



NEW YORK

**Testimony for the New York City Council Committees on Finance and Education  
in New York City  
March 18, 2024**

**Submitted by No Kid Hungry New York**

**INTRODUCTION**

Chair Brannan, Chair Joseph and members of the New York City Council Committees on Finance and Education, Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on the Fiscal Year 2025 Preliminary budget for the New York City Department of Education. Even after reversing the effects of the November 2023 budget changes, we stress the importance of continuous support in the Executive Budget to maintain effectiveness of school meals throughout New York City. My name is Rachel Sabella, and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry New York.

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, No Kid Hungry New York builds and supports public-private partnerships with the goal of ensuring children have access to the healthy food they need, every day. No Kid Hungry New York has provided more than \$9 million to organizations, school districts, and government partners across New York State and Puerto Rico to help feed hundreds of thousands of kids since 2020.

First, we thank the Education and Finance Committees, along with the entire New York City Council, for your continued commitment to protect New York City from food insecurity. The City Council has long been a leader in moving New York City closer to ending childhood hunger. Now more than ever, we are counting on you as our partner in the fight against food insecurity as we face the danger of erasing years of progress.

New York City Public Schools are being threatened with a staggering cut to one of the most vital components to their students' academic achievement – school meals. Without full restoration of funding, there will be a negative impact on access to food after years of incredible progress. Back in 2017, after a years-long campaign by a massive coalition of advocates, including No Kid Hungry, New York City took the major step of implementing universal, no-cost school meals in every public school. But the progress did

not stop there; a year later, the State passed expansive “Breakfast After the Bell” legislation that created more flexible grab-and-go options that benefitted every school in New York City.

### **CURRENT STATUS OF HUNGER AND POVERTY IN NEW YORK CITY**

Now more than ever, as 1 in 5 children face hunger in New York, we are counting on you as our partner in the fight against food insecurity. No Kid Hungry’s own 2023 poll showed 2 in 5 New York families are experiencing food insecurity, and nearly 3 in 4 New Yorkers reported it had become harder to afford groceries. Over a quarter of New Yorkers had to decide between purchasing food versus another necessity, such as utility bills, rent, or gas. As one respondent from the Bronx wrote, “I had to choose between feeding my children or paying my light bill because there just isn’t enough food resources out here.”

As pandemic era programs come to an end and New Yorkers continue to face rising costs, we must take every step possible to connect more children with meals. Even when other levels of government have stepped back, New York City found the means to prioritize the fight against child hunger in our schools. New York City has a tremendous opportunity to lead the nation in this work and can do that by investing resources in school meal programs. Together we can make no kid hungry a reality.

**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 achieve their dreams.** 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.

As New Yorkers continue to face a hunger crisis, there are numerous investments that can and must be made in the FY 2025 New York City Executive Budget to improve food access and food security for children and families across New York City. By providing needed support to expand participation in federal nutrition programs and increase coordination and innovation, New York City can help to reduce food insecurity for New Yorkers in every borough and continue to reverse the trend of drastically increased food insecurity.

### **IMPACT OF FISCAL YEAR 2025 PRELIMINARY BUDGET ON SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS**

When released in January, the FY2025 New York City preliminary budget included a massive and immediate cut to school meal programs due to PEGs. This was shocking, since most recently, the Administration expanded the selections in school cafeterias so that every student could find something healthy they would want to eat, no matter their preferences or dietary restrictions. These policies have been massively successful resulting in a 9% increase in children participating in no-cost school meals for the start of this school year. Favorite items (that meant more children were eating) were removed from the menu and there was no true explanation for the cut.

We are grateful that Mayor Adams and the Department of Education heard the message from advocates and families across the City, led by the City Council, to restore mid-year cuts almost immediately and ensure children can continue to access healthy no-cost meals that they enjoy. While the restoration was made for FY 2024, we will be watching the FY 2025 Executive Budget documents closely to ensure the restoration is reflected there too.

In a city as diverse as this one, the OFNS team has worked diligently to expand options and provide culturally responsive meals and the recent proposed cuts showed how much students and parents value these options. Students spoke loudly about how much they valued the diverse menu items such as bean and cheese burritos, bone-in chicken, dumplings, guacamole and salsa, and bagel sticks especially as they were replaced by “soggy mozzarella sticks” as one student describes, and other lesser desired options.

The budget cuts could have had a detrimental impact on the unionized workforce as well. Training programs, the installation of air conditioners in kitchens, and other safety supports were initially rolled back when the first cuts were made. At the height of the pandemic, it was the men and women of OFNS that fed the entire City of New York, and we must protect their safety. We encourage the Department of Education to ensure these supports are restored now and continued in future years - we must support the workforce.

### **CONCLUSION**

The New York City Council has played a major role in ensuring New York City continues to be an innovative leader for school meal programs. As budget negotiations continue, we urge you to continue to prioritize increased funding for school meal programs. While New York City has made progress in increasing school meal participation, there is more work to be done to ensure more children are accessing these meals. No Kid Hungry New York looks forward to working with the City Council, the Department of Education, and the entire Adams Administration to continue to address ending childhood hunger.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to share my testimony.