

## **As budgets are cut, advocates push for continued free lunch**



City Councilman Brad Lander speaks at a rally today to oppose school lunch cuts.  
(*Courtesy: Lander's office*)

Last month, city officials [announced](#) a plan to save \$3 million by reducing the number of students receiving free lunch next year. Today, elected officials and child advocates struck back from the steps of City Hall.

The group was arguing that the city's plan to end the practice at some schools of providing free lunch to all students, not just those who fill out forms proving their need, could force some hungry students go unfed.

“For many low-income kids, universal free lunches are depended-upon meals,” Councilwoman Letitia James said in a statement. “We all know that children need nutrients and nourishment to best process information throughout the day. Cutting universal free lunches would, in effect, be impairing children’s ability to learn. This is not an acceptable proposal.”

The city has said it expects to save \$24 million in total by changing its school lunch program. Other changes [include](#) reducing the number of hot options at all schools and cutting 276 food service employees.

### **Press Release: Council Members and Advocates Rally to Save Free & Healthy Lunches in City Schools**

New York, NY - New York City Council Members, along with food and public education advocates, called today for the restoration of proposed cuts to NYC’s School Food program, so that low-income kids don’t go hungry, and all kids have healthy choices. In particular, council members and advocates called for the restoration of \$3 million to prevent the elimination of nearly 100 schools from the Universal School Meals program,

which insures that all kids in predominantly low-income schools receive free lunches, and has been shown to improve health, nutrition, and academic achievement.

The NYC Department of Education, which has a budget of over \$18 billion, has proposed substantial cuts to the School Food program: eliminating the Universal School Meals program in nearly 100 schools, and reducing the number of hot lunch options available in all schools (from 2 to 1 in elementary schools, from 3 to 2 in middle and high schools).

Under the Universal School Meals program, participating schools are able to offer students free breakfast and lunch regardless of their income, residency, or citizenship status. Filling out the necessary forms to qualify for free or reduced lunch is a barrier to many families that could benefit from these programs. The Universal School Meals program gives schools and their children access to healthy, nutritious meals while reducing the paperwork and simplifying the logistics of operating school meals programs. Providing free school meals universally within a school system has been shown to increase the likelihood that the meals are eaten, therefore improving children's eating habits and their overall attention and ability to learn. Schools that provide universal breakfast in the classroom report decreases in discipline and psychological problems, decreases in visits to school nurses and tardiness, increases in student attentiveness and attendance, and generally improved learning environments.

“A strong public school food program - with universal free meals in low-income schools, and healthy food choices for all kids — is essential to keeping kids healthy and making sure they can learn,” said Councilmember Brad Lander. “This is a small investment in our children's future when considering the vast improvement in academic performance and overall well-being it promotes.”

“Balancing the budget on the bellies of hungry students is just plain cruel,” stated Councilmember Robert Jackson, chair of the City Council's Education Committee. “America is still one of the world's wealthiest nations. During these widespread hard times, the least we can do is feed our children. Hungry children can't learn — what is DOE thinking?”

“Schools often serve as the primary or only source of balanced meals for our city's youth,” said Councilmember Gale A. Brewer. “Unfortunately, many low-income students each day decide to forego school meals in order to avoid being identified as a reduced cost or free lunch student. The Universal School Meals system ensures students are not stigmatized and increases their likelihood to participate in school meals. In order to save \$20-50 million in city tax levy funds, the city risks losing significant portions of the \$350 million it receives in federal reimbursement dollars and depriving thousands of low income students of a nutritious meal.”

“The Universal Free Lunch Program eliminates the paperwork and stigmatic barriers to access for children who cannot normally afford to eat at school. There is nothing more important than our children's education — shame on us if we fail to make it a top priority,” said Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez.

“For many low-income kids, universal free lunches are depended-upon meals,” stated Council Member Letitia James. “We all know that children need nutrients and nourishment to best process information throughout the day. Cutting universal free lunches would, in effect, be impairing children’s ability to learn. This is not an acceptable proposal.”

Said Joel Berg, Executive Director of New York City Coalition Against Hunger, “At a time when we all know it is in our self interest to fight child hunger, reduce obesity, and improve test scores, it is absurdly counterproductive to cut funding for a program that accomplishes all three of those things.”

“The movement to improve school food has been one of the most vibrant movements in many years. Parents care about what their kids eat — they want healthy, appealing food for all our kids — and they are willing to organize for that,” said Nancy Romer, the General Coordinator for the Brooklyn Food Coalition. “As the most effective program to keep kids healthy and avoid obesity and its effects, school food should expand to provide more fresh fruits and veggies, not contract. School food is our collective offering to youngsters: it tells them what we believe about food. These cuts tell our kids that we don’t care about their health, that we won’t protect them from budget cuts. We shouldn’t jeopardize our kids’ health when taxing higher incomes at higher rates, among many other possible revenue raising initiatives, that could easily balance the budget and not take healthy food out of our kids’ mouths.”

“For our children to be able to concentrate, learn, and be productive in school, they need a hot meal so they are not hungry during the school day,” said Daysi Cuevas, a parent leader at Make the Road New York. “The Universal School Meal is an important program that helps thousands of needy families and we ask the Mayor not to cut this program.”

“The American Heart Association believes all New York City school children should have access to healthy and nutritious school meals,” stated Stephanie Chan, a survivor of heart disease and volunteer spokesperson for the American Heart Association. “Our schools should model appropriate healthy behaviors by promoting the availability of a nutritious meal during the school day. The Universal School Meals Program here in New York City makes great strides toward this goal as it reduces the barriers to these free meals. The last thing we would want to see happen is for our young people to choose unhealthy, less expensive options. On behalf of the American Heart Association, I applaud the efforts the Council Members to remove these cuts to such an important program.”

“The pennies that the city may save on meals will be overshadowed by the dollars spent administering the complicated school meal application process,” stated Áine Duggan, Vice President for Research, Policy & Education at the Food Bank For New York City.