

I want to start my testimony this year by thanking each and every one of our Senate and Assembly members for their crucial support this past budget season in ensuring that NYS picked up the funding for CEP districts after USDA's expansion of the CEP program. As a mother residing in one of those districts, the cost savings to our family is immeasurable. My child can now go to school each and every day assured that he will never have to worry about lunch money. A concern that no child, at any age should ever have. But, we still need to do better.

I manage the school lunch program in a district where even on our best day, we are still 9% shy of qualifying for CEP. Our school district is well known in the Capital District as offering some of the top educational programming in the area. We offer students a vast amount of support for whatever their educational path may look like, from Kindergarten all the way through graduation day. I was working with a mother earlier this year who had moved into our school district in an effort to provide her two children with better educational opportunities. Her previous district was an urban district that was a CEP qualified district so her children had been eating for free all year. As we worked through the free and reduced meal application, I had to share the heartbreaking news that after the 30 carryover period on the application was up, she would need to pay for her children's meal as she was just over the income limit. After the initial shock that she would have to either pay for school meals for her students or increase her grocery bill to send them with a lunch each day, she shared that had she known we did not provide free meals to our students, she never would have moved into our district.

It is beyond heartbreaking to hear that parents are having to choose between a quality education and paying for school meals. We don't charge our students when they see the nurse, we don't charge our students to ride the school bus each day, we don't even charge students for tutoring services at home when needed. I don't understand why we are still charging families when our state has the opportunity to provide students a nutritious, flavorful (and often local) meal each and every day. In a time when residents are leaving our state because it is too expensive to stay, why not take one burden off their plate.

I manage the school lunch program in a district where even on our best day, we are still 9% shy of qualifying for CEP. As I type this letter, my current meal debt has reached \$13,000. Last February, we were at \$10,000. In June of this year we will be facing a negative balance total of close to \$30,000, which our general fund will have to cover. That is \$30,000 that could have been spent on staff, technology, field trips, etc. Facing rising wages, inflationary food costs, staff shortages and a host of other challenges, school lunch programs that do not qualify for CEP run the risk of having to be supported yearly by their general fund or being outsourced to a nationally run management company. We are risking losing our self operating school lunch programs to national companies, often based out of state.

Our neighbors in Massachusetts and Vermont have already implemented permanent, statewide school meals for all policies, alongside California, Colorado, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico. New York can and must be next. New York has always prided itself on being innovative, to be the first to bring new ideas and programs to light before other states. We strive

to be the leader and show others why our programs and systems work, so why are we behind when it comes to supporting our children? School meals have been proven to increase test scores, decrease suspension rates, and increase school attendance. For our most vulnerable students, that school meal might be the only reason they are getting to school that day, but for those 8 hours, we know that they are safe, eating healthy, and surrounded by support. We are investing millions of dollars in mental health access and benefits, why not invest in our lunch programs to fuel our students and possibly avoid some of the mental health issues that arise by not attending school.

In closing, I am asking you all to support Healthy School Meals for All New York students. In a year when education funding is being decreased due to enrollment drops, this is not a time for us to relax. We need to double down and support these students. Our mental health and physical health issues are only going to increase if we don't start funding our education programs appropriately. Funding solutions to the mental and physical health crisis in our state right now is only a band aid covering a bullet hole. We need to address the root of the problem before we try to stop the bleeding.

Thank you,
Megan Bates
Senior School Lunch Director