



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on Education on the Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2022**

**March 23, 2021**

**Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Chair Treyger and members of the Committee on Education of the New York City Council. My name is Rachel Sabella and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on the preliminary budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

First, we thank the City Council for your continued commitment to protect New Yorkers from food insecurity. The City Council has long been a leader in addressing food insecurity, from supporting Breakfast in the Classroom to the expansion of universal school meals to leading the charge for increased, baselined funding for food pantries and soup kitchens to ensuring addressing food insecurity remained a top priority throughout the pandemic. Now more than ever, we are grateful to count you as our partner in the fight against food insecurity.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national anti-hunger organization dedicated to ending hunger and poverty. Using proven, practical strategies, our No Kid Hungry campaign builds public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, No Kid Hungry has provided emergency grants across all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico to help school districts, food banks and other community organizations feed kids during this crisis. In addition to our grant-making, we have advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by this crisis – including national child nutrition waivers that offer flexibility to meal providers, expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Pandemic EBT – while offering strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations. No Kid Hungry also launched a text line – “NYC FOOD” or “NYC COMIDA” to 877877 - to help families locate meals and worked closely with the Department of Education to customize the service to reflect their specific offerings. Since 2011, our No Kid Hungry New York campaign has helped connect millions of children across the state with school breakfast and summer meals.

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUNGER AND POVERTY IN NEW YORK CITY**

The coronavirus pandemic has affected all parts of our lives as New Yorkers. As of December 2020, the city's unemployment rate was 11%, an increase of over 250% since December 2019.<sup>1</sup> For many of our city's children and families, the pandemic and its economic consequences has had a disastrous impact on food security. Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 5 children were food insecure. **Now, recent estimates show that 1 in 3 children in New York City may have faced food insecurity over the last year.**<sup>2</sup>

Here's what food insecurity looks like: In some families, the pantry is completely empty. In others, mom or dad skips dinner a few nights a week so the kids can have something to eat in the evening. Many families are making impossible decisions between paying their ConEd bill or buying groceries. All of these scenarios have a profound effect on kids and families.

When kids don't get the consistent nutrition they need each day and throughout the year, it's harder for them to grow up healthy, happy, and strong. Consistent access to nutrition is linked to cognitive and physical development, test scores and long-term health and education outcomes. With the economic impacts of the coronavirus reverberating across the city, an entire generation is at stake. The New York City Council must work with Mayor de Blasio to take decisive action to ensure that children have adequate nutrition whether at school or at home.

As we continue to learn more about the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that a decade of progress in improving child food security has likely been eliminated in a single year. Despite these challenging circumstances, there are numerous measures that the FY22 New York City budget can take to improve food access and food security for children and families across the city. By providing needed support to existing nutrition programs and by investing in outreach and awareness to connect families with federal nutrition programs, New York City can help to alleviate the impact of food insecurity for New Yorkers in every part of the city.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2022 NEW YORK CITY BUDGET**

**Restore \$6 million in Funding for Breakfast in the Classroom.** In 2015, the New York City Council, Mayor de Blasio, and the New York City Department of Education made a bold commitment to equity, requiring all city elementary schools to implement breakfast in the classroom and ensuring students in those schools could start the school day with a nutritious breakfast. New York City became a national model for child nutrition programs and the City's commitment and success paved the way for New York State, which passed legislation in 2018 requiring breakfast be part of the school day for more than 1,400 schools statewide, including over 1,000 schools in New York City. Unfortunately, the budget includes a \$6 million reduction in funding for Breakfast in the Classroom.

As part of their reopening guidelines for schools, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) strongly recommended providing meals in the classroom as a way to feed all children safely. As schools will likely have to employ measures of social distancing in the fall, it is imperative that DOE continue to have funding to protect and expand Breakfast in the Classroom options so that children and staff members remain safe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://labor.ny.gov/stats/laus.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

As referenced earlier in my testimony, 1 in 3 children in New York City could face hunger due to the pandemic. Breakfast in the Classroom ensures more children are eating and starting the day with a nutritious meal. It is also an essential tool in building greater equity among students, as it is the most inclusive way to ensure that all students are starting the day ready to learn, regardless of family income. When all students get breakfast, it helps to level the playing field, making everyone starts the day with the nutrition they need to focus and learn.

**Ensure the Office of Food and Nutrition Services Has Adequate Funding to Maintain Operations and Protect Kids and Staff.** The New York City Department of Education (DOE) Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) changed their operations practically overnight starting March 16, 2020—the day school buildings officially closed in New York City—to ensure kids and families across the five boroughs had access to meals, whether they were attending school in person or virtually. While school buildings were closed, they set up meal sites for students and their families in hundreds of school buildings across the city. When school buildings reopened for in-person learning in September they provided meals to students learning in-person and virtually. In addition, they created over 200 community sites that serve meals to any New Yorker in need of a nutritious meal.<sup>3</sup> Despite these absolutely herculean efforts, during the past year, OFNS has served fewer meals to children than they were serving pre-pandemic. Since the number of meals served was reduced, DOE received less federal reimbursement despite other rising costs. As we look to the next fiscal year, we must ensure that OFNS has the funding they need to keep their staff members safe and to continue their essential work of feeding children.

**Provide Support and Protection for Nutrition Staff Working to Serve Families and Children.** We also want to recognize the members of the DOE OFNS staff who are serving school meals on the front lines of the pandemic. The entire New York City school system relies on the incredible men and women of Local 372, DC 37 to provide nutritious meals to children during the school year. Now, they are helping to feed every New Yorker. As school buildings continue to provide meals to kids and families, we must ensure that OFNS has a robust supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), masks, cleaning supplies and other resources needed to keep staff members safe and to continue their essential work of feeding children.

**Increase Awareness, Outreach and Enrollment for Nutrition Programs.** With record unemployment numbers in New York City and across the country, safety net programs are more important than ever. Programs like School Meals, Summer Meals, Community Meal Sites, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) exist to help families get back on their feet during hard times. However, these programs only work when people can access them. Current discussions reveal a cut to marketing and awareness budgets when the reverse is true – New York City should be investing increased funds into outreach and awareness programs.

With many New Yorkers qualifying for benefits for the first time and fear still associated with participation in some programs due to immigration status, there is a clear need for outreach efforts, in different languages, to inform communities about these programs and help eligible families enroll in them. Community based organizations in all 5 boroughs are engaged in this work and additional support

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/food/community-meals>

and coordination with New York City schools would help them deepen engagement and help even more New Yorkers use these programs to help put food on the table.

Safety net programs are important tools to help families in New York City weather this crisis, and investing in robust outreach and enrollment campaigns, including interagency outreach campaigns, will help families keep their children healthy and fed.

## **CONCLUSION**

New York City is facing a time of unprecedented challenges and devastating loss. In order to rebuild stronger and help struggling New Yorkers, it is essential that we ALL come together to help the City rise again. As you continue deliberations on the FY22 New York City budget, we urge the New York City Council to continue to prioritize funding to programs that ensure no New Yorker faces hunger. No Kid Hungry New York stands at the ready to work with the New York City Council and our fellow New Yorkers to ensure all children and families have access to the food they need to thrive.