

The Dobbs Ferry Board of Education is seeking the community's help to advocate for an important issue being considered right now in the New York State budget process: Establishing and funding a permanent statewide "Healthy School Meals for All" program.

Last summer, Congress ended the federal program, which started during the pandemic, that provided free school meals to all public school students. That federal program was so effective and beneficial to students that at least seven states have already stepped in to provide free meals to all their students and 20 more states have considered similar programs this year. It's easy to see why. Studies show that universal access to free meals in schools leads to improvements in areas like school attendance, behavior, health outcomes and academic achievement. It eliminates the stigma associated with free school meals and reduces bullying. It provides families financial relief – saving families an estimated \$140 per child in monthly grocery spending – and eliminates school meal debt, a significant burden for families and school budgets.

This past fall, with the federal universal free meals program ending, more than 726,000 students in New York lost access to free school meals and families' school meal debt has already skyrocketed. In the Hudson Valley region, nearly 146,500 students lost access to free school meals.

We believe New York State must do better by our students. We are joined by many others who agree, including the New York State PTA, the New York State School Boards Association, New York State United Teachers, the New York Farm Bureau, and a large coalition of children's health advocates and elected officials from both sides of the aisle. Both the Senate and Assembly support restoring free school meals for all students in their one-house budget bills. Now it is up to Governor Hochul to ensure that Healthy School Meals for All is fully funded in the FY2024 State budget.

Please contact Governor Hochul and tell her that you support this crucial program. You can do so by visiting the New York State PTA website at <https://nyspta.org> and clicking on "Advocacy" and then selecting "Take Action" in the drop down menu, which brings you to a Voter Voice email tool. Or you can draft your own message by visiting <https://www.governor.ny.gov/> and clicking "Contact."