



NEW YORK

## **Testimony for the New York City Council Committees on Finance and Education**

**May 15, 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, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on the Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget for the New York City Department of Education. We are concerned over the confusion and reduction in funding for the Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS). Now more than ever, as 1 in 5 children face hunger in New York City, it is critical we ensure OFNS is taking all steps to connect more kids with school meals. 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.

First, we thank 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 through expansion of school breakfast, championing no cost school meals and supporting efforts to protect SNAP and implement Summer EBT. 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.

The New York City Public Schools are being threatened with yet another staggering cut to one of the most vital components to their students' academic achievement – school meals. Based on proposed funding levels in the FY25 Executive Budget there will be a negative impact which likely will lead to a reversal of the progress we have made together.

## **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. As pandemic era programs (such as the expanded Child Tax Credit and increased SNAP benefits) 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 must be made in the FY 2025 New York City Executive Budget to ensure 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 EXECUTIVE BUDGET ON SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS**

Over the last few months, there has been confusion among students, parents, and advocates over opaque funding changes for the Mayor's Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS). These changes have caused concern around potential impacts to the school meal program in the largest school district in the nation.

Prior to November 2023, the Administration expanded school food menu options to include a more diverse selection of food to fit every student's need no matter preference or dietary restriction. With these menu additions, the no-cost school meals program became more successful in ensuring students had access to healthy and diverse food options leading to a 9% increase in participation.

In the November 2023 Financial Plan, advocates saw a \$60 million cut to OFNS, which the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) insisted was offset by an increase in federal funds coming to NYC. However, this swap of NYC and federal funds was not made clear to the public and led to confusion due to mixed messaging of whether the \$60 million was a cut.

In February 2024, OFNS made significant menu reductions. Favorite food items such as burritos, chicken drumsticks, french toast sticks, and chicken dumplings, which likely led to increased participation in the school food program and ensured every student could find food options no matter preference or dietary restrictions, were removed from the menu. Due to the blurred communications regarding the funds swap, advocates and [media](#) attributed the menu reductions to the \$60 million cut in NYC funds in the November 2023 Financial Plan.

During the City Council’s preliminary budget hearing with the Department of Education, students, parents, and advocates had a clear message about the adverse effects of menu reductions at schools. At this time, the Administration made public an additional \$25 million of federal funds for FY24 to restore the cut items to school food menus, which appeared in the FY25 Executive Budget released in April. We were grateful to the Administration and NYC Public Schools heard the message and restored the mid-year cuts, ensuring children could continue to access healthy no-cost meals.

Our concern now stems from the \$25 million in federal funds for OFNS not included in the office’s FY25 budget. Not only does the program not include the \$25 million that allowed the restoration of menu cuts, but the FY25 proposed budget for OFNS drops by \$52 million overall.

	<b>School Food Budget</b>			
	FY24 Adopted Budget	FY24 as of April of 2024	FY25 Executive Budget Proposal	Change FY24 to FY25 Exec
Total	<b>\$546.3</b>	<b>\$606.9</b>	<b>\$554.7</b>	<b>(\$52.2)</b>

In a city as diverse as this one, the OFNS team has worked diligently to expand options and provide culturally responsive meals. The turn out at the preliminary budget hearing and testimony focused on the cuts made to school meals showed the value students place on having more options. Students spoke loudly about how much they valued the diverse menu items such as bean and cheese burritos, chicken drumsticks, 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. This made the return of preferred items even more important. But with the proposed \$25 million funding drop in FY25, will there be a return to soggy mozzarella sticks?

The budget reduction in FY25 could have 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 NYC Public Schools to ensure these supports are restored now to at least the \$606.9 million and continue in future years.

**2024 NEW YORK HUNGER SURVEY FINDINGS**

In April of 2024, No Kid Hungry released the findings of our third annual Hunger Survey and the findings were deeply concerning. 85 percent of New Yorkers reported that the cost of food was rising faster than their income. As a result, nearly 4 in 5 households said it had become harder to afford groceries over the past 12 months—the highest percentage tracked yet in our annual poll. No Kid Hungry’s own 2024 poll showed 79% of New Yorkers said it had become harder to afford groceries over the past year and . 43%

of New Yorkers said they had experienced signs of food insecurity because of cost., while 51% of New Yorkers bought less (or no) meat, fish, eggs, or other protein due to cost, and 45% bought less (or no) fresh produce.

The poll was in the field in mid-March of 2024 - when some of the students favorite items were removed from the menus due to budget cuts. Not only are parents struggling to provide nutritious food at home, 28% of parents identified that the quality of food in New York City Public Schools was on the decline. We believe this was likely driven by the budget cuts implemented which reduced school meal options. Parents are already grappling with the challenge of providing nutritious meals at home, and the proposed cuts may further exacerbate the situation, potentially leaving many children without access to healthy foods.

### **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. Prioritizing stable, consistent funding for school meals is essential. No Kid Hungry New York looks forward to working with the City Council, the NYC Public Schools, and the entire Adams Administration to continue to address ending childhood hunger.

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