



## Testimony of the Healthy School Meals For All New York Kids Coalition

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

Submitted by:

Jessica Pino-Goodspeed, LMSW

Co-Leader, Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids Campaign

January 24, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our response to the FY2026 Executive Budget proposal before the Senate Committee on Finance, the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Chair Krueger and Chair Pretlow, on behalf of the Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids coalition.

[Healthy School Meals for All New York Kids](#) is a [diverse coalition](#) of over 350 anti-hunger, education, health, agriculture, and equity-focused organizations, alongside students, parents, school administrators, and other concerned New Yorkers. Together, we are advocating for New York State to establish and fully fund statewide universal free school meals for all students in schools participating in the federal school meal programs.

**We applaud Governor Hochul for including full funding for statewide universal school meals in her Executive Budget proposal.** This historic commitment will ensure access to free school meals for all 2.7 million students across New York State.

The State Senate and Assembly have championed universal school meals and included full funding in their respective FY2024 and FY2025 one-house budgets. We thank the Legislature for its longstanding, bipartisan advocacy for this critical policy. Now, with the Governor's support, **we urge the Legislature to ensure Healthy School Meals for All is fully funded in the FY2026 Enacted Budget.**

Healthy School Meals for All has proven wide-ranging benefits. The policy:

- **Alleviates hunger:** Households with children who attend schools that provide universal free meals are [less likely](#) to experience food insecurity.
- **Improves children's mental and physical health:** Across all income levels, [kids receive some of their healthiest meals at school](#), consuming more milk, fruit, vegetables, and fiber than their peers. Access to school meals also [reduces the risk of adverse mental health outcomes](#).
- **Supports learning:** School meals [boost test scores](#), [cognitive function](#), [academic achievement](#), and [school attendance](#), setting students up for lifelong success.
- **Eliminates stigma:** While New York lawmakers have taken important steps to ban overt "lunch shaming" practices at the school level, peer-to-peer perceptions of means-tested programs remain a persistent barrier to meal access. When school meals are not free for

all, they are often perceived as a program just for low-income students, causing students to worry about being singled out as “free lunch” kids. School food service directors have described a harmful misperception among students that “only poor kids eat school meals,” discouraging students from accessing the food they need. Universal free meal programs eliminate this stigma; studies find when schools shift to universal meal policies, [student participation](#) increases even among those who were already eligible for free meals. In a recent survey of more than 400 New York parents and caregivers, 82% of those in schools with universal meals report that their child is not embarrassed to eat school meals since they are now free to all.

- **Makes New York more affordable for families:** Providing school breakfast and lunch each school day saves families an estimated \$165 per child per month in food costs. This is meaningful financial relief for families who struggle to make ends meet but do not qualify for traditional free school meals. Currently, a family of four earning just \$58,000 annually is over-income. At the same time, a family of four on Long Island – where a disproportionately high number of students remain without access to free school meals – needs an [estimated](#) \$92,000 annually to meet basic needs, including housing, health care, and child care.
- **Strengthens Farm-to-School initiatives:** Universal free school meals strengthen schools’ buying power and streamline administration, enabling schools to shift resources to local food purchasing and preparation. 90% of schools currently participating in the 30% New York State Initiative do so with the benefit of universal free school meals. A recent [USDA report](#) found that states with Healthy School Meals for All policies were more likely to report an increase in the purchase of local foods.

The research speaks volumes, and New York parents agree. This past fall, Hunger Solutions New York conducted a survey that captured perspectives from over 400 New York parents and caregivers. **Eighty-seven percent of surveyed parents agree that all students, no matter their income, should have access to free meals at school.**

Amid a growing [affordability crisis](#), New York families see free school meals as part of the solution. **Eighty-two percent of those surveyed who have children in schools with universal meals report that the program provides financial relief, while over half of parents in schools *without* universal meals say paying for school meals causes financial stress.**

One parent described the importance of free school meals for caregivers struggling to make ends meet despite working multiple jobs:

*"Inflation is making it a lot harder for me financially. I work two full-time jobs and still struggle. Having free school lunch helps me not stress about having to pack a lunch every morning before I leave for work at 3:30 in the morning."*

Another parent—a single working mom—described the challenges of managing rising expenses and food access for her family:

*“The rising costs of food are harming my ability to feed my child healthy options. Free school meals provide that opportunity.”*

Others described their own experiences with school meals and the stigma that accompanies a means-tested program:

*“I was a hungry child, and my parents did not enroll in free meals due to feeling shame. I ate what my friends had left over sometimes.”*

In addition to more than 350 organizational partners, our coalition represents the voices of these families, who are asking New York to ensure all children have access to the food they need, no questions asked.

**With strong support from the Legislature and Governor Hochul, this can be the year Healthy School Meals for All becomes a reality for New York’s students.** We urge lawmakers to ensure this historic investment is fully funded in the FY2026 Enacted Budget.