



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Sean M. Ryan

## Senator Sean Ryan Highlights New York State Free School Meals Investment, Urges Federal Government To Expedite Rule To Expand Free School Meal Availability

SEAN M. RYAN September 6, 2023

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Senator Sean Ryan speaks at a press conference at Kenmore West High School, Sept. 6, 2023

New Program Will Provide Free Meals to 294,000 Additional New York Students in Upcoming School Year

**KENMORE, N.Y.** – Today, September 6, 2023, New York State Senator Sean Ryan joined Assemblymember Bill Conrad and officials from the Ken-Ton School District to announce

that Ken-Ton is among the school districts benefiting from New York's \$135 million investment in free school meals in the 2023-2024 state budget. The funding has been estimated to provide 294,000 additional students with breakfast and lunch at no cost to their families or to the school during the upcoming school year.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) operates the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools with high concentrations of low-income families to serve free breakfast and lunch without requiring an application for the benefit. Schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students eligible for free meals. Because the program does not fully cover all of the costs to provide meals to students, schools must cover the cost difference, which has traditionally kept many eligible schools from participating.

The new funding program included in the 2023-2024 state budget allows New York schools that participate in the CEP to be reimbursed by the State Education Department for the cost of all meals that are not covered by the federal government. By covering those costs, the program incentivizes more schools to participate in the CEP program.

The federal government provided free school meals for all students during the COVID-19 pandemic but the program was discontinued before the 2022-2023 school year. Last year, only five of the 10 schools in the Ken-Ton School District were CEP participants. Students at the remaining schools had to pay full price for school meals unless their families qualified and applied for free or reduced-price meals. With the expanded funding included in this year's budget, all Ken-Ton students now automatically qualify to receive free meals every day. In the Ken-Ton district alone, 2,037 additional students will receive free meals this school year.

Senator Ryan has called on the federal government to expedite a proposal that would make more students eligible to receive free meals during the 2024-2025 school year. In March, the

USDA proposed lowering the minimum threshold to determine a school or district's CEP eligibility from 40% of enrolled students to 25%. Expanding CEP eligibility has many benefits; in addition to ensuring all children have regular access to two healthy meals each day, CEP participation eliminates unpaid meal charges, minimizes stigma, and reduces burdensome paperwork for both families and administrators.

The proposed rule from the USDA is not set to take effect until April 2024. Senator Ryan is urging the USDA to expedite the rulemaking process and enact the new threshold sooner so that state leaders can plan accordingly when allocating funding in the 2024-25 state budget.

**Senator Sean Ryan** said, "The free school meal program has been very impactful in our country, but it has historically left behind a lot of families just above the qualifying line and those who didn't want the stigma often associated with free school meals. This new program is already a big win for thousands of families in New York, and I'm hopeful we'll be able to reach thousands more next year."

**Assemblymember Bill Conrad** said, "Inflation and soaring food costs have plenty of parents and guardians struggling to make ends meet, and until now, many were ineligible for free school meals. As a former teacher, I know that nutrition is directly tied to a student's ability to learn. A hungry child cannot fully focus in the classroom or reach their fullest potential in a school setting. Senator Ryan and I fought hard for this funding, to ease families' financial burden and level the playing field for more kids."

**Sabatino Cimato, Superintendent of Ken-Ton School District,** said, "The expansion of eligibility for the CEP Program and increased funding in the NYS Budget has made it possible for all Ken-Ton students to receive free breakfast and lunch. This will have an extremely positive impact on student performance and culture in our schools. It will also be extremely beneficial for families who previously had to pay full price, saving hundreds of dollars per child annually."