

Ensure Universal Access to School Meals

For two school years during the COVID-19 pandemic, school meals were universally available to all students, regardless of household income, at no cost to students and families. With the return to pre-pandemic meal programs, school districts are quickly seeing the great benefits of universal access disappear for hundreds of thousands of students. Students that have access to nutritious meals during the school day are not only better prepared to learn; they also see overall health improvements, especially those who experience food insecurity.

Schools can draw down federal and state funds to offset the cost of meals for children in households eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. However, there are still many students living in hunger who don't receive this benefit. While many families are directly certified as

eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, some are not. Families that cannot be directly certified must submit income verification forms to enroll. If students are not enrolled but do not have money, they may not eat. If they do eat, and cannot pay for the meals, districts have limited ability to recoup the funds.

To close the funding gap and maintain access, **New York state should fund a Universal Meal Program for all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.** Such a program would provide the equivalent of the free meal reimbursement for every school meal served that is not already reimbursed or fully reimbursed by the federal government. If participation in the federal meal program is maximized — a program that already funds over a billion dollars in school meal reimbursement — the cost to the state to fund this program would be approximately \$200 million.



COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP)

Nearly 60% of New York's schools participate in the CEP provision of the NSLP. This provision allows any district that can directly certify that at least 40% of their students would be eligible for free meals to serve meals free to all students. CEP districts are reimbursed for 1.6 meals for every 1 eligible free meal. While this provision has helped many districts across New York state, even with the 1.6 multipliers, many districts have to fund a gap until they can directly certify that at least 60% of their students are free lunch eligible.

SCHOOL MEAL FACTS

- 1 in 7 kids in New York experience hunger – disproportionately children of color
- 470,000 children are ineligible for free school meals, but live in households earning less than a living wage
- \$24.9 million in statewide unpaid meal debt
- More than \$1 billion in current federal funding
- \$187.3M to \$201M needed to close the funding gap

Source: Hunger Solutions New York