

NEW YORK KIDS NEED

Healthy School Meals for All

An Investment in Education, Health Equity, and Local Economies

This policy proposal is endorsed by a diverse coalition of anti-hunger, education, food, nutrition, health, and equity-focused organizations and associations. For a full list, visit: bit.ly/HSMFA-supporters

The Problem: 1 in 7 kids in New York experience hunger, disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx children.

Hungry kids can't learn. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus, have lower attendance than their peers, and are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems. School meals are one of the farthest reaching anti-hunger programs for school-aged children, yet the free and reduced-price payment structure leaves many behind, including:



Children whose **families struggle** to meet basic needs, **but do not qualify** for free school meals.

A family of four making just \$51,400 is over-income for free school meals. Statewide, an estimated 470,000 children are ineligible for free school meals, but live in households earning less than a living wage.



Children in small **rural schools** **unable to provide free meals for all** using existing federal options.

While 59% of New York schools offer free meals for all through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), small schools in areas where poverty is prevalent but less concentrated are often ineligible for CEP or unable to make it work financially.



Children who **qualify but fall through the cracks** due to stigma and administrative barriers.

When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, many decline to participate, despite their hunger. Participation drops as students get older and more aware of stigma.

Stigma, literacy and language barriers, and administrative burdens keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications, driving unpaid school meal debt—an estimated \$24.9 million statewide.

The Policy Solution: a statewide Healthy School Meals for All program.

In the FY 2024 State Budget, **New York must establish and fund a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for All program** across all schools in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). This policy will:

Provide breakfast & lunch at no cost for all students each school day, regardless of household income.

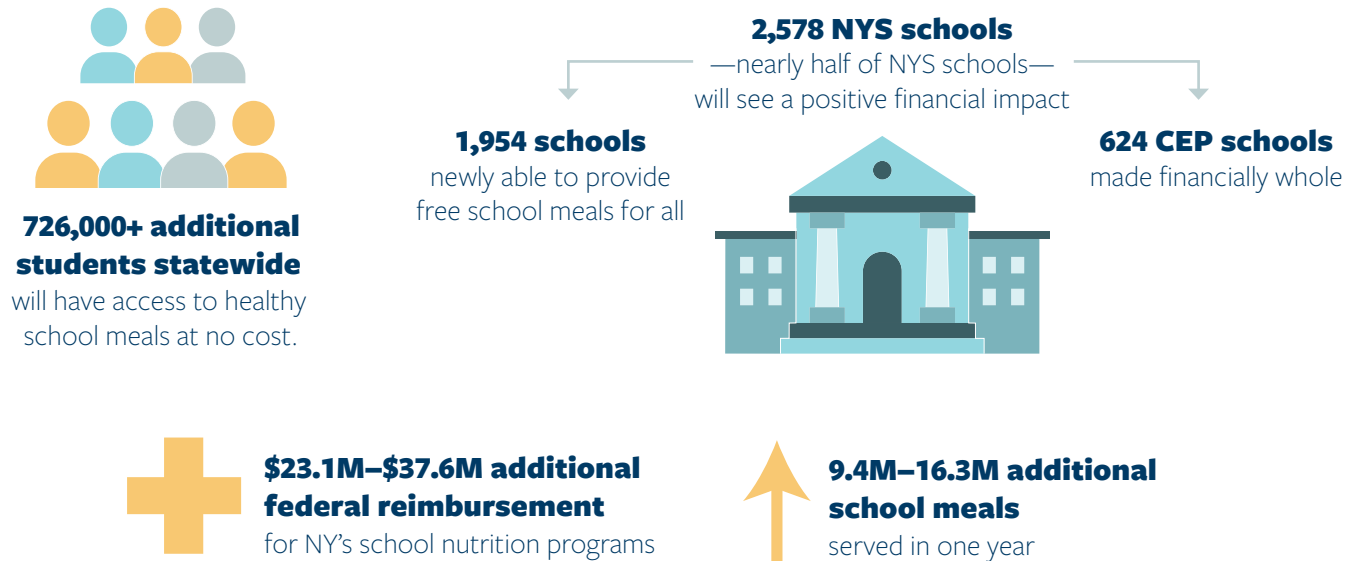
Ensure nutritious meals, as schools must follow NSLP and School Breakfast Program (SBP) guidelines.

Maximize federal reimbursement by fully leveraging existing federal provisions and SNAP outreach.

Federal funds cover the majority of school meal costs in New York, drawing down over \$1B annually under the NSLP and SBP. To establish Healthy School Meals for All, the state will fund meal costs not covered by federal reimbursement, an anticipated annual investment of \$187.3M to \$201M.

Impact:

Providing Healthy School Meals for All would benefit students and schools across New York State.



Return on Investment:

The benefits extend far beyond the school cafeteria. This policy:



Levels the playing field for kids and families

- Reduces hunger; households with children attending CEP schools are three times less likely to experience food insecurity.
- Eliminates stigma.
- Provides families financial relief; receiving school breakfast and lunch at no cost saves families an estimated \$140 per child in grocery spending each month.
- Eliminates school meal debt, a significant burden for families and school district budgets.



Advances child health, education, and racial equity

- Provides reliable access to nutrition; school meals can account for over half of a child's daily calories. Across all income levels, kids receive their healthiest meals at school, consuming more milk, fruit, vegetables, and fiber than their peers.
- Supports academic achievement, boosting test scores and improving attendance and classroom behavior.
- Reduces longstanding, widening racial disparities in nutrition, health, education and achievement.



Invests in every NYS school, community, and local economy

- Improves school nutrition finances, better positioning schools to buy local, high-quality foods.
- Streamlines administration.
- Generates a ripple effect: every dollar invested in school meals provides \$2 in health, economic, equity, and environmental benefits. Studies find healthy school meals for all policies reduce grocery costs for families with and without school-aged children.