

Dear Kathy Hochul,

You don't know me, but I'm a school lunch director in the Capital District. I am one of many fighting for universal meals for all students in our state. This may not seem like a huge issue that deserves funding, but to our programs, it is everything.

Yesterday I spent my day managing negative balances in my district. Yes, I spent my entire 8 hour day, and also some time in the evening while home with my family, working to try and recoup some money that is owed to my program. I received 40, yes 40, parent phone calls when I sent out negative and low balance notices yesterday. 3 hours of my day (including my entire drive home) were spent on the phone working with parents to understand our school lunch program. I was, and will continue to be, sent nasty emails by parents just for asking them to repay the money that is owed. They tell me I am rude for sending negative balance letters and that I should rethink sending them to families. I spent 8 hours yesterday chasing money, instead of spending the day sourcing local foods, working side by side with my staff, and collaborating with other directors and business owners to bring new and exciting menu items to our program.

In a district of 4,400 kids, our negative balances have already reached over \$10,000 and it is only February. I should share that 18% of my students qualify for free/reduced meals and are not part of the \$10,000 that is owed to our program. And it is not students that are just over the income guidelines that owe money, the total amount of money owed by students that were denied free meals is under \$400. We are projected to end the year with a negative balance total of just under \$20,000. That means that our General Fund will need to pay our program \$20,000 at the end of the school year per SED Child Nutrition laws.

What does \$20,000 mean to our district? \$20,000 is 2 part time aide positions in elementary classrooms. It's 4 field trips to local businesses and establishments. It's 75 Chromebooks for our students. It's half of a starting teacher salary. Our district will lose valuable resources because it will be required to pay off the owed lunch debt at the end of the year.

On top of the district losing resources by having to cover the negative balances, my program will make no revenue to reinvest back into it. I can't purchase new equipment, increase my staffing, or bring in new and exciting menu ideas. I have to re-evaluate our budget, make cuts, and go back to heat and serve items. I run the risk of losing my job because families are choosing not to pay for meals. Why would a school district employ a school lunch director that can't run a profitable program? No one else in a school district risks losing their job at the mercy of families being able to pay for lunch.

I have worked in school food service for the better part of 12 years. I have brought programs back from consistently losing money to making a yearly profit. I have watched my cooks become successful directors after I have moved on to a different school district. I have hosted countless interns and showed them how incredible school lunch is and what amazing things we offer students and staff. I sit on the New York School Nutrition Association Board of Directors as an At Large Director and have shared my passion across the state. Ask any of my colleagues

across the state and they will tell you that I eat, sleep, and breathe school lunch, it is my passion.

So please, we are begging you to add universal meals for all students to the NYS budget. Please help us keep these amazing programs thriving and giving back to students each and every day.

Yours Truly,
Megan Bates
Your Local School Lunch Director