

New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition

March 23rd, 2026

The Honorable Carl E. Heastie

Speaker, New York State Assembly

Legislative Office Building, Room 932

Albany, NY 12248

Dear Speaker Heastie:

On behalf of the **New York Grown Food for New York Kids (NYGFFNYK) Coalition**, we thank you and your conference for your continued leadership in supporting Farm to School programs and strengthening connections between New York’s farmers and the more than **2.7 million students** served by school meals each day across the state.

The **30% New York State Initiative** has proven to be a powerful tool for increasing school purchases of New York-grown food, improving student nutrition, and strengthening regional food systems. We appreciate that the **Governor’s FY 2026–27 Executive Budget maintains \$10 million** for the 30% Initiative and **\$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants Program**, preserving the essential partnership between incentives and capacity-building that allows School Food Authorities (SFAs) to succeed.

We are also grateful that the **Assembly’s One-House Budget includes Article VII language to allow breakfast and reimbursable snacks to count toward the 30% calculation**. This is an important and logical step that aligns the program more closely with how school meal programs actually operate and reflects shared legislative intent to modernize the Initiative.

Importantly, the **full modernization framework** needed to ensure this expansion works as intended is outlined in **A.6619A**, sponsored by **Assembly Committee on Agriculture Chair Donna Lupardo**. This legislation reflects extensive input from School Food Authorities, state agencies, and farm-to-school stakeholders, and provides a comprehensive approach to modernizing the 30% Initiative—pairing breakfast inclusion with reimbursement modernization, tiered incentives, and transition protections to support both schools and New York farmers.

At the same time, recent analysis underscores that **breakfast inclusion alone is not sufficient**—and, if implemented without additional safeguards, could unintentionally reduce participation in the program.

A **Department of Agriculture and Markets analysis** found that when breakfast and snacks are added to the 30% calculation without other modernization measures, the total pool of “counted” food costs increases, raising the effective purchasing threshold districts must meet. Under this scenario, **only 37 of the 73 School Food Authorities** that participated in the program during the 2024–2025 school year would have remained eligible—not because they reduced New York purchasing, but because the calculation itself changed.

The district-level impacts are similarly concerning. For example, within **Broome-Tioga BOCES**, which serves 15 school districts, only **five districts** would remain eligible if breakfast were added without transition

protections, and those districts would collectively need to spend an additional **\$250,000 on local food** simply to regain eligibility. Many of these districts have participated in the program since its inception and have helped build stable procurement relationships with New York farmers.

For these reasons, the NYGFFNYK Coalition respectfully urges the Assembly to ensure that breakfast and snack inclusion is implemented as part of a **complete modernization framework**, rather than as a standalone change. Specifically, we urge inclusion of the following complementary measures in the FY 2026–27 One-House Budget:

1. Adopt a Three-Year Hold Harmless Provision

A hold harmless period is essential to protect current participants as the program is updated. It provides SFAs—particularly long-standing participants—with three years to adjust procurement practices, strengthen supply chains, and grow New York purchasing without losing eligibility overnight. This safeguard preserves existing farm-to-school relationships and prevents sudden disruptions to farmer markets.

2. Modernize Reimbursement Through a Tiered Incentive Structure

The proposed tiered reimbursement model restores the real value of the incentive, bringing reimbursement rates back in line with **inflation-adjusted levels from 2018**, while also rewarding higher percentages of New York food purchasing. By increasing incentives as districts deepen their commitment to local sourcing, tiered reimbursement strengthens the return on state investment and delivers greater benefit to New York farmers.

3. Pair Breakfast Inclusion With Reimbursement Modernization

Including breakfast and snacks only works if districts have adequate support to meet higher purchasing thresholds. Without reimbursement modernization, breakfast inclusion risks becoming an unfunded expansion that strains school food budgets and undermines program goals. Together, tiered reimbursement and hold harmless protections ensure that breakfast inclusion **expands participation and purchasing**, rather than shrinking them.

4. Maintain Core Program Funding

Maintaining **\$10 million for the 30% NYS Initiative** and **at least \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants Program** is critical to sustaining the incentive-plus-capacity model that allows districts to purchase more New York-grown food while supporting equipment, training, and regional coordination.

The Assembly has played a vital role in advancing Farm to School and supporting policies that benefit students, farmers, and communities statewide. By pairing breakfast inclusion with the full modernization framework, the Legislature can ensure that the 30% Initiative continues to function as intended—**driving public food dollars to New York farmers while expanding equitable access for schools**.

The **30% New York State Initiative** has demonstrated a strong return on investment by directing public food dollars to New York farmers and food businesses. However, due to structural barriers, **more than 70 percent of available reimbursement dollars go unused each year**, limiting the program's reach and impact.

At the same time, the expansion of **Universal School Meals** has increased both the **scale and consistency of school food purchasing** across the state. This creates a critical opportunity: when schools are able to purchase more **New York-grown food**, state investments remain **circulating within New York's economy**, supporting farmers, processors, distributors, and workers throughout the supply chain. These in-state purchases strengthen regional food infrastructure and reinforce a **circular food economy**, where public dollars generate local economic activity rather than flowing out of state.

Completing the modernization of the 30% Initiative ensures that Universal School Meals translates into **greater demand for New York products**, rather than increased reliance on out-of-state sourcing. By unlocking unused funds and aligning incentives with real purchasing behavior, modernization maximizes the return on existing state investment—benefiting students, farmers, and communities statewide.

Thank you for your leadership and continued commitment to New York's students and agricultural communities. We look forward to working with you as budget negotiations proceed.

Sincerely,

*The New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition
(Signatories attached)*

CC:

Ashley Dougherty, Deputy Secretary for Environment and Food & Agriculture
Richard Ball, Commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
Betty Rosa, Commissioner, New York State Education Department
Assemblymember J. Gary Pretlow, Chair, Ways and Means Committee
Assemblymember Michael Benedetto, Chair, Education Committee
Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, Chair, Agriculture Committee

Adirondack Food System Network — Josh Stephani, Director
American Farmland Trust — Julian Mangano, NY Policy Manager
Community Food Advocates — Abbie Watts, Director of School Food Advocacy
Hunger Solutions New York — Jessica Pino-Goodspeed, Deputy Director of Public Affairs
New York Farm Bureau — Kat Slye-Hernandez, PhD, Senior Associate Director of Public Policy
New York School Nutrition Association — Jennifer Martin, CEO; Jess Cogswell, Professional Development Coordinator
Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) — Marcie Craig, Executive Director
NYS PTA — Kyle Belokopitsky, Executive Director
Port Jervis City School District — Erin Phelan, Food Service Director
Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance — Maura Ackerman, Executive Director