



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York City Council Committee on Education
Hearing on School Food**

June 15, 2022

Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chair Joseph 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 School Food.

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. We are grateful that Speaker Adams' recent State of the City address included strong recommendations to addressing food insecurity and the FY23 New York City budget includes increased investment in programs addressing food insecurity.

No Kid Hungry New York is a campaign of Share Our Strength, a national 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. Since March of 2020, No Kid Hungry New York provided more than \$2 million in emergency grants and support across New York City and Puerto Rico. In addition to our grant-making, we also offered strategic assistance to hundreds of local organizations and advocated for policies to address the unique barriers and unprecedented level of need brought on by the pandemic. This included national child nutrition waivers, which allowed meal providers to adapt and streamline their federal child nutrition program operations so they could keep serving meals to kids, other program flexibilities for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Pandemic EBT to help reach more kids in need. No Kid Hungry will also continue to operate a local text line this summer – “NYC FOOD” or “NYC COMIDA” to 304-304 to help families locate meals, and No Kid Hungry New York will continue to work closely with the New York City 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 COVID-19 pandemic has affected all parts of our lives as New Yorkers. For many of our city's children and families, the pandemic and its economic consequences have had a disastrous impact on food security. Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 5 children in New York City were food insecure. **Recent estimates show that 1 in 4 New York City children may face food insecurity this year** and the numbers would likely be higher without interventions from the federal, state and city governments.¹

No Kid Hungry New York believes that all children, no matter their borough or circumstance, deserve the opportunity to be nourished and safe, so they can live up to their full potential and thrive.

Adequate nutrition, both at school and at home, helps lay the foundation for a child's physical and emotional development, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Years of data and research have demonstrated that federal nutrition programs are our nation's most effective defense against hunger and food insecurity and have helped lift millions of families out of poverty.

NEW YORK CITY HUNGER SURVEY

In April 2022, No Kid Hungry engaged in a new polling project in New York City that shows that many New Yorkers report experiencing hunger in the past 12 months due to lack of money or other resources. The numbers are impactful, particularly among parents of school age children.

Here are some of the key findings:

- A majority (62%) of New Yorkers say it is harder to afford groceries for their household than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 87% of respondents support expanding access to school-based programs that provide meals to children and families, like Grab-and-Go Breakfast and breakfast delivered to the classroom
- 36% report they had to skip a meal at least once.
- Nearly half (46%) of all respondents say they were unable to afford to eat healthy food. Families with kids in public school were the most likely to be forced to skip meals or to run out of food in the home.

An overwhelming majority (85%) of New Yorkers agree that ending childhood hunger should be a top priority for elected officials in New York. Similarly, 79% agree that elected officials in NYC should do more to help families put food on the table.

School Food

¹ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *Food Insecurity and Access in New York City during the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020-2021*. Epi Data Brief, No. 128, Nov. 2021.
<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/epi/databrief128.pdf>.

The New York City Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS, formerly known as School Food) is the largest school food authority in the country. They are responsible for implementing a range of federal nutrition programs including the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program as well as other innovating local programs. OFNS is also a major employer in New York City with a dedicated workforce, primarily composed of Local 372-DC 37 members.

For many children, school meals are their only source of consistent nutrition. The importance of school meals has never been more apparent than when school buildings closed for classroom learning in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic. This hearing is an opportunity to learn about OFNS initiatives, areas for growth to ensure more children are eating and ways New York City leaders can stand up for stronger policies.

Expiration of Federal Child Nutrition Waivers

Early in the pandemic, Congress gave the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to issue national child nutrition waivers that made it possible for schools to adapt their meal programs so they could still reach kids with the food they need. For example, waivers allowed for meals to be served outside traditional group settings, they waived penalties for challenges caused by strained supply chains, and they allowed parents to pick up multiple meals for kids learning from home. This made it simpler for DOE to reach more kids and have flexibilities in meeting meal pattern requirements.

Unfortunately, Congress has not extended USDA's authority to extend these waivers and they are slated to expire on June 30th. These waivers played a critical role in helping to feed millions of kids through the pandemic, and they are still helping NYC DOE cope with supply chain disruptions and higher food costs. Specifically, schools have been able to receive waivers from the usual meal standards so that they can still get reimbursement funding for the meals they're serving to students even when a missed delivery or product substitution leaves them out of compliance. The waivers have also provided NYC with higher funding rates to offset the dramatically higher costs they're facing now. Without these waivers, OFNS will struggle financially and struggle to provide high-quality meals in the coming school year.

There are still opportunities to have this waiver authority extended but we need New York City to take action NOW. No Kid Hungry New York strongly urges Mayor Eric Adams, NYC Council Speaker Adrienne Adams, NYC Schools Chancellor David Banks and members of the New York City Council to reach out to the New York Congressional Delegation, especially Leader Schumer and Senator Gillibrand, and urge them to extend this waiver authority as soon as possible.

Full Implementation of Breakfast After the Bell

In 2015, New York City 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 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. Despite these agreements, many schools chose not to participate and claimed there were operational barriers to offering grab and go breakfast or breakfast delivered to the classroom. Since the pandemic,

all New York City public schools have provided alternative breakfast options and this program expansion must become permanent. Students who start the day with breakfast have higher attendance, better test scores and fewer chronic health problems. We urge the Department of Education to ensure ALL schools successfully implement this key program so all children start the day the same way.

Culturally Relevant Meals

The New York City Department of Education has prioritized offering kosher and halal meals to children and families across the city. Each year, they have also expanded vegetarian and now vegan options. Failure to accommodate cultural food preferences can discourage children from participating in school, out-of-school time, and childcare nutrition programs, so this expansion has helped increase participation. New York City should continue to expand diverse food options and provide city agencies with training and tools to engage communities and plan culturally relevant menus.

Summer Meals Accessibility

Summer meals historically reach far fewer eligible students than meals served during the school year, making summer the hungriest time of the year. In New York City, barriers to access often include accessibility of meal sites and lack of program awareness among families. Broad promotion of the summer meals program and available meal sites is integral to reducing summer hunger among New York City's children. Ensuring that information regarding meal sites comes from trusted messengers, such as schools, local elected officials, principals, parent advisory councils, and faith leaders, is an important way to encourage families to participate in the summer meals program. Many families also struggle with reaching meal sites, especially if meal sites are not close to home or when facing extreme weather. Expanding the number of meal sites and strategically placing them to avoid gaps in service are both essential strategies to increase summer meals participation. We also urge the Council to help promote summer meals to your own constituents.

Provide Support and Protection for Nutrition Staff Working to Serve Families and Children

We also want to recognize the members of the Department of Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Services staff who have been on the front lines of the pandemic serving school meals to kids and families. 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 year-round. We must ensure the Department of Education has appropriate supplies, tools and resources to protect staff members as they continue their essential work of feeding children. We also owe them tremendous gratitude for these heroic efforts.

CONCLUSION

New York City is recovering from a prolonged period of unprecedented loss and challenges. Throughout the pandemic, city agencies and nonprofit organizations sustained and fed children and families. With the city reopening for business and communities slowly returning to pre-existing operations, it is essential that no New Yorkers are left behind. As you deliberate the FY23 New York City budget, we urge the New York City Council to prioritize funding programs that ensure none of New York's children face 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.