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**New York Farm Bureau Testimony for
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Elementary/Secondary Education**

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NYFB is the state's largest general agricultural advocacy organization and the voice of New York agriculture. Our members represent an industry that provides significant revenue to local, state, and national economies along with providing locally produced food for our communities and schools.

New York farms produce food, support jobs, and sustain local economies in every region. Having a strong Farm-to-School program that promotes local purchasing of New York food is vital not only for our farmers but for the health and wellness of our students. NYFB supports the changes to the Farm-to-School program proposed by the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition including adding breakfast, updating the reimbursement rate, and indexing it modestly to inflation.

NYFB appreciates the continued investment in the Farm-to-School program and urges the legislature to support modernizing the NY 30% Incentive Program. There are many schools unable to participate in this program due to operational and financial barriers. Only about 10-11% of School Food Authorities (SFAs) qualify for the program, thus leaving most of the reimbursement dollars unused. 62% of non-participating SFAs identify the lunch-only requirement as their top barrier to entry because they have to separate food when it is delivered to keep track of what is used at lunch only. This leads to some schools utilizing NY apples for lunch but Washington State apples for breakfast because there is no benefit to buying NY apples for breakfast.

We also support increasing the reimbursement rate from \$.19 per meal to \$.30 per meal and indexing it to inflation. An increase of \$.11 a meal might not sound like much, but it would go a long way in helping our schools be able to afford more NY food, which in turn benefits our farmers and our communities by keeping money in the local community and reducing greenhouse gas emissions with less transportation since food is more local to the purchaser. The cost of food has only gone up since the program's inception, and this increase is needed to continue to allow SFAs to offer fresh, New York foods to our state's students.

NYFB also supports the creation of a lower-threshold onboarding year for SFAs who try to reach 30% but fall a little short in their first attempt. There have been many SFAs who thought they

had reached 30% and were expecting the higher reimbursement, but the audit found they fell a few percentage points short, meaning they didn't get anything more than the normal reimbursement per meal. This has happened a few times to some SFAs and one has said this is their last year trying and if they can't reach 30%, they won't be able to try again.

If the goal of the Farm-to-School program is to increase purchasing of New York food from our New York farmers, we need to make sure we do everything to make that happen. The research shows that once an SFA enters the program, they stay in it, so we support the idea of creating an onboarding year to give SFAs a slightly higher reimbursement (\$.25/meal, assuming the 30% reimbursement increases to \$.30/meal) to help them reach the 30% purchasing threshold in their second year.

New York agriculture is exceptionally well-positioned to supply a modernized 30% Initiative. The state is a national leader in many key farm-to-school products. New York is:

- 1st in yogurt, cottage cheese, and sour cream,
- 2nd in apples, maple syrup, cabbage, snap peas,
- 3rd in grapes, wine, and Italian cheese,
- 4th in corn silage and total cheese, and
- 5th in milk, tart cherries, green peas, squash

New York is in the top 10 nationally for 30 different commodities, and agriculture generates more than \$8 billion annually for the state. This is important for Farm-to-School because many of these products are staples of school meals. Expanded purchasing (especially with breakfast included) aligns with what NY farms already produce at scale. Strong statewide production ensures schools can reliably source NY-grown products without straining supply, and increased demand strengthens supply chains and stabilizes markets for NY producers—from dairy processors to vegetable growers.

In short: *New York farms can meet increased farm-to-school demand today—and modernization helps unlock that potential.*

I want to note that all of these changes, according to calculations done by American Farmland Trust and the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition, can be accomplished within the current budget allocation of \$10M, so we are not asking for any additional money, just some language changes within the program to improve and modernize it.

NYFB appreciates the legislature's ongoing partnership and looks forward to working with you to deliver a final budget that reflects this shared commitment to supporting farmers and students along with strengthening the agricultural economy across every region of the state. Thank you for your continued dedication to ensuring our state's youth has access to farm fresh foods and our farmers have predictable markets in providing that food.