

# NEW YORK STATE EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCE BOARD



## Support Universal School Meals

**Educational Conference Board, comprised of the seven leading statewide public school organizations representing parents, classroom teachers, school related professionals, school boards, building administrators, superintendents, and school business officials, strongly supports the Senate and Assembly budget proposals to fund a statewide universal school meals program that includes both breakfast and lunch. We urge that funding be included in the final enacted budget.**

During the pandemic and through this school year, communities across the state saw firsthand how schools function as the glue that supports students and families. What started as a huge effort to feed students during the pandemic often grew to a much larger scale.

For over 2 years, federal waivers allowed for all students to be served nutritious meals, regardless of income qualifications. During that time, school meal participation increased, stigma was eliminated, and school meal debt was a problem of the past. Mealtime was part of the school day, just like any other program. However, on June 30, 2022, the federal waivers ended. Nearly 2,000 schools lost the ability to provide free meals for all of their students in the 2022-23 school year. At the start of the school year, administrators immediately noted that school meal debt was accumulating at much higher rates than before the pandemic. Many families who struggled to put food on the table at home didn't meet the strict income thresholds to qualify their children for free meals at school. School administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the community have witnessed worsening food insecurity since the beginning of the pandemic. The need for nutritious meals is high across all family incomes. New York State must pick up the tab.

The most effective way to ensure all students are well-nourished is through a universal school meals program. Providing free meals for all students is a proven strategy to reduce food insecurity, improve mental and physical health, support students' ability to thrive academically, and bolster educational, health, and economic equity.

We must invest in the health and well-being of our students. We urge New York to commit to feeding kids through a universal school meals program.

***For all these reasons, the Educational Conference Board supports a universal school meals program and urges enactment with the 2023-24 state budget.***