



## 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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Chair Krueger and Chair Weinstein, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the Executive Budget Proposal hearing to be reviewed by the Senate Committee on Finance and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. On behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a science-based consumer advocacy organization and member of the Healthy School Meals for All New York (NY) Kids Coalition,<sup>i</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to express our strong support of providing free breakfast and lunch for every New York student. CSPI is a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards and has worked on school food for decades. Prior to our involvement in 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. 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 also advocates for access to healthy meals for all students at the federal, state, and local levels, including involvement in approximately a dozen statewide healthy school meals for all campaigns.

**With this testimony, CSPI urges the Legislature to fully fund healthy school meals for all New York students in the FY 2024-25 State Budget.** There are three key reasons why funding healthy school meals for all must happen during this budget cycle.

#### **Healthy School Meals for All Provide Needed Economic Support for Families**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds allowed students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income.<sup>ii</sup> Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates, Congress allowed this to expire in summer 2022.<sup>iii</sup> In response to this change, several states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont have moved to ensure free access to school meals for students statewide.<sup>iv</sup>

Last year, the NY State Legislature included a \$134.6 million investment in free school meals in the State Budget. This monumental increase expanded access to free school meals for more than 347,000 students across 1,200 schools. Still, more than 320,000 students in 650 schools across the state were left behind, including lower middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, a

family of four earning just \$56,000 is considered over-income and therefore ineligible for free school meals.<sup>v</sup> Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the costs of school meals. For those who do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent some students from participating.<sup>vi</sup> 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.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Healthy School Meals for All Promote Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance**

A systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that they are positively associated with school meal participation, and in many cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.<sup>viii</sup> Research shows that by 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids – followed by grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants.<sup>ix</sup> Additionally, 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.

### **Healthy School Meals for All Advance Equity**

Healthy school meals for all remove stigma for 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 outside of school and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.<sup>x</sup> 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.

Many families are struggling to put food on the table – a 2023 report found that 13.4% of households with children in New York reported food insufficiency in November 2022, compared with 10.8% of households without children.<sup>xi</sup>

No child deserves to be hungry at school. Please ensure that children in New York have the nourishment and dignity they need to learn and thrive by fully funding healthy school meals for all in the FY 2024-25 budget.

Thank you for your consideration,

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- <sup>i</sup> Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids Coalition. *Healthy School Meals for All NY Kids*. 2024. <https://schoolmealsforallny.org/about/#:~:text=Our%20Coalition%3A,Meals%20for%20All%20NY%20Kids>. Accessed January 30, 2024.
- <sup>ii</sup> Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127 § 2202, 134 Stat. 185.
- <sup>iii</sup> Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022. P.L. 117-158.
- <sup>iv</sup> Food Research and Action Center. *Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All*. November 2023. [Healthy School Meals for All \(frac.org\)](https://www.frac.org). Accessed January 30, 2024.
- <sup>v</sup> Benefits.Gov. National School Breakfast and Lunch Program for New York. United States Government. <https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/2007>. Accessed January 30, 2024.
- <sup>vi</sup> Cohen J et al. Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families. Nourish Lab at the Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice. June 2023. [https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd\\_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf](https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf). Accessed January 30, 2024.
- <sup>vii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Eating Healthier at School. September 19, 2022. [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/eating\\_healthier.htm#:~:text=Schools%20play%20an%20important%20role,nutrients%20like%20calcium%20and%20fiber](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/eating_healthier.htm#:~:text=Schools%20play%20an%20important%20role,nutrients%20like%20calcium%20and%20fiber). Accessed January 30, 2024.
- <sup>viii</sup> 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.
- <sup>ix</sup> 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.
- <sup>x</sup> Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. Pages 22, 24. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.
- <sup>xi</sup> New York State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli. *New Yorkers in Need: Food Insecurity and Nutrition Assistance Programs*. March 2023. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/reports/new-yorkers-need-food-insecurity-and-nutritional-assistance-programs>. Accessed January 30, 2024.