



2026 Position Paper

Nourishing New York's Children and Farmers: A Call to Sustain Universal Meals & Strengthen the 30% Farm-to-School Program

Background

New York has made historic progress in ensuring every child has access to healthy school meals. With Universal Meals, more students than ever benefit from no-cost, nutritious food. Combined with the 30% Farm-to-School Incentive, schools are sourcing more local food, creating stable markets for New York farmers while improving student health and learning.

The Challenge

- The all-or-nothing structure of the 30% incentive penalizes districts that nearly meet the threshold, discouraging incremental progress.
- Since 2018, inflation has risen by 28%, reducing the real value of reimbursements.
- Without adjustments, schools risk losing financial stability, and local farmers lose growth opportunities.

The Solution

1. **Maintain Universal Meals in the 2026–27 Budget**
 - Guarantees uninterrupted access to nutritious meals for all students.
 - Eliminates unpaid meal debt and reduces administrative burdens.
 - Improves student health, food security, and academic readiness.
2. **Adopt a Tiered, Inflation-Indexed Farm-to-School Reimbursement Structure**
 - Rewards incremental purchasing while incentivizing schools to go beyond 30%.
 - Proposed increases are in addition to all program funds contributing to the base of state reimbursement for participating programs:
 - 25–29% local: **\$0.15/meal**
 - 30–40%: **\$0.21/meal**
 - 41–50%: **\$0.23/meal**
 - 51%+: **\$0.25/meal**
 - Expands markets for NY farmers and increases access to fresh, local foods.
 - Reduces volatility of the current system without requiring major new funding.

The Impact

By pairing Universal Meals with a restructured 30% Farm-to-School Program, New York can:

- Ensure equal access to nutritious meals for all children.
- Support the state's agricultural economy.
- Promote long-term student health, achievement, and food security.

We urge lawmakers to:

- **Fund Universal Meals in 2026–27.**
- **Reform the Farm-to-School Program** with a fair, tiered structure tied to inflation.

Together, these steps represent fiscally responsible choices that strengthen schools, students, and New York agriculture.