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Launch Universal NYS School Meals Program

Issue:

Students need proper nourishment to be successful. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has granted school districts broad flexibility throughout the pandemic to provide all students free meals. These allowances expire on June 30, 2022. Without continuance of a free school meals program for all, school districts will no longer be able to ensure that every student has access

to healthy nutritious meals. Proposed federal investments in the Build Back Better Act could lower the cost of a universal school meals program in New York. As written, the bill would increase federal reimbursements by over \$64 million. While changes at the federal level could make a universal school meals program more cost-effective for our state, New York must act now regardless of federal action.

Recommendations

1. Launch a free universal school meals program to all students statewide.

ECB calls on New York State to launch a universal school meals program to ensure all public school students are offered breakfast and lunch, free of charge. Universal school meals programs reduce the stigma for students unable to afford meals, increase the number of students fed during the school day, reduce paperwork for school staff and assist districts in streamlining their meal service operations. California and Maine will launch statewide programs starting in the 2022-23 school year.



2. Include all federally allowable categories in the state's electronic Direct Certification Matching Process (DCMP).

Direct certification is an electronic data-matching process that automatically certifies income-eligible students to receive free or reduced-price school meals. In New York State, children from families receiving SNAP and/or Medicaid benefits are eligible for direct certification. Children who are homeless or in foster care may be eligible for direct certification but are currently not included in New York's DCMP allowable categories. Schools and districts may qualify for Community Eligibility (universal school meals at the federal level) based on the percentage of their students who directly certified for free or reduced-price lunch. Therefore, expanding the allowable categories for direct certification may increase reliance on federal reimbursements and thereby decrease the financial burden for New York's statewide universal school meals program.

3. Increase state and federal meal reimbursements to keep up with rising costs of food.

The combination of inflation and supply chain shortages has caused the price of nutritious meals to increase sharply. ECB calls on both the state and federal governments to increase meal reimbursements.

4. Increase federal Community Eligibility Provision reimbursement multiplier.

Schools and districts that participate in Community Eligibility (receive universal school meals at the federal level) currently receive reimbursement based on the percentage of students who directly certify for free or reduced-price lunch multiplied by a factor of 1.6. Due to rising costs of nutritious school meals, ECB calls on the federal government to increase the multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5.

Reduce Childhood Hunger

Issue:

Many students face food insecurity outside of traditional school hours. Meeting the needs of the whole child includes making sure no child goes hungry in or out of school.

Recommendations

1. Streamline the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides meals for after-school programs. CACFP is currently run through DOH, while after-school programs are run by school districts or providers licensed by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). Strengthening the linkages between DOH, SED and OCFS will ensure more students are able to receive meals during after-school programs.

2. Establish a permanent, nationwide Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) program.

The American Rescue Plan Act expanded the Pandemic EBT to include benefits during Summer 2021. This EBT was available to all children eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year. ECB calls on the federal government to establish a permanent Summer EBT program to ensure needy children are able to access nutritious meals during summer months.

Increase School Meal Flexibility

Issue:

In order to continue to feed students during a pandemic that limited access to a traditional school cafeteria, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided school districts multiple waivers to enhance flexible meal deliveries. Those waivers are slated to expire

June 30, 2022. Furthermore, as districts face supply shortages with their vendors, they are seeking alternative solutions to quickly acquire food their vendors are no longer able to provide.

Recommendations

1. Increase the state's small purchase threshold.

School districts may make small purchases less than or equal to the small purchase threshold. Generally, in New York State the small purchase threshold is \$20,000. Meanwhile, the federal small purchase threshold is \$250,000. Purchases that are less than or equal to the federal, state or local small purchase threshold have additional requirements. These purchases require competitive bids be obtained from a minimum of three bidders. However, due to supply chain issues and shortages, school districts need greater flexibility to source products when a vendor is suddenly unable to provide what a district ordered. A reasonable increase to the state threshold would allow school districts to respond to market scarcity and potentially lead to an increase in locally sourced products.

2. Review state restrictions around bidding processes and purchases.

School districts are subject to formal bidding requirements contained in NY General Municipal Law 103. ECB recommends the state conduct a multi-stakeholder review of existing requirements, culminating in recommendations to modify certain mandates and increase purchasing flexibility.

3. Maintain federal waivers that have provided flexibility in meal delivery.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, school districts have been granted waivers to expand flexibility around meal delivery. Key waivers have allowed students to be served outside of traditional meal times and in non-group settings, and have permitted parents/guardians to pick up meals and bring them home to their children. These waivers are set to expire June 30, 2022. ECB supports maintenance of these and other federal waivers that provide flexibility in meal delivery, provided districts face conditions out of their control that warrant such flexibilities.

