

This School Lunch Week, Remember Kids Who Are Hungry

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Long division is hard. Doing long division when you're hungry and don't know where you're going to get your next meal is downright impossible.

The research is clear: kids can't learn when they're hungry. That's why every October we celebrate National School Lunch Week. School meals are critical for keeping young people healthy and focused in the classroom. However, this September, students in nearly [2,000 schools](#) across New York lost access to free school meals. This quiet crisis has not received much attention, but students are dealing with the fallout every day.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government provided emergency waivers to ensure every student had access to free meals. The impact was immediate and significant. School meals improve kids' physical and mental health, boost academic performance, and provide more fruits, vegetables, fiber, and whole grains than kids eat otherwise, reducing their risk of developing diet-related diseases.

Unfortunately, the federal waivers allowing free school meals for all students expired at the end of the 2021-2022 school year, jeopardizing access to school breakfast and lunch for hundreds of thousands of students at schools across New York. More than [726,000 New York State students](#) lost access to universal free school meals. When [many New Yorkers](#) are facing food insecurity and [inflation](#) is driving grocery prices to historic highs, this loss is hitting families hard.

We are wholly disappointed Congress hasn't acted, and doesn't have a federal solution for our children.

Other states have already acted to address this crisis, responding to the lack of solutions from Washington. California, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Nevada have all stepped up to provide state funding to ensure healthy meals for all their students.

Hungry kids can't learn. Students experiencing hunger struggle to focus and have [lower attendance](#) than their peers, and are at [greater risk of mental and physical health problems](#). These challenges affect all students and they [disproportionately impact](#) Black and Latino kids.

New York must join this group of states that are prioritizing students' health and success. By providing healthy school meals for all, we can ensure all NYS students have access to nutritious food at school at no cost to their families. This will benefit students across the state, but will have an especially significant impact in small, rural schools.

The benefits for students and families would be far-reaching. Across income levels, [school meals are the healthiest many children eat](#), and ensuring all students are well-fed is [proven](#) to boost test scores and improve classroom behavior while [reducing](#) racial health disparities and academic achievement gaps. Making free school meals universal is critical to achieving these outcomes because it reduces the stigma associated with free lunch, increasing participation among all students and especially those who need it most.

In addition to the health benefits for students, providing healthy meals for all kids is smart economic policy. By enabling schools to purchase ingredients in bulk, healthy meals for all [can bring down the per-student price of lunches](#) and eliminates an estimated [\\$24.9 million per year](#) in unpaid school meal debt. Overall, every dollar invested in providing healthy meals for students leads to [at least two dollars](#) in health, economic, equity, and environmental benefits.

Now is the time to support our children. We will continue to work with Congressional leaders, education stakeholders, and state policy makers to see that every child has access to healthy meals they need to thrive in the classroom and life. New York State is the national leader in supporting children, and together, we will make every child's potential a reality – there is no other more important work.