

New York Grown Food for New York Kids

December 11, 2024

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

Thank you for your continued support for New York's Farm to School programs, specifically the 30% Initiative. K-12 schools across the state serve breakfast, lunch, snack, and afterschool meals to 1.7 million schoolchildren, providing half of their daily calories on average. Incorporating fresh, locally grown New York food into these meals through Farm to School programs is an effective way to increase access to healthy food for kids, improve their academic performance, create new markets for New York farmers, and build local supply chains that are more resilient to disruptions in our global food economy. Since 2018, the Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive and Grants programs have worked hand in hand, promising to lead the nation in helping schools buy and serve more local food, increasing the economic support to New York State businesses across the food supply chain.

Despite the foundation established to increase engagement in the 30% Initiative, there has only been a 2.5% increase in School Food Authority (SFA) participation since the program's second year. In total, there are only 73 SFAs that are spending at least 30% of their total lunch food costs on NYS Food Products, based on 2023-2024 Purchases. This is an underwhelming participation rate of 11.4% of School Food Authorities, statewide. Importantly, these purchases account for over \$9.6 million spent on NYS agricultural products, but these schools represent only 6% of the state's total public-school students.

To jumpstart the momentum of our promising Farm to School programs in New York and fully unlock their potential to generate nearly an additional half of a billion dollars in economic impact statewide, we encourage the Governor to include the following in the SFY2025-26 Executive Budget:

- At least \$10 million for an expanded Farm to School Reimbursement program, which incentivizes schools that spend at least 30% of total meal costs through all federally reimbursable meals in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) on New York foods, with an increased reimbursement of 25 cents per meal;
- At least \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program to continue to meet demand, ensuring at least \$500,000 remains set aside as non-competitive funding to support a statewide network of regional farm to school coordinators.

Expand the 30% Program to include All NSLP and SBP Meals

While the state and partners across New York have shown admirable dedication to making the Incentive program achieve its promise, multiple research reports from the American Farmland Trust (AFT) show that it has not yet reached its full impact because of its sole focus on lunch. Out of the 16 states providing local food purchasing incentive programs for K-12 schools nationally, New York is the only

state that does not include breakfast expenses for the 30% local food purchase threshold for reimbursement. This focus on lunch causes an administrative barrier for school participation—especially for larger city schools where a more racially diverse student body often faces food insecurity—and limits student access to healthy local food throughout the school day. In a 2023 survey of School Food Authorities (SFAs) conducted by AFT, 62% of survey respondents who have not qualified for the program indicated that their number one barrier is the program’s sole focus on lunch.

We commend your leadership through Executive Order 32, which directs State Agencies and encourages School Food Authorities (SFAs) to allocate 30% of their annual food budgets to support local farmers, producers, processors, and distributors in New York State. Expanding the 30% Reimbursement Incentive Program to cover all federally reimbursable school meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) would strengthen alignment with Executive Order 32. This expansion would not only provide a significant boost to New York's agricultural economy but also streamline administrative processes, making it easier for NY schools to source local foods. AFT’s 2023 survey also revealed that over 70% of respondents indicated they would purchase more local foods if the program expanded beyond lunch. Additionally, more than half reported adjusting their practices to meet the current program's limitations: 58% served most or all local products during lunch instead of breakfast to simplify tracking, 50% made this adjustment to increase their local food percentage, and 58% decreased serving local products at breakfast because they knew these would not count toward their percentage goals. The New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition greatly appreciates your ongoing commitment to local food systems and the 30% reimbursement incentive program. We urge you to expand the program to include all school meals—a vital step toward unlocking its full potential. This expansion would enhance student access to nutritious, locally sourced meals and provide crucial support to New York’s farmers, particularly dairy producers who have faced considerable challenges in recent years.

Continue Funding the Farm to School Grants Program

The Farm to School Grants program, which funds training and support for school food professionals as well as critical capital for infrastructure, remains in high demand for schools working toward achieving 30% local procurement. We applaud your five-year funding plan for regional scratch-cooking facilities to support these infrastructural barriers and were excited to see the second round of funding released. At the same time, we continue to see the need for the Farm to School Grants program. In the past year, sixteen such projects were awarded between \$50,000 and \$100,000 each, for a total of over \$1.5 million supporting Farm to School programming across the state. These projects include awardees focused on increasing relationships with local producers alongside hands-on agriculture and nutrition education for students. The grant funding continues to provide much needed support for increasing local procurement, building culinary capacity, and enhancing education in school districts statewide. The innovative Regional Farm to School Coordinator program has also been funded since 2021 through the non-competitive Farm to School grants funding allocation in the education budget. Through this program, a network of Farm to School Coordinators is working to provide vital support to help schools reach 30% local food procurement by strengthening connections between schools and farmers and by helping food service staff with critical activities like purchase tracking, recipe generation, and more. In

AFT's 2023 survey of SFAs, nearly half of respondents indicated that they are working with an FTS coordinator through this program who has helped them to increase their local purchasing and community connections with NY farmers. **We applaud your historic support of this program and ask that you continue to bolster support for schools and farmers by holding the funding for this program to at least \$1.5 million.**

Thank you all for your leadership in working to support child nutrition and farm viability in New York. We look forward to working alongside you to continue to make New York a visionary leader and innovator in improving student health and building resilient local food systems through Farm to School programs.

Sincerely,

See attached list of signatories

CC: Kevin King, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture

Richard Ball, Commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets

Betty Rosa, Commissioner, New York State Education Department

Senator Shelley B. Mayer, Chair, Senate Education Committee

Senator Michelle Hinchey, Chair, Senate Agriculture Committee

Senator Liz Krueger, Chair, Finance Committee

Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, Chair, Assembly Agriculture Committee

Assemblymen Michael Benedetto, Chair, Assembly Education Committee

Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein, Chair, Ways and Means Committee

American Farmland Trust, Julian Mangano, NY Policy Manager

BT Boces Nutrition Services, Annie Hudock

Capital Roots, Amy Klein, *Chief Executive Officer*

Community Food Advocates, Abbie Watts, *Director of School Food Advocacy*

Equity Advocates, Leah Eden, *Executive Director*

Essex Food Hub, Inc., Lindsay Willemain, *Executive Director*

Food Bank of the Southern Tier, Sarah DeFrank, *Director of Policy, Program & Partnerships*

FoodCorps, Dawn Crayco, *NE Regional Policy Director*

Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corp, Todd M. Erling, *Executive Director*

Hunger Solutions New York, Jessica Pino-Goodspeed, *Deputy Director of Public Affairs*

New York Farm Bureau, Renee St. Jacques, *Senior Associate Director of Public Policy*

No Kid Hungry New York, Liz Lucas, *Senior Program Manager*

New York State School Boards Association, Brian Fessler, *Director of Governmental Relations*

NYS PTA, Kyle Belokopitsky, *Executive Director*

NYSNA Farm to School, Stephanie Lyon-Lawrence, *Chairperson*

NYSNA, Jennifer Martin, *CEO*

Rural Health Network of South Central NY, Demetra Alberti, *Executive Director*

Tompkins County Food Policy Council, Sarah DeFrank, *Steering Committee Member*

Wilson CSD, Susan Bell, *Food Service Director*