



14 Computer Drive East  
Albany, NY 12205  
518.436.8757 PH  
518.458.6068 FAX  
HungerSolutionsNY.org

**Testimony to the  
Joint Fiscal Committees on the SFY 2018–19 Executive Budget  
Education**

**Submitted by Hunger Solutions New York  
February 7, 2018**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of the initiatives set forth by Governor Cuomo in the “No Student Goes Hungry” proposal. Specifically, we are testifying in support of:

- **Breakfast After the Bell** (\$7m in funding for capital start-up costs and \$5m in meal reimbursement)
- **Anti-lunch shaming** proposal that would eliminate practices that withhold or substitute meals or potentially shame or embarrass students who do not have enough money to pay for school meals
- **Lunch Incentive** of .25 cents to support schools’ increased procurement of NYS products (\$10m funding in meal reimbursement)

**About Hunger Solutions New York**

Hunger Solutions New York is a statewide anti-hunger organization dedicated to alleviating hunger for all New Yorkers. Our organization’s primary approach to addressing hunger is to maximize participation in the federally-funded nutrition assistance programs including the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. We do this by providing consult and resources to non-profit organizations, schools and other agencies to improve access to nutrition assistance programs, and to help make their anti-hunger efforts more efficient and effective. We also manage one of the largest SNAP outreach and application assistance programs in the country; the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP).

**Support Breakfast After the Bell**

Hunger is a reality for 1 in 5 children in New York State.<sup>1</sup> A robust body of research supports that the federally-funded School Breakfast Program is a readily available resource to reduce hunger, bolster student success and improve health. Yet, New York ranks 42nd in the nation for reaching low-income students with school breakfast.<sup>2</sup> Across the state, fewer than half of all kids who are eligible for free and reduced-price school breakfast are able to access this important meal.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Map the Meal Gap (2015). <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/child/new-york>

<sup>2</sup> Food Research and Action Center (2017) [School Breakfast Report Card, School Year 2015-2016](#).

<sup>3</sup> Hunger Solutions New York (2017) School Breakfast: Reducing Hunger and Bolstering Student Success

While most schools in New York already offer school breakfast, it is served in the cafeteria before the school day starts. Transportation schedules and social stigma, among other factors, prevent kids from participating – often leaving them starting the school day too hungry to learn.

Breakfast After the Bell – where breakfast is offered after the official start of the school day – is proven to be one of the best practices to overcome barriers school Breakfast participation. Schools across New York that have implanted a Breakfast After the Bell program have experienced significant increases in the number of students who eat school breakfast. Beyond improving school breakfast participation, Breakfast After the Bell has also been linked to stronger academic performance, improved student behavior and reduced absenteeism among students.

Governor Cuomo's 2019 FY Budget Proposal includes a requirement for schools with more than 70% free and reduced price eligible students to offer Breakfast After the Bell. These schools would be required to offer school breakfast after the start of the regular school day, either in the classroom, through a grab n' go method, a second chance breakfast, or other approved model.

The proposal:

- Ensures high-need schools are offering an accessible breakfast program – by using Breakfast After the Bell models – to maximize the number of vulnerable children who have access to a healthy meal
- Provides impacted schools with flexibility to choose the model of Breakfast After the Bell that best suits their school environment
- Unlocks millions of federal dollars – drawn down by a per-meal reimbursement – that will go to schools across the state
- Provides \$7M in start-up grant funds for schools to purchase equipment such as coolers or delivery carts
- Clarifies that time spent eating school breakfast in the classroom is counted as instructional time

Under this proposal, more than **1,400** schools in New York will have resources and technical assistance to implement Breakfast After the Bell. This means an additional **109,000** children are expected to participate in school breakfast every day. These schools will draw down an additional **\$40 million** in federal reimbursement as a result of increased participation in their breakfast program.

The legislature can improve this proposal in two ways:

- **Offer Breakfast After the Bell at no charge in schools with 70% and above**  
Schools with 70% or more free and reduced-price eligible students are able to offer free breakfast to all students without losing money. Nearly all of the schools impacted by the Governor's proposal already offer free breakfast to all students, but 9%--103 schools—do not. This creates inequity among these schools by limiting participation among students certified for reduced-price school meals, who are charged a copay; as well as those whose families are struggling to make ends meet, but who do not qualify for subsidized school meals. Federal options like the Community Eligibility Provision are available for the remaining 103 schools to offer free breakfast to all students at no additional cost to local districts or the state. **The legislature should require schools at 70% and above to offer free meals to all students.** By eliminating the barriers of school meal fees in high

poverty schools, schools eliminate the problem of unpaid school meal fees, and Breakfast After the Bell programs are more efficient and result in the highest program participation.

- **Lower Breakfast After the Bell Threshold from 70% to 60%**

Breakfast After the Bell legislation is a proven strategy to increase and maintain participation in the School Breakfast program, especially among low income students. While impact of the current proposal would be widely beneficial, the legislature has an opportunity to strengthen the proposal to grow participation in “middle-need” schools in the 60-70% free and reduced price eligibility range. These schools are strategically positioned to reach a significant number of children from low-income households and make a tremendous impact on closing the school breakfast participation gap in all corners of the state. Every additional child who participates in Breakfast After the Bell benefits from the consistency of a healthy morning meal, and helps make programs viable and sustainable. **That is why we are recommending that the legislature amend the proposal to require schools with 60% or more free and reduced price eligible students to offer Breakfast After the Bell.** This simple change would reach an additional 35,000 children – for a total of 144,000 statewide – and would provide an estimated \$53 million in federal reimbursements. It would also make New York’s Breakfast After the Bell policy the most progressive of its kind in the nation.

### **End Lunch Shaming Practices**

The Governor’s proposal includes a directive to end lunch shaming, which will have a positive impact on the lives of low-income children who are sometimes treated unfairly when unable to pay for their school meals.

USDA requires all school districts to have a policy for how unpaid meal debt is handled. However, USDA did not articulate standards or guidance that these policies must contain to protect children from unfair practices. As a result, school district policies vary widely in terms of how unpaid school meal debt is handled. Some schools have elected to provide regular meals to all students regardless of their ability to pay, others provide alternate meals when students have accrued debt. Still others discard meals when a student is found to be lacking funds. These striking examples all reveal a systemic problem faced by many schools; low income families that are required to pay a reduced or full price rate for their child(ren)’s school meals struggle to afford this cost.

The Food Research and Action Center has set forth [best practices](#) to protect children from being shamed or stigmatized in the breakfast or lunch line. The Governor’s proposal embraces many of these best practices:

- Schools should communicate directly with parents/guardians to resolve outstanding meal debt without using the student as an intermediary
- Schools should operationalize a process to establish eligibility for free/reduced price meals for students who are accruing meal debt
- Schools should provide a meal that meets reimbursement criteria to all students regardless of their ability pay
- Schools should eliminate any practice that singles out or otherwise punishes or embarrasses a student for their inability to pay

The legislature can improve upon this proposal with the following amendments:

- **Ensure schools are connecting eligible families to free and reduced price school lunch throughout the year.** The current proposal sets parameters around the free and reduced-price school meal application process at the beginning of the year. Yet, the bill language does not lay out requirements for school districts to make free and reduced-price school meal applications and support to families available throughout the school year. Specific language can be added to ensure eligible families are enrolled in free and reduced-price meals throughout the year, especially when families experience unforeseeable circumstances like losing a job or hours at work.
- **Ensure high-need schools implement options that limit or eliminate fees paid by households.** Language can be added to the current proposal to encourage schools with high percentages of low-income students — whether or not they have high unpaid meal fee debt — to look at available options to offer free meals to all children. There are still many schools across New York State that could benefit from the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2 which eliminate fees for students, but have not yet implemented them, leaving some students in these communities to accrue unpaid meal debt unnecessarily.

New York State has the opportunity to set a national standard for strong lunch shaming legislation. We are proud to support legislation that end practices that further stigmatize the school meal programs and the children who rely on them.

### **Support an Increased State Reimbursement for School Lunch Programs with 30% Locally-Sourced Food**

Farm to School programs are an important way to address food insecurity, curb the rise in childhood obesity, support New York’s farmers and help our rural communities grow. Governor Cuomo has proposed \$10 million to quadruple the current meal reimbursement – from 6 cents to 25 cents – for schools who purchase 30% of the previous year’s total food costs of from New York farmers, growers, producers, and processors. It is important to note that requiring that the *total* food cost be local in order to be eligible for this additional reimbursement puts high-poverty schools at a disadvantage. High-poverty schools tend to have higher food costs because they are providing more meals such as snacks and summer meals. The proposed Farm to School Program would be more equitable if the additional lunch reimbursement was solely tied to lunch costs. **We recommend the legislature support this budget appropriation and clarify that this additional lunch reimbursement be tied specifically to the food cost of lunch, and not the district’s overall food costs.** This incentive will help more school children eat fresh, local produce while also supporting local economies by driving new purchases of locally sourced food and new employment opportunities. It is particularly important that schools in low-income communities have the ability to tap into this impactful program.

We urge the legislature to adopt these initiatives and related funding proposals in its final budget. We look forward to working with the Senate and Assembly, state agencies, schools, and other stakeholders to implement these programs in the 18-19 fiscal year. The benefits of these proposals will be immediate, and the gains felt by low-income households with children will be long-lasting.