

**Testimony of David Sandman, Ph.D.
President and CEO
New York Health Foundation**

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2025 Executive Budget Proposal: Elementary & Secondary Education
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Thank you to Chair Kreuger, Chair Pretlow, and members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees for the opportunity to testify today. 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. Our Healthy Food, Healthy Lives program works to advance policies and programs that link New Yorkers with the food they need to thrive. Supporting nutritious, culturally responsive food in New York's public institutions, including schools, is a core approach of our program. NYHealth has also supported initiatives to increase State funding for farm-to-school programs that expand local products in school cafeterias.

We enthusiastically support universally free meals for all students in New York State in schools that participate in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.

For nearly a decade, NYHealth and our partners have worked to make this vision a reality. In 2017, NYHealth grantee Community Food Advocates (CFA) helped secure free school meals for New York City's 1.1 million public school children. That move was a game changer for the largest public school system in the nation. Subsequently, CFA and grantee Hunger Solutions New York led a coalition to extend that policy statewide. In 2023, both houses of the legislature supported full funding for universal free school meals. Following negotiations, the final enacted budget vastly expanded the free school meals program. Last year's expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)—a federal option that allows high-poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students—led to 90% of all students receiving free school meals.

The proposed investment contained in the Executive Budget is the final step to making healthy school meals truly universal. It will provide free school meals for an additional 280,000 students (approximately 10% of New York students) across the 600 school districts that do not participate in CEP. Closing the gap for these students will help save their families up to \$165 per child per month.¹ It will make New York more affordable. It will also reduce the administrative burden on schools, so they can focus on educating children and improving meal quality instead of harassing families for money they may not have.

Extensive evidence proves the roles that food and nutrition play in enhancing children's health and wellbeing. School meals are often the healthiest parts of students' diets, regardless of income level. When students eat school meals, they consume more fruits and vegetables and have higher quality diets

¹ Healthy School Meals for All. 2025. "Healthy School Meals for All." https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HSMFA-policy-proposal-1_14_25.pdf, accessed January 2025.

than students who don't eat school meals.^{2,3} Nutritious school meals support students' academic performance.⁴ School meals also reduce food insecurity among children in families with low income. Food-insecure students struggle to focus, have lower school attendance, and face greater risks of mental health issues compared to peers. Because it affects children's ability to develop, socialize, and learn, food insecurity can lead to poor health and economic disadvantages later. Food insecurity disproportionately affects Black and Latino children, so healthy school meals for all is also a win for equity.⁵

Universal means everyone, and too many children are left behind by the current policy, including:

- **Children whose families struggle to afford basic needs but do not qualify for free school meals.** Currently, if a family of four earns more than \$58,000 a year, the children are not eligible for free meals unless they are already in a school that participates in CEP.⁶
- **Children in small rural or suburban schools that cannot provide free meals for all students through existing federal options.** The State's CEP subsidy has led to 90% of New York students receiving free school meals. Smaller rural and suburban schools, specifically in the regions of the Hudson Valley, Long Island, and Western New York—which may have lower, but still notable, rates of poverty—are often ineligible for CEP.⁷
- **Children who qualify for free school meals but fall through the cracks because of stigma or administrative barriers.** Students, especially older students, may choose not to participate in school meals despite their hunger, because they perceive school meals as only for low-income students. Stigma may also discourage eligible families from submitting applications for free school meals, as can administrative burdens and literacy or language barriers.

Voters overwhelmingly want universal free school meals. An NYHealth survey found that almost 90% of New Yorkers support healthy school meals for all.⁸ Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, eight states have enacted permanent policies supporting healthy school meals for all students. While most states saw decreases in school lunch participation in the 2022–2023 school year, participation in school lunch

² Fox, M.K.; Gearan, E.; Cabili, C.; et al. 2019. "School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 4: Student Participation, Satisfaction, Plate Waste, and Dietary Intakes." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume4.pdf>, accessed January 2025.

³ Kinderknecht, K.; Harris, C.; Jones-Smith, J. 2020. Association of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act with Dietary Quality Among Children in the US National School Lunch Program. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 324(4), 359-368.

⁴ Pucher, K.K.; Boot, N.M.W.M.; De Vries, N.K. 2013. School health promotion interventions targeting physical activity and nutrition can improve academic performance in primary- and middle school children. *Health Education*. 55(5), 372-391.

⁵ The Education Trust. 2021. 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 January 2025.

⁶ Healthy School Meals for All. 2025. "Healthy School Meals for All." https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HSMFA-policy-proposal-1_14_25.pdf, accessed January 2025.

⁷ Healthy School Meals for All. 2025. "Healthy School Meals for All." https://schoolmealsforallny.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/HSMFA-policy-proposal-1_14_25.pdf, accessed January 2025.

⁸ New York Health Foundation. 2022. "NYHealth Survey of Food and Health." <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NYHealth-survey-of-food-and-health.pdf.pdf>, accessed January 2025.

programs increased in states that enacted healthy school meals for all.⁹ When school meals are universal, the stigma decreases, and participation increases.

Until now, food has been the one part of public education that discriminates by income. This change will make meals an intrinsic part of New York students' education, just like textbooks and transportation. Let's close the gap for school meals and make school meals truly universal.

NYHealth appreciates the State's recognition of school meals' role in fighting hunger, improving health, and helping children thrive. We look forward to working with you in partnership to support New York students and families.

⁹ Food Research & Action Center. 2024. "The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2022–2023 School Year." <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report-2024.pdf>, accessed January 2025.