

New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition

March 23, 2026

The Honorable Andrea Stewart-Cousins

Majority Leader, New York State Senate
Legislative Office Building, Room 907
Albany, NY 12247

Dear Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins:

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 the connection between New York’s farmers and the more than **2.7 million students** who rely on school meals each day.

The **30% New York State Initiative** has helped position New York as a national leader in farm-to-school policy by directing public food dollars to New York farmers while improving student access to fresh, healthy meals. 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 incentive-plus-capacity model that enables School Food Authorities (SFAs) to participate successfully.

We are also grateful that the **Senate’s One-House Budget includes Article VII language to allow breakfast and reimbursable snacks to count toward the 30% calculation**. This change reflects how school meal programs actually operate and signals shared legislative intent to modernize the Initiative in a way that expands access and impact.

Importantly, the **full modernization framework** needed to ensure this expansion works as intended is outlined in **S.5057A**, sponsored by **Senate Committee on Agriculture Chair Michelle Hinchey**, which reflects extensive input from School Food Authorities, state agencies, and farm-to-school stakeholders. This legislation pairs breakfast inclusion with reimbursement modernization and transition protections to ensure the program expands participation and strengthens markets for New York farmers—without disrupting existing participants.

Recent analysis underscores why this complete approach is essential. A **Department of Agriculture and Markets analysis** found that when breakfast and snacks are added to the 30% calculation *without* complementary safeguards, the total pool of “counted” food costs increases—raising the effective purchasing threshold districts must meet. Under this scenario, **only 37 of the 73 SFAs** 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 significant. For example, within **Broome-Tioga BOCES**, which serves 15 school districts, only **five districts** would remain eligible if breakfast were included without transition protections, and those districts would collectively need to spend an additional **\$250,000 on New York-grown**

food simply to regain eligibility. Many of these districts have participated in the program since its inception and have helped establish stable procurement relationships with New York farmers.

For these reasons, the NYGFFNYK Coalition respectfully urges the Senate to ensure that breakfast and snack inclusion is implemented as part of a **complete modernization framework**, consistent with **S.5057A**, by including 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 critical to protecting existing participants as the program is updated. It provides SFAs with three years to adjust procurement practices, strengthen supply chains, and grow New York purchasing while maintaining program eligibility. This safeguard preserves established 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, aligning reimbursement rates with **inflation-adjusted levels from 2018**, while rewarding higher percentages of New York food purchasing. Tiered incentives strengthen the return on state investment and increase benefits to New York farmers as districts deepen their local sourcing.

3. Pair Breakfast Inclusion With Reimbursement Modernization

Including breakfast and snacks only achieves its intended impact when paired with adequate reimbursement and transition protections. Without these elements, breakfast inclusion risks becoming an unfunded expansion that strains school food budgets and undermines participation. Together, tiered reimbursement and hold harmless provisions ensure that breakfast inclusion **expands participation and purchasing**, rather than reducing 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 essential to sustaining the incentive-plus-capacity model that allows districts to purchase more New York-grown food while investing in equipment, training, and regional coordination.

The Senate has been a leader in advancing Farm to School policy and strengthening New York’s agricultural economy. By pairing breakfast inclusion with the full modernization framework outlined in **S.5057A**, the Legislature can ensure that the 30% Initiative continues to function as intended—**supporting New York farmers, expanding equitable access for schools, and maximizing the return on public investment**.

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 move forward.

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*
Senator Liz Krueger, *Chair, Finance Committee*
Senator Shelley B. Mayer, *Chair, Education Committee*
Senator Michelle Hinchey, *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*