November 9, 2026

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Re: FY 2027–28 Executive Budget Request – $10 Million to Ensure Universal School Meals are Inclusive and Accessible to All New York Students

Dear Governor Hochul,

On behalf of our tens of thousands of New York State members and supporters, we respectfully request that you include **$10 million in the FY 2027-28 Executive Budget** to establish a voluntary opt-in grants program administered by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to enable school districts to reliably offer kosher, halal, and plant-based entrées and/or beverages across breakfast, lunch, and other child nutrition programs.

Thanks to your visionary leadership, New York enacted Universal School Meals in 2025, recognizing that every child learns best when well nourished. However, the principle of Universal School Meals remains unfulfilled for students whose religious, health, and other dietary needs fall outside of conventional menu offerings. Today, students requiring kosher, halal, or plant-based meals frequently face inadequate choices or no choices at all.

When schools lack inclusive meal options, the financial burden falls directly on families. Parents whose children follow kosher, halal, or plant-based diets often cannot participate in Universal School Meals, and must purchase groceries for packed school meals or risk their children going hungry at school. Driven by persistent food inflation, these additional grocery costs place an unsustainable strain on families—who spend between $1,600 and $1,980 per child per year on meals—an estimate that does not account for additional expenses required for kosher, halal, or plant-based foods.[1] A "universal" meal program is not truly universal if families are financially penalized for adhering to religious, health-related, or other dietary requirements.

For families who cannot afford to purchase groceries for packed meals, the consequences are severe: students are forced to go hungry, triggering a cascading cycle of harm. This hardship disproportionately impacts faith communities. Studies show 25% of U.S. Jewish residents struggle to afford at least one basic necessity, while 10% of halal-observant Muslims face food

[1] Hunger Solutions New York, *Every Student, Every Day: Universal School Meals are a Victory for Kids, Families, and Schools* (Oct. 9, 2025), https://hungersolutionsny.org/universal-school-meals-a-victory-for-families-and-schools/; New York Office of Children and Family Services, *Governor Hochul Announces More Than 150 Million Free School Meals Served to Students Across New York State Since Start of School Year,* https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/news/article.php?idx=2725.

insufficiency, with many choosing to go without food rather than violate religious dietary needs.[2] Nutritional deficits weaken children's immune systems, leading to increased illness and chronic absenteeism, while impaired cognitive function results in lower standardized test scores, behavioral disruptions, and declining academic performance.[3]

While kosher, halal, and plant-based meals represent different dietary requirements, they share a common challenge: current school food systems are not designed or funded to provide them at scale. New York State is home to the nation's largest Jewish and Muslim populations, with an estimated 38% of New York City public school students identifying as Jewish or Muslim,[4] alongside rapidly growing communities across suburban and upstate districts.[5] One poll found that 83% of Muslim respondents keep or prefer to follow a halal diet.[6] Meanwhile, Jewish and Muslim youth are increasingly requiring foods that adhere to their religious traditions.[7] Meeting these needs often involves procuring certified products, compliance oversight, and, in some cases, kitchen adjustments. For instance, serving halal food involves rigorous verification, monitoring, and oversight through the entire supply chain to safeguard product integrity. School districts must rely heavily on the commercial market where certified products are significantly more expensive and difficult to procure,[8] making targeted financial support essential.

At the same time, demand for plant-based entrées and beverages continues to grow among

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[2] Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020* (May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/05/PF_05.11.21_Jewish.Americans.pdf; Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, *American Muslim Poll 2022* (Aug. 25, 2022), https://ispu.org/poll/american-muslim-poll-2022-1/; Met Council, *Food Insufficiency and Halal Observance Among American Muslims: Met Council's Analysis of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's 2022 American Muslim Poll,* https://metcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Met_Council_Report_on_ISPU_Poll.pdf.

[3] School Nutrition Association, *School Meal Statistics,* https://schoolnutrition.org/about-school-meals/school-meal-statistics/; Statement of Dr. Eduardo Ochoa Jr., M.D., Children's Health Watch, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Committee on Agriculture, U.S. House of Representatives (Oct. 27, 2015), https://agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/10.27.15_ochoa_testimony.pdf; K. Alamo, C.M. Olson, and E.A. Frongillo Jr., *Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development,* 108(1) Pediatrics 44-53 (July 2001), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11433053/.

[4] New York City Comptroller's Office, *Halal and Kosher School Lunch Pilot Proposal* (May 2018), https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Halal_Kosher_Pilot_Proposal.pdf.

[5] UJA Federation of New York, *2023 Community Study: Population Estimates and Demography,* https://communitystudy.ujafedny.org/topic-areas/population-estimates-demography; Orthodox Jewish Public Affairs Council, *Census Data! Population Growth in Multiple Counties Was Led By Orthodox Jewish-Populated Neighborhoods* (Aug. 15, 2021), https://tinyurl.com/b6dds92r; The Association of Religion Data Archives, *Westchester County, New York - County Membership Report* (2020), https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2020&y2=0&t=0&c=36119.

[6] Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, *American Muslim Poll 2022* (Aug. 25, 2022), https://ispu.org/poll/american-muslim-poll-2022-1/.

[7] Research and Markets, *Halal Food Market Size, Share, Trends, and Forecast By Product, Distribution Channel, and Region, 2026-2034*, https://www.researchandmarkets.com/report/halal-food; Market Research Report, *Kosher Food Market* (April 2025), https://market.us/report/global-kosher-food-market/.

[8] Office of New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer, Bureaus of Policy and Research, Budget, and Public Affairs, *Halal and Kosher School Lunch Pilot Proposal* (May 2018), https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Halal_Kosher_Pilot_Proposal.pdf.

students and families for religious, cultural, health, environmental, and ethical reasons. Student demand for plant-based meal options is prominent: nationwide survey data shows that one in three students rate vegetarian or vegan options as extremely or very important when choosing lunch at school, while 37% reported they would participate in school lunch programs more often if vegetarian or vegan choices were more broadly available.[9] Expanding access to plant-based meals is also essential to advancing racial equity in nutrition. Approximately 57% of New York State's 2.4 million public school students belong to racial and ethnic groups with disproportionately high rates of lactose intolerance (ranging from 50% to over 90% among Black, Hispanic, and Asian communities). Plant-based meal and beverage options ensure these students receive proper nourishment without suffering illness or discomfort.

By serving as a versatile, inclusive option, plant-based entrées can streamline school food service operations. A single plant-based meal can serve omnivores, vegetarians, vegans, and students with certain common food allergies. In many cases, plant-based meals can also meet the needs of certain religious dietary practices—including those observed by many Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Seventh-day Adventist, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christian communities. Reliably serving plant-based options to accommodate students of these varied dietary requirements simplifies meal planning, food procurement, and kitchen workflows, all while expanding student choice.

School districts can face financial barriers when introducing or expanding plant-based, kosher, and halal meal options, including up-front costs for recipe development, staff training, student engagement, equipment, certifications, and other implementation needs. Targeted state funding can help districts overcome these initial barriers and make changes that may ultimately reduce ongoing food costs. For example, a 2024 analysis of university catering by Bryant Research found that food costs for plant-based meals were, on average, 30% lower than for meat-based meals and 21% lower than for vegetarian meals, demonstrating that plant-based meals can be a cost-effective option.[10] A new federal law also creates an important opportunity for schools to expand access to non-dairy milk by allowing them to proactively offer nutritionally equivalent options, such as fortified soy milk, to all students without requiring a medical or parental request. However, because soy milk costs more than cow's milk, schools need additional resources to take advantage of this new flexibility and make it broadly available. State investment can therefore help schools absorb both the up-front costs of transitioning menus and the ongoing costs of expanding access to nondairy milk, while supporting meal programs that can become financially sustainable over time.

Under the proposed NYSED opt-in grants program, funding would be distributed to participating

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[9] Chartwells, *Chartwells K-12 Wants Kids to 'Veg Out' with New Plant-Forward Lunch Menus and Food Stations in School Cafeterias Across the Country,* https://www.chartwellsk12.com/chartwells-k12-wants-kids-to-veg-out-with-new-plant-forward-lunch-menus-and-food-stations-in-school-cafeterias-across-the-country/.

[10] Billy Nicholles and Chris Bryant, Ph.D., *Climate-Conscious & Cost-Effective: The Case for Plant-Based University Catering* (Bristol, UK: Bryant Research, 2024), https://bryantresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Case-for-Plant-Based-University-Catering.pdf.

districts based on local student and district needs. School food authorities could flexibly apply grant funds toward culinary training, consulting, technical assistance, menu development, food procurement, student engagement (e.g., taste tests), halal and kosher certification, kitchen equipment upgrades, and/or associated labor or operational expenses.

Universal School Meals have already transformed school foodservice by reducing stigma, supporting affordability for families with school-age children, and improving student well-being. Investing in plant-based, kosher, and halal meal options is a critical next step to build on these gains—ensuring that every student can fully benefit from the promise of Universal School Meals.

We appreciate your continued leadership on child nutrition and educational equity. Our organizations stand ready to partner with your administration and NYSED to make New York's school meals the most inclusive in the nation.

Respectfully,

211 New York Inc.
Acterra
Altagracia Faith and Justice Works
Bethany Center Hudson Valley
Black Veg Society
Brighter Green
Bronx Eats, Inc.
Bronx Health REACH
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation
Cafeteria Culture
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Jewish Food Ethics
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Chef Ann Foundation
Chilis on Wheels
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
Cleveland Hill Union Free School District
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families
Coalition for Healthy School Food
Council on American-Islamic Relations, New York
Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit
DSI International, Inc.
Earthjustice
Eastchester (NY) Environmental Committee
Equity Advocates
Farm School NYC
Farmingdale Union Free School District
FoodCorps

Friends of the Earth
Green Beetz
Green Bites
Green Islam
GreenFaith
Healthy Kids, Happy Planet!
Humane World for Animals
Integrity Partners for Behavioral Health IPA
Interfaith Public Health Network
Jewish Vegan Life
Land to Learn
Lansing Central School District
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education and Policy, Columbia University
Majlis Ash-Shura: Islamic Leadership Council of New York
Mercy For Animals
Mohonasen Central School District
Muslim Community Network
National REACH Coalition
New Roots Charter School
New York Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
New York City Mayor's Office of Food Policy
New York City Public Schools
New York State American Academy of Pediatrics
New Yorkers for Clean, Livable, and Safe Streets
Niskayuna Central School District
North American Food Systems Network
Physicians Against Red Meat
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Plant Based Foods Association
Plant Based Treaty
Plant Powered Metro New York / Share the Health
Remarkable Foods
Resurrection House, Inc.
Rhoda Bloom Kosher Food Pantry
Rochester Food Policy Council
Shamayim: Jewish Animal Advocacy
Smithtown Central School District
Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter
St. Francis High School
Superhumn Inc.
Syracuse City School District
Teach New York
Teens for Food Justice
The Climate Reality Project: New York State Chapters Coalition

The Humane League
The Institute for Family Health
The Institute for Human Services, Inc.
United Way of New York State
Uri L'Tzedek: Orthodox Social Justice
Voters for Animal Rights
Wellness in the Schools
West Harlem Group Assistance, Inc.
Westchester County (NY) Chapter of the Climate Reality Project
Yeshiva Ahavath Israel Bnos Visnitz
Yonkers Public Schools
Zone 126