify for free school meals.* A family of four making just \$51,400 earns too much to participate in free school meals. Statewide, an estimated 470,000 children are not eligible for free school meals, despite living in households earning less than a living wage. New York schools are now reporting unprecedented increases in school meal debt as more families than ever struggle to pay, but do not qualify for free meals. This year, school nutrition directors anticipate

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<sup>4</sup> Zaslow M, Bronte-Tinkew J, Capps R, Horowitz A, Moore KA, Weinstein D. Food security during infancy: implications for attachment and mental proficiency in toddlerhood. *Mat Child Health J.* 2009;13(1):66-80.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas MMC, Miller DP, Morrissey TW. Food Insecurity and child health. *Pediatr.* 2019;144(4).

<sup>6</sup> The Education Trust. School meals are a key party of educational equity. <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/school-meals-are-a-key-part-of-educational-equity/>. Accessed February 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, et al. Trends in food sources and diet quality among U.S. children and adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2021;4(4):e215262.

<sup>8</sup> Murphy JM. Breakfast and learning: an updated review. *J Current Nutr Food Sci.* 2007;3(1):3-36.

<sup>9</sup> Basch CE. Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. *J School Health.* 2011;81(10):635-640.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy JM, Pagano M, Nachmani J, Sperling P, et al. The relationship of school breakfast to psychosocial and academic functioning: cross-sectional and longitudinal observations in an inner-city sample. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 1998;152:899-907.

<sup>11</sup> Powell CA, Walker SP, Chang SM, Grantham-McGregor SM.. (1998). Nutrition and education: a randomized trial of the effects of breakfast in rural primary school children. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1998;68:873-9.

<sup>12</sup> Hecht et al. Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on student nutrition, behavior, and academic outcomes: 2011–2019. *Am J Pub Health.* 2020;9:1405-1410.

their debt will surpass pre-pandemic levels—an estimated \$24.9 million statewide. School meal debt burdens local school districts administratively and financially. Schools become de facto debt collectors, jeopardizing critical relationships with parents. They must reconcile uncollected debt at the end of the school year, often with general funds that could otherwise support important educational interventions.

- *Children in small rural and suburban schools that are unable to provide free meals for all students using existing federal options.* While 59% of New York schools offer free meals for all through the federal Community Eligibility Provision for high-poverty schools, these schools are predominately in larger, urban school districts. Smaller rural and suburban schools in areas where poverty is prevalent but less concentrated are often ineligible for this provision.
- *Children who qualify for free school meals, but fall through the cracks because of stigma and administrative barriers.* When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, many decline to participate, despite their hunger. Participation drops as students get older and more aware of stigma. Stigma, administrative burdens, and literacy and language barriers also keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications.

**New York now has the opportunity to reimagine the way school meal programs operate.**

Over the last 10 school years, New York rolled out universal school meals to more than 3,600 schools statewide. During the pandemic, federal waivers enabled the State to extend free school meals for all to schools, essentially piloting a statewide universal meals policy. The results of that pilot were clear: healthy school meals for all support students' education and health while also improving school nutrition finances and operations. Far more children ate breakfast and lunch at school, supporting their learning and development. Families benefited from grocery savings amid rising food costs, and schools no longer used valuable administrative and financial resources to grapple with unpaid school meal debt. By devoting an estimated \$275 per student—about 0.1% of the State's budget—to feeding our kids, New York can advance equity for students, families, and schools.

**There is widespread support for healthy school meals for all.** Nearly 90% of New Yorkers support universal school meals for all.<sup>13</sup> Nationally, California, Maine, and Colorado have passed permanent School Meals for All policies. Vermont, Massachusetts, and Nevada have established free school meals for all students for the 2022–2023 school year, and other states are considering similar legislation. Advocates continue to push for a nationwide policy, but federal inaction is slowing progress in New York.

**Hungry children can't wait.** School meals are one of the government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children. 726,000 students in nearly 2,000 schools across the state now lack access to free school meals. Like textbooks and transportation, school meals should be an inherent part of a child's education.

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<sup>13</sup> New York Health Foundation. NYHealth Survey of Food and Health. 2022. <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NYHealth-survey-of-food-and-health.pdf.pdf>. Accessed February 2023.

NYHealth is grateful for the shared recognition of the importance of free school meals to promote food security and children's wellbeing. We look forward to working with you as partners to support New York students and families.