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**Adirondack Food System Network Written Testimony for the Joint Legislative Budget
Hearing on Education**

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Thank you for allowing the space today to write on the importance of the State budget to Adirondack communities, our rural farmers and growers, and the families who call northern New York home. My name is Josh Stephani and I represent the Adirondack Food System Network (“AFSN”), a collaborative effort across the vast Adirondack region. Since 2020, our Network works to broaden collaboration across the sectors, bringing and building capacity to organizations already stretched thin, and advocate for the North Country throughout the state and country. Working closely with nearly 40 organizations, we bridge the disconnect between food system actors, working to tackle the thorniest of challenges through collective action.

I write today to show support for Universal School Meals and the Farm to School program in New York State. These programs are critical to the success of children in the classroom as well as supporting the continuation of our agricultural producers.

Agriculture and our farmers are the bedrock of our livelihoods and the success in the Adirondacks as well as in New York. Our region produces over 15% of the state’s entire agricultural output, roughly \$1 billion annually. Yet, our food system does not end at our county lines or even the ‘Blue Line’ of the Adirondack Park. Food grown in the North Country makes it way well beyond the borders of the Adirondacks, to regions of New York, and even other states. For our rural communities, our livelihoods come at a cost of economics. However, as I am sure that you are aware, farmers and producers all over the state are facing difficult conditions. New York’s farm economy has been struggling for years and recent events have exacerbated the problems. New York’s agricultural and

farming communities are under a barrage of continual threats – from tariffs imposing a high cost on fuel and silage to threats to our immigrant families working in our dairy barns and orchards. Extreme weather, heavy rains and long droughts, are wreaking havoc on our agricultural lands.

AFSN commends the Governor and the Legislature on their recent commitment to Universal School Meals, and we strongly support adequately funding this program in the 2026-2027 State Budget. Furthermore, farm-to-school programs offer critical markets for farmers and allow local products to stay hyperlocal. The 30% Initiative, which reimburses School Food Authorities (SFAs) for lunch purchases at a higher rate if they reach the namesake threshold, has long supported local procurement. While over 10% of eligible SFAs were approved for reimbursement, this program needs to be modernized to increase participation for more school districts and reduce the unnecessary burdens on SFAs. Through modernization, we can unlock demand for schools and increase markets for farmers:

- A **one-time lower-threshold onboarding year (25–29%)** plus a one-time grace year for current participants: Too many schools find out too late that they did not qualify for reimbursement. This onboarding process allows school districts to scale up, build producer relationships, and develop contracts.
- Expand eligibility to **include all meals** (breakfast, lunch, and reimbursable snacks),
- Increase reimbursement from **\$0.19 to \$0.30** per meal with a 1.5% annual CPI adjustment for five years and clarify “per meal.” Food costs are rising and we must reflect the increasing costs in the reimbursement rate.
- Add a **hold-harmless transition** for three years: that have already built procurement systems and supplier relationships around the existing program. A temporary hold harmless gives current participants time to adapt menus, contracts, and operations to meet the expanded “all meals” threshold—while protecting farmers and food businesses from losing stable institutional demand due to a formula change.
- **Clarify the reimbursement is separate** from other state and federal school meal reimbursements so districts do not lose or conflate funding streams.

As a member of the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition, we strongly support maintaining funding for the 30% Incentive program for lunch at \$10 million and the Farm to School program at \$1.5 million in the 2027 Fiscal Budget. Both of these programs are important and strategic investments in markets, schools, and supply chains.

Thank you again for your support and opportunity to provide testimony. AFSN believes that through collaboration across our region and state, we can take bold steps to amplify agriculture in New York. While our rural communities are strong and resilient, our food system demands attention and support

from the Legislature and Executive Chamber. New York has the capacity to feed itself but this Government must ensure protections and support to make that a reality. I look forward to continuing to make New York a guiding light for agriculture and healthy communities.