

New York State Comptroller
THOMAS P. DiNAPOLI

Let's Do Lunch

New York's School Meal Expansion

October 2026

Prepared by the Office of Budget and Policy Analysis

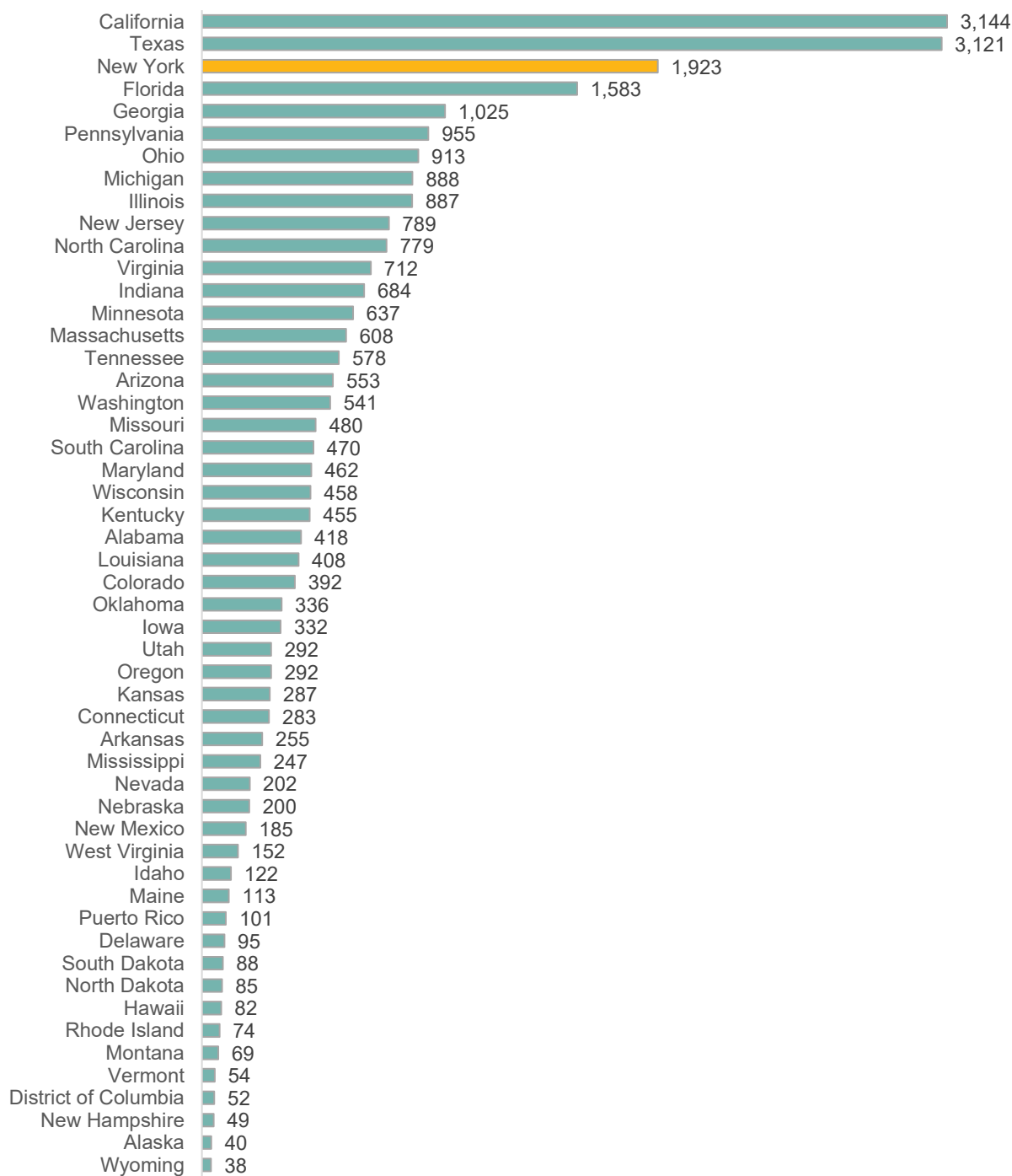
Introduction

School meal programs provide students with breakfast, lunch, and for students staying after school, a snack.¹ Public and nonprofit private schools, as well as residential child care institutions, are all eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program. These programs have been shown to lower rates of food insecurity, student hunger, disciplinary referrals and increase the rate of on-time grade promotion, with universal school meal programs potentially having an even greater impact.² In addition, universal school meal programs may help decrease the stigma that is created when some students receive free lunches while others pay.³ These impacts are critical in New York, where one in eight households is facing [food insecurity](#) and far too many students [lack stable housing](#).

New York has long recognized the role food security plays in making sure that students are prepared to learn. As early as 1853 the Children's Aid Society of New York began serving lunches to students at a vocational school.⁴ In 1908 the New York City public schools began a pilot program, providing school lunches in two schools, which was expanded just two years later.⁵ With the establishment of the National School Lunch Act, approved in 1946, the federal government took a prominent role in supporting school meal programs by providing funding for school lunches and requiring minimum nutritional standards for these meals.⁶ Since the establishment of the National School Lunch Act, various modifications have taken place, including the creation of the school breakfast program as a pilot program in 1966, expanding to all schools in 1972.⁷

Between 2010 and 2025, both federal and State initiatives expanded support for school meal programs. Through these actions, hundreds and then thousands of New York schools began providing free school meals to all their students. This culminated in 2025 when New York became the ninth state to provide free school meals for all children.⁸ As of May of 2026, New York had more than 1.9 million students participating in the school lunch program, the third highest total in the nation.⁹

Figure 1
Children Participating in the National School Lunch Program, May 2026
(in thousands)



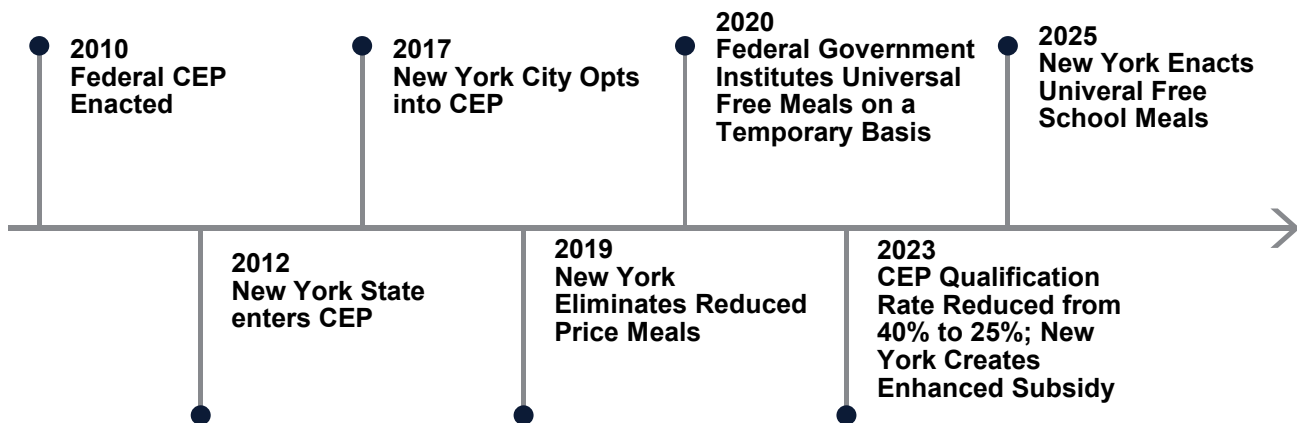
Note: Data is preliminary and subject to change. Participation data are based on average daily meals adjusted by an attendance factor of 0.927.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture - Food and Nutrition Administration, [Child Nutrition Tables](#).

Getting to Universal Meals

Over several years, New York expanded access to universal school meals through a combination of federal policy changes and State investments. Key milestones include:

Figure 2
Universal School Meal Adoption Timeline



Federal Funding

New York's school meal program relies heavily on federal funding. The federal government provides a subsidy to school meal programs for every meal that is served. The reimbursement varies based on household income:

- Students living in households below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) qualify for free meals and receive the highest subsidy.
- Students in households between 130 and 185 percent of the FPL qualify for reduced-price meals with a slightly lower subsidy.
- Students living in households above 185 percent of the FPL pay full price and qualify for a smaller subsidy.¹⁰

These rates were originally specified in the program's enabling legislation and are adjusted annually based on the Consumer Price Index for Food Away From Home.¹¹

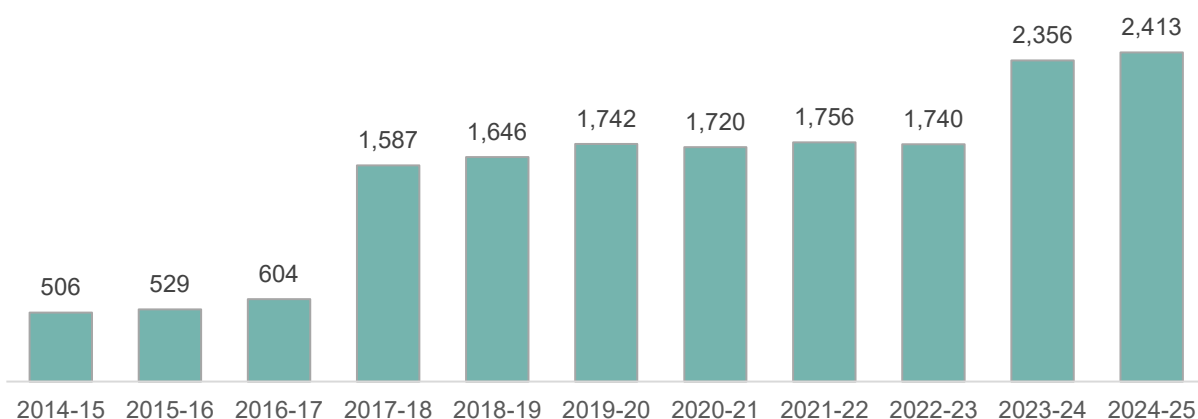
In 2010 Congress created the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools, groups of schools, or school districts that meet certain conditions to provide free school meals to all students. Students can be certified directly if they are eligible for other federal assistance programs, such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹² Schools participating in the CEP are reimbursed through an alternative formula. Only schools

reaching an identified student percentage of at least 62.5 percent receive full meal reimbursement for all students; others receive a blended rate.¹³

Early New York Progress

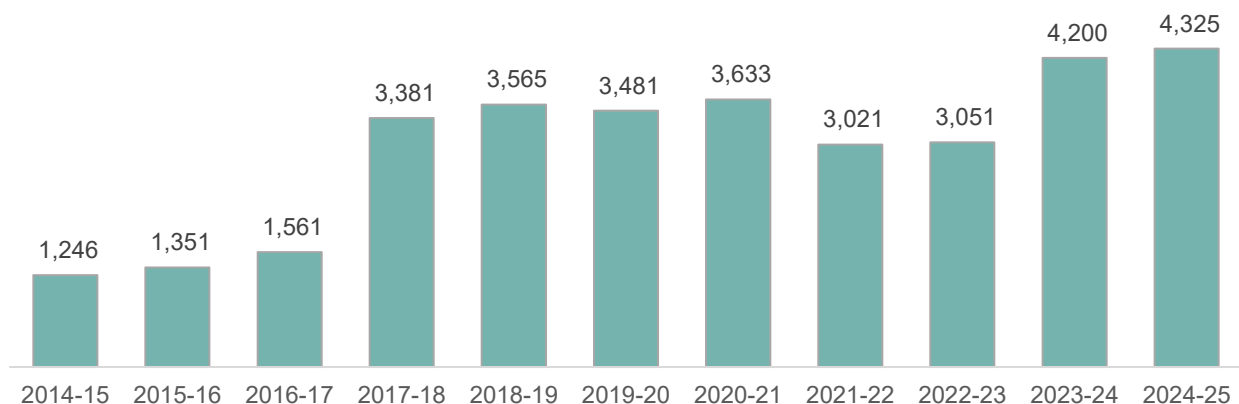
Schools in New York became eligible to participate in CEP beginning in SY 2012-13. New York City opted into CEP for SY 2017-18, vastly increasing the number of children with access to free meals and more than doubling the number of schools participating in CEP in the state.¹⁴ By SY 2017-18 the majority of students in the state attended schools that provided universal school meals.

Figure 3
Number of Students in Schools Participating in CEP in New York, by SY
(in thousands)



Sources: Food Research & Action Center [Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools: School Year 2023-2024](#) and [New York Fact Sheet October 2025](#).

Figure 4
Number of Schools Participating in CEP in New York



Sources: Food Research & Action Center [Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools: School Year 2023-2024](#) and [New York Fact Sheet October 2025](#).

Recognizing the importance and the cost of providing school meals, New York has provided subsidies to school food authorities (SFAs), the entities responsible for operating school meal programs, in addition to the federal reimbursement received.¹⁵ SFAs are the governing bodies responsible for administering school meal programs for one or more schools, typically the food service departments within school districts.¹⁶

In 2018, New York passed several laws related to the provision of school meals. One requires public schools with over 70 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals to also provide breakfast. That same year, the State prohibited schools from any policy that would shame or publically identify students who were unable to pay for their school meals. Finally, an additional State subsidy was created for schools who purchase at least 30 percent of the total cost of school lunch products from New York State farmers, growers, producers, or processors.¹⁷

In 2019 the State began providing a subsidy to eliminate the charge to students receiving reduced price meals, further expanding the number of students receiving free meals.¹⁸

Pandemic Brings Universal Free Meals to New York – Temporarily

During the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government provided extensive support for states, localities, and school districts. Federal waivers allowed schools to distribute meals to students outside school buildings and for SFAs to receive higher reimbursement rates.¹⁹ This allowed schools nationwide to provide universal school meals.²⁰

SY 2022-23 marked a return to the pre-pandemic system. While over 1.7 million students in New York attended more than 3,000 schools that were providing universal school meals, the balance of students remained in a bifurcated system, with some students receiving free school meals and others having to pay. During this time, several other states, including California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont, implemented universal free school meal programs.²¹

Federal and State Policy Expansion

In March 2023, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration proposed a rule, subsequently adopted in the fall, to decrease the required ratio of identified students to qualify for CEP from 40 percent to 25 percent, significantly expanding eligibility.²²

New York policymakers took advantage of this change by expanding the State meal subsidy for schools participating in CEP, lowering the barrier for schools to enter the program and provide universal school meals. The State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2024 Enacted Budget included a provision and State funding for schools participating in CEP to bring the reimbursement level of every meal served to match that of a free meal.²³ These intertwined policies accelerated adoption, increasing the number of New York schools participating in CEP from 3,051 in SY 2022-23 to 4,200 in SY 2023-24. In the 2024-25 School Year (SY), 4,325 schools in New York participated in CEP, covering 2.4 million students.

Figure 5
School Lunch Reimbursement Rates for the 2026-27 School Year
(amounts per meal)

	Free	Reduced	Paid
Federal	\$4.76	\$4.36	\$0.45
State	\$0.0599	\$0.4599	\$4.3699
Total Reimbursement	\$4.8199	\$4.8199	\$4.8199

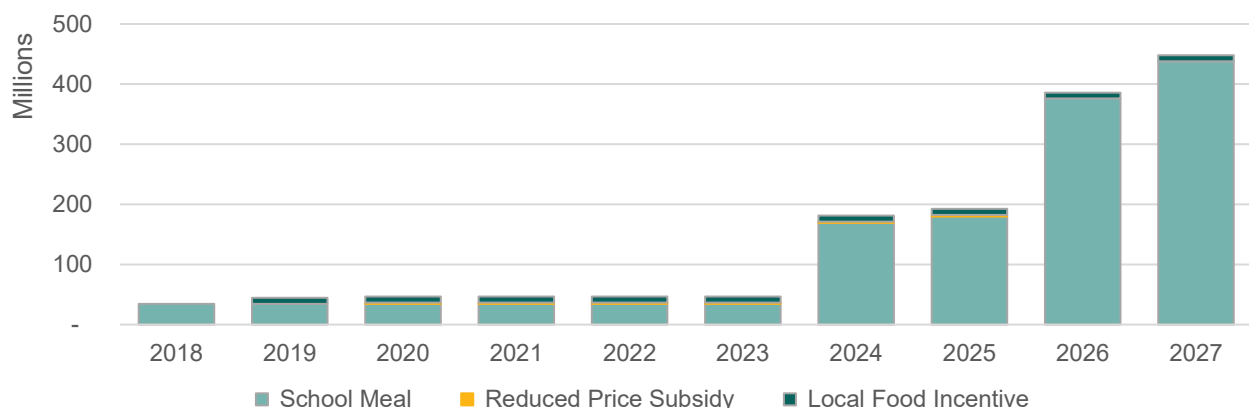
Notes: Reimbursement rates for programs where fewer than 60 percent of lunches served in the school lunch program during the second preceding school year were served at free or reduced price. For those programs with 60 percent or more free or reduced price lunches, the federal reimbursement rate is only slightly higher, 2 cents per meal. School food authorities are eligible for an additional nine cent performance-based reimbursement per meal if they are certified as meeting certain meal pattern and nutritional standards.

Sources: Data on reimbursement rates from the New York State Education Department [2026-2027 School Year Reimbursement Rates](#). Additional information for the note from the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Information [National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rate SY 2026-27](#).

Universality

Through the State-federal partnership, by SY 2025-26 90 percent of students in New York were receiving free meals.²⁴ The SFY 2026 Executive Budget contained a proposal to create full universality, expanding the State subsidy to every school. The Enacted Budget contained the provision which required all schools participating in the federal school meal program to provide free school lunches, and provided, as the Governor recommended, an additional \$160 million to subsidize the program. As part of the legislation, eligible schools are required to join CEP to maximize federal reimbursement, lowering the State cost to subsidize the program. These actions made New York the ninth state to implement universal free school meals beginning in SY 2025-26.

Figure 6
New York State Funded School Meal Appropriations SFY 2018 – SFY 2027



Sources: New York State Enacted Budget Bills.

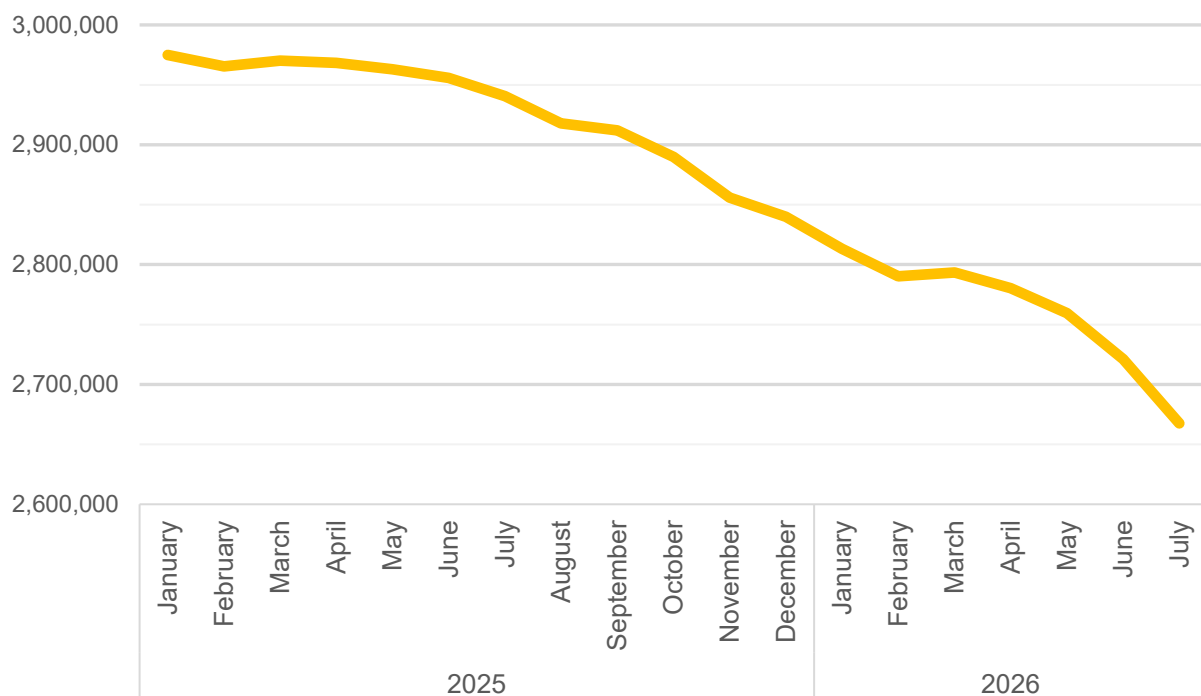
Uncertain Federal Landscape

In Federal Fiscal Year 2025, New York received over \$1.1 billion in federal funding for its school meal program.²⁵ However, recent policy developments threaten federal support for New York's universal school meal program.

Changes to SNAP and Medicaid eligibility made in Public Law 119-21 (P.L. 119-21), enacted in July 2025, will impact CEP certification. These changes included [restricting SNAP and Medicaid eligibility](#) for certain legally present immigrants, as well as expanding work requirements and increasing the frequency of eligibility renewals for some Medicaid recipients. These changes are projected to cause reduced participation in these programs, decreasing the number of students who appear in need of support and potentially increasing State subsidy costs.²⁶

Nationally, there are already signs that SNAP participation is already declining. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that from July of 2025 to June of 2026 in just 28 states there has been a decline of 1.5 million children receiving SNAP benefits.²⁷ Based on data from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the number of people receiving SNAP benefits declined by nearly 273,000 between July 2025 and July 2026.²⁸

Figure 7
Number of People Receiving SNAP in New York State, January 2025 – July 2026



Source: New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, [SNAP Caseloads and Expenditures](#)

The second potential risk to the program is from proposals to increase the CEP qualifying rate from 25 percent to 60 percent. This could result in a large number of schools in New York no longer qualifying for CEP, which in turn could potentially increase State costs to maintain the program. In the lead-up to the adoption of P.L. 119-21, such a proposal was included in a list of potential savings actions with an estimated federal savings of \$3 billion over 10 years.²⁹

The continuing partnership between the State and federal government is essential to maintaining the universal free meal program. Proposals that restrict student access to meal programs could add costs to the State, making the program more difficult to maintain. Any federal action to cut school food support would not just hurt New York fiscally, but would take away essential nutrition from students in New York and nationwide who depend on these essential programs to stay fed and prepared to learn.

Endnotes

- ¹ New York State Education Department, [Child Nutrition Programs](#), (accessed September 3, 2026).
- ² Amelie Hecht, et al. [Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on Student Nutrition, Behavior, and Academic Outcomes: 2011-2019](#). American Journal of Public Health, 2020 Sep; 110 (9): pages 1405-1410.
- Irma Arteaga and Colleen Heflin, [Participation in the National School Lunch Program and food security: An analysis of transitions into kindergarten](#). Children and Youth Services Review 47 (2014) pgs. 224-230.
- Food Research & Action Center, [School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning](#). May 2021 (accessed September 9, 2026).
- ³ Donka M Mirtcheva and Lisa M Powell, [Participation in the National School Lunch Program: Importance of school-level and neighborhood contextual factors](#). *Journal of School Health*, 79(10), 485–494, 2009.
- Thurston Domina et al. [There Is Such a Thing as a Free Lunch: School Meals, Stigma, and Student Discipline](#), American Educational Research Journal, Volume 61, Issue 2, January, 2024, (accessed September 10, 2026).
- ⁴ Gordon W. Gunderson, [The National School Lunch Program, Background and Development](#), United States Government Printing Office, 1971 (accessed September 3, 2026).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Janet Poppendieck, [Celebrating the History of School Breakfast: The Beginning](#), Food Research & Access Center blog post, (accessed September 29, 2026).
- ⁸ See Part B of Chapter 56 of the Laws of 2025 for the legislation enacted universal school meals. See the Healthy School Meals For All [website](#) for information regarding New York being the 9th state to institute such a policy.
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration, [Child Nutrition Tables](#), (accessed September 1, 2026).
- ¹⁰ Said Toosi, et al. [The National School Lunch Program: Background, Trends, and Issues, 2024 Edition](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, Pg. 5, (accessed September 3, 2026).
- ¹¹ [7 CFR Part 210 -- National School Lunch Program](#)
- USDA Food and Nutrition Administration, School Meals Reimbursement Rates, (accessed September 24, 2026).
- ¹² When the CEP was originally created, schools or school districts with over 40 percent of students eligible for free school lunches through direct certification qualified for the program. Students can be directly certified if they are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), as well as through other means. See U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration, [Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation](#), (accessed September 3, 2025).
- ¹³ The amount of meals reimbursed at the free price rate is calculated by multiplying the percentage of qualifying students by 1.6 with a maximum of 100 percent. Identified percentage is the number of students approved for free school meals based on receipt of SNAP, TANF, the Food Distribution program on Indian Reservations or Medicaid, divided by the number of enrolled students. See [https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-245/section-245.9#p-245.9\(f\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-245/section-245.9#p-245.9(f)) for more details (accessed September, 9, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Office of the New York State Comptroller, Federal Funding and New York: Federal Funds to New York City, [National School Lunch, Breakfast Programs](#), (accessed September 3, 2026).
- ¹⁵ New York State Education Department, [Child Nutrition Programs](#), (accessed September 3, 2026).
- ¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, [School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding](#), Updated July 16, 2025, page 15, (accessed September 24, 2026).
- ¹⁷ All three are in Part B of Chapter 56 of the Laws of 2018.
- ¹⁸ Chapter 53 of the Laws of 2019.

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- ¹⁹ Liana Washburn, et al. [Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, July 2021 through September 2022](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, March 2025, (accessed September 4, 2026).
- ²⁰ Francesco Ramponi, et al. [Universal Free School Meal Policies and Participation in the US National School Meal Programs](#), JAMA Pediatrics, 2025 Aug 4, Pgs 1108-1118.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration, [Proposed Rule: Child Nutrition Programs Community Eligibility Provision - Increasing Options for Schools](#), March 23, 2023, RIN 0584-AE93.
- ²³ Chapter 56 of the Laws of 2023: Part A, Section 3-a for the Law, Chapter 53 of the Laws of 2023, page 253-254 for the appropriation.
- ²⁴ New York State Division of the Budget, [Briefing Book \(PDF\) | NYS FY 2026 Executive Budget](#), (accessed September 4, 2026).
- ²⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Administration, [Child Nutrition Tables](#), (accessed September 1, 2026).
- ²⁶ Congressional Research Service, [FY2025 Budget Reconciliation: Implications for USDA's Child Nutrition Efforts](#)
- ²⁷ The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, [SNAP Tracker](#), (accessed September 25, 2026).
- ²⁸ USDA, [SNAP Data Tables](#), (accessed September 25, 2026).
- ²⁹ Ways and Means Committee [Reconciliation Options 2025](#) (accessed September 4, 2026).



Contact

Office of the New York State Comptroller
110 State Street
Albany, New York 12236

(518) 474-4044

www.osc.ny.gov

Prepared by the Office of Budget and Policy Analysis

Andrea Miller, Executive Deputy Comptroller
Maria Doulis, Deputy Comptroller
Matt Golden, Assistant Comptroller
Timothy Loftus, Program Research Specialist



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