

It's time for New York to **close the gap.**



The problem:

Hunger exists in every school community.



1 in 6 New York kids experience hunger. Black and Latinx children are twice as likely to be affected. Students facing hunger struggle to focus, have lower attendance, and are at higher risk of mental and physical health problems.

New York made great strides in expanding free school meals, but

320,911 students are still left behind.

School meals are one of the farthest reaching anti-hunger programs for children, yet many are still left behind, including:



Families who struggle to meet basic needs.

A family of four earning just above \$55,500—far below a living wage—does not qualify for free school meals. Often, children accrue school meal debt or choose not to eat to avoid financially burdening their families.



Children who qualify, but fall through the cracks.

Literacy and language barriers prevent many eligible families from applying. Stigma also inhibits participation, especially when students are afraid to be labeled “poor” for participating in school meal programs.



Schools with significant need that do not qualify to offer free meals to all.

New York's expansion of free school meals remains out of reach for many, including:

- Rural communities where poverty is prevalent but less concentrated.
- Suburban areas with stark economic inequities and high costs of living.
- Communities with low participation in programs like SNAP and Medicaid. These programs pose barriers for vulnerable groups, including immigrant families.

The policy solution:

Healthy School Meals for All.

Hunger is a solvable problem. New York can help end child hunger by funding a statewide, permanent Healthy School Meals for All program across all schools operating the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). This policy will:

- **Provide breakfast and lunch at no cost for all students every school day.**
- **Ensure nutritious meals, as schools must follow federal nutritional guidelines.**
- **Maximize federal funding by fully leveraging existing federal provisions and SNAP outreach.**

77% of NY voters support Healthy School Meals for All

Impact, Cost, and Benefits

Impact:

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



- **659 Schools**
newly able to provide free meals for all
- **320,911 More Students**
gain access to healthy school meals at no cost

Cost:

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 \$90.4M.

Benefits:

Levels the playing field for kids and families

- Reduces hunger—universal free meals during the pandemic reduced hunger by 7%.
- Eliminates stigma.
- Provides financial relief to families.
- Eliminates school meal debt.

Supports child health, education, and racial equity

- Provides reliable access to nutritious food.
- Improves academic outcomes, test scores, and attendance.
- Advances racial equity in nutrition, health, and education.

Invests in every NYS school, community, and local economy

- Improves school nutrition finances.
- Builds capacity for farm-to-school.
- Generates substantial return on investment in health, economic, equity, and environmental benefits.



Saves families \$150 per child per month on groceries



Ensures kids have access to healthy meals

\$1 → \$2

Generates \$2 in benefits for every \$1 invested



Visit **SchoolMealsForAllNY.org**

This policy proposal is endorsed by a diverse coalition of nearly 290 anti-hunger, education, food, nutrition, health, and equity-focused organizations and associations. See the full list at: SchoolMealsForAllNY.org/hsmfa-supporters

1/2024. For a list of sources for this document, visit SchoolMealsForAllNY.org/hsmfa-sources/