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New York School Nutrition Association launches statewide campaign to secure funding for free meals for children in NYS budget

Albany, N.Y. – Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic schools across the nation have offered meals to students at no cost, ensuring they have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch each school day, even when remote learning was in place. However, federal waivers that gave schools the ability to do so are set to expire in June and the federal government has failed to extend the waivers or provide additional funding. With the issue left to states to remedy – at least on a temporary basis – the [New York School Nutrition Association](https://www.nyschoolnutrition.org/) has launched a comprehensive statewide campaign to urge state legislators and Gov. Kathy Hochul to include the Healthy School Meals for All proposal in the FY2023 state budget. More than 300 state education associations, anti-hunger groups, child nutrition advocates, and school districts have joined NYSNA in the fight to continue providing free meals to students.

The members of this group will be reaching out to their members and constituents to increase grassroots pressure on their elected officials, including Gov. Hochul, to address this critical issue. “We are confident that this diverse statewide coalition will be able to activate the tens of thousands of New Yorkers in their networks to raise the visibility of this need and how important it is not to take a step back,” said Jennifer Martin, executive director NYSNA.

School meals are among the most effective anti-hunger programs and are proven to reduce food insecurity; improve mental and physical health; support students’ ability to thrive academically; and bolster education, health, and economic equity. In schools with universal meals, students had improved results on standardized tests, attention and learning retainment, and overall tardiness. Participation in school nutrition programs also have been shown to result in decreased rates of mental illness, depression, disruptive behavior, and obesity, and improved rates of overall behavioral health. Free meals for all also reduce stigmas related to free or reduced-price meals.

“In a hunger-free school, kids come through their lunchroom doors as equals, with everyone entitled to the same meal and no one needing to provide that they are paid up or sufficiently poor to eat for free,” said Martin.

“We cannot go back to an inequitable, inefficient, and stigmatizing tiered eligibility system that leaves many behind,” said NYSNA Board President Donna Riviello of the Clyde-Savannah Central School District in Wayne County. “To allow this benefit to expire in the wake of the pandemic, when families and communities are struggling to recover, will have disastrous consequences on our school communities, creating a hunger cliff for the estimated one in five New York kids experiencing food insecurity.”

Advocates for Healthy School Meals for All are calling for the establishment and funding of a permanent, statewide program to ensure students have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch each school day. In addition to all the health and academic benefits, the investment would help schools by eliminating school meal debt, which is a major burden on school district finances and staff time; streamlining administration of school meal programs so the focus can be placed on serving nutritious meals; and improving school nutrition finances as increased participation allows schools to benefit from economies of scale.

“We bus children to school, we provide them with technology to learn; nutrition is another important factor in their success,” said Martin. “We need to ensure that our students are ready to learn by providing them with free nutritious meals. Not doing so is a real disservice to our children.”

NYS Senator Michelle Hinchey said, “For thousands of children in New York State, the meals they receive at school are the only meals they will receive that day. Our young people learn better when they can focus on their lessons instead of the hunger in their bellies, and our young people are successful when they are fueled by healthy food. It is incumbent upon us as a state – especially as a leading agricultural state – to fund universal school meals so that every student, whether they live in a rural town or in a city center, has access to free, nutritious, and locally sourced food while they are in school. Healthy school meals are an investment in the development of our young people, in the future of New York agriculture, and set the stage for a shift toward expanding real food access in communities statewide. As chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I will continue to fight for the inclusion of this critical funding in the final budget.”

“In June, 2,000 schools and 800,000 students will lose access to healthy school meals across our state and in districts that were in high need before the COVID-19 pandemic and now find themselves in greater need of resources. Not feeding children is a policy choice if we do not invest in sustaining this program in our state budget. California and Maine have done this, and now we need New York State to do so. We urge our legislature and Governor to fund universal school meals for all students in our FY 23 Enacted State Budget because no child should ever have to go hungry,” said Assembly Member Jessica González-Rojas.

Assemblyman Fred Thiele said, “The USDA-supported School Meal Program has been nothing short of a lifeline for children and families facing food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the program's expiration date looms closer, New York must act to ensure no child goes without a reliable source of nutrition. I strongly urge my colleagues in government to include Universal School Meals in the enacted budget and support the health and growth of our kids. ”

“Every school in this state should offer healthy school meals at no cost for their students – regardless of income,” said Assembly Member Harry Bronson. “Our students deserve equal access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school to support their health and well-being. There is a direct link between academic performance and healthy school meals. The future of New York State is our children and we must do everything we can to ensure our education system is one that promotes equity in our schools. I will continue to fight for the dignity and opportunity of every student in this state.”

“As a lifelong educator, principal, and board of education president in the Yonkers Public Schools, I know firsthand the importance of a well-nourished child,” said Assembly Member Nader Sayegh. “Providing no-charge breakfast and lunch means all of our students are ready to learn. That thousands of New York school children would go without breakfast and lunch is unacceptable and I strongly support funding Healthy School Meals for All.”

“Every student deserves access to a free and nutritious meal during school hours regardless of their family’s income,” said Assembly Members Demond Meeks. “Free and quality meals for all children promote a more equitable learning environment. By providing nutrition to young minds, we also reduce the severe impacts of poverty, illness, and hunger within our community. It is essential now more than ever that we support our students with every resource possible. This is why we must expand access to school meals by providing Healthy School Meals for All in New York State.”

About the New York School Nutrition Association:

The New York School Nutrition Association is a cohesive group of school nutrition employees, managers, directors, registered dietitians, nutritionists, and industry members in New York State committed to ensuring that all students have access to healthy meals. NYSNA provides information, services, and continuing education to school nutrition and food service professionals in New York State. For more information:

<https://www.nyschoolnutrition.org/>

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