

Issue Brief:
**Local Lunches: A “Win-Win” for New York State’s
Farmers and Students**

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INTRODUCTION

The New York FY 2019 enacted State budget funds an ambitious “No Student Goes Hungry” five-point platform related to school nutrition. In addition to doubling funding for farm-to-school grants, banning school “lunch shaming” policies, helping schools implement breakfast after the school day begins, and increasing access to food pantries on public university campuses, the State agreed to raise reimbursement rates—from 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal—for schools that spend at least 30% of their school lunch budget on food from New York State farms.¹ This new reimbursement policy is a State entitlement program—all schools that qualify will receive the reimbursement—with a current projected cost of \$10 million annually. This policy has been cheered in Albany as a “win-win” for increasing revenues for farmers while simultaneously providing schoolchildren with farm-fresh foods in their school meals. Other potential benefits include reduced carbon emissions, transportation costs, and packaging waste, along with increased awareness among children and families about local food production.

PILOTING FARM-TO-SCHOOL PURCHASING IN THE NORTH COUNTRY

A farm-to-school meal reimbursement policy has been piloted in the North Country of New York State. Assemblywoman Addie Jenne pioneered the “Drive for 25” initiative for the 116th Assembly District in 2015. The pilot program was capped at \$900,000 over three years (\$200,000 per year was set aside directly for food costs, while \$100,000 went toward grants and other farm-to-school programming).² One of the program’s goals was to increase farm revenues within the largely rural district along the St. Lawrence River while providing more nutritious foods to schoolchildren.

In St. Lawrence and Jefferson counties, more than \$188,000 was spent directly on food in the first year, with 15 local farms and 16 of the area’s 20 school systems participating. Schools purchased more than 150,000 pounds of 47 different local food products directly from farms. Enthusiasm for the program has continued to increase, with participation reaching at least 22 local farms and 19 school districts. The increased local food supply has reached an estimated 24,000 students.^{3,4}

¹ New York State Office of the Governor, “Governor Cuomo Unveils 15th Proposal of 2018 State of the State: Launch Comprehensive No Student Goes Hungry Program,” <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-unveils-15th-proposal-2018-state-launch-comprehensive-no-student-goes>, accessed April 2018.

² Kenmore, Abraham, “Drive for 25 gives mini grants to local farms to provide food for local schools,” Watertown Daily Times, January 11 2018.

³ Adirondack North Country Association, “Farm to School: A Case for State Support,” https://adirondack.org/StateProposal_FarmToSchool_Blog, accessed April 2018.

⁴ Assemblywoman Addie Jenne, “Assemblywoman Jenne: State budget includes more funding North Country farm to school program,” http://assemblywomanjenne.blogspot.com/2018/03/assemblywoman-jenne-state-budget_31.html, accessed April 2018.



EXAMPLES IN OTHER STATES

Several states have enacted similar legislation to increase reimbursement to school districts for healthy meals, but New York's \$10 million, 25 cents per meal reimbursement is unprecedented. The state of Michigan sets the rate at 10 cents for every meal that includes local fruit, vegetables, or legumes, but limits the reimbursement program to \$315,000 for a certain number of school districts, selected on an application basis. Michigan farms in targeted areas report increased sales and greater collaboration among businesses after the implementation of this program.⁵ The District of Columbia reimburses an additional five cents when at least one component of a lunch meal comprises entirely locally grown and unprocessed foods.⁶ Maine reimburses school districts \$1 for every \$3 spent on "local product or minimally processed foods purchased directly from a Maine producer" up to \$1,000 per district, per year.⁷ Oregon's statewide program, implemented in 2011, reimburses school districts at varying lower amounts (between 7 and 15 cents per meal) to purchase Oregon food products.⁸ However, funding is capped at \$4.5 million for the FY 2015–2017 biennium for both food reimbursement and educational programming costs.⁹ The 2011 program builds on a prior proposal that called for seven cents of reimbursement, which was said to be the cost of half of a serving of fruits or vegetables at the time.¹⁰

IMPLEMENTATION

Despite popular support for this "win-win" policy, there may be certain challenges with regards to implementation. Districts with fewer resources or that have not taken steps to source food from New York State may not have the ability to source 30% of their ingredients from New York farms right away, regardless of additional reimbursement.¹¹ Districts that do not see the benchmark as a realistic goal may choose to direct their resources elsewhere, rather than strive to meet it—leaving students without any increase in farm-fresh products.

In the North Country pilot, schools obtained between 2% and 13% of their ingredients from

⁵ Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, "10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms 2017-2018 Legislative Report," <http://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/10-cents-a-meal-for-school-kids-farms-2017-2018-legislative-report>, accessed April 2018.

⁶ dcclims1.dccouncil.us/images/00001/20100510112429.pdf

⁷ Maine Department of Education, "Local Produce Fund," <http://www.maine.gov/doe/nutrition/programs/localfoods/fund.html>, accessed April 2018.

⁸ Oregon State Legislature, 2011 Regular Session. "House Bill 2800." <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2011R1/Measures/Overview/HB2800>, accessed April 2018.

⁹ EcoTrust, "Farm to School in Oregon a Win for All," <https://ecotrust.org/project/farm-to-school-advocacy/>, accessed April 2018

¹⁰ EcoTrust, "The Magic of Seven Cents," https://www.ecotrust.org/media/7-Cents-Report_FINAL_110630.pdf, accessed April 2018.

¹¹ Politico New York, "Tweaking the Farm to School Proposal," <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/newsletters/education-morning-newsletter/2018/01/29/tweaking-the-farm-to-school-proposal-028097>, accessed April 2018.



local sources (not including fluid milk, which accounts for another 10–12% of school food costs).¹² However, the pilot program schools were able to get partial matches for each meal, even if they did not meet the 30% benchmark. A 1% increase in the amount of the food budget directed to local food was associated with an additional 1 cent of reimbursement per meal for eligible local foods. The new State program may provide stronger incentives for schools to locally source ingredients for their meals.

Another challenge is the growing season in New York, which peaks during the summer months when school is not in session. Some foods, such as dried beans, carrots, squash, and apples can be served year-round. However, schools will have more choices in the growing months of May and June, as well as September and October in the beginning of the school year.¹³

THINGS TO WATCH

As the “No Student Goes Hungry” initiative gets underway, several items will be important to watch:

- **Ensuring food is locally produced:** Often, food supply chains from farm to school are long and opaque; it can be difficult to verify the origin of products—especially in processed products—once they leave the farm. Providing transparent information and having reliable, verifiable ways to trace products to their origin will help ensure that this program has integrity and that public tax dollars are truly creating the intended benefit.
- **Supporting school participation:** Efforts must be made to provide school districts with timely, specific guidelines for how to qualify for increased school lunch reimbursement. Participation guidelines can be expected from the New York State Education Department, Department of Agriculture and Markets, and other parts of the State government. Other organizations have also developed new resources. For example, American Farmland Trust created a Farm to Institution New York State (FINYS) Local Food Buyer Learning Center to help build institutions’ skills and capacity to purchase food locally.¹⁴
- **Monitoring implementation and evaluating effectiveness:** As the statewide program gets started in the 2018–2019 school year, it will be critically important to monitor how it is being implemented to tease out best practices and impact. Included in the law is a provision that

¹² Adirondack North Country Association (personal communication May 1, 2018)

¹³ The New Food Economy, “New York’s ‘No Student Goes Hungry’ proposal sounds great on paper. How feasible is it in reality?” <https://newfoodeconomy.org/new-york-cuomo-no-student-goes-hungry-proposal-feasibility/>, accessed April 2018.

¹⁴ For more information on the FINYS Local Food Buyer Learning Center, visit: <https://finys.org/blc>



the State Education Department is obligated to publish data on each school food authority that receives this subsidy, including average daily lunch participation, total food costs for its school food program, and total cost of food products purchased from local growers. This data will be useful when evaluating the reach and the impact of the new reimbursement program. Future evaluations should examine the number of schools meeting the reimbursement threshold, as well as how many meals were provided and how many students were served. Additionally, evaluations of the program's impact on student health and school performance, as well as its effect on the local farming and food preparation economies, may be useful tools for other states that may consider whether to implement similar programs of their own.

CONCLUSION

The unprecedented generosity of this program has the potential to create many new opportunities for both farmers and school districts across New York State. In addition to benefitting the local economy, increasing reimbursement can allow schools to provide their students with healthy meals and teach lifelong lessons about the importance of eating healthy food from local farms. While the State program is still getting started, anecdotal evidence suggests the North Country pilot program has been a rousing success. By being the first state in the nation to reimburse schools for local food purchases at such high rates, New York is showcasing confidence in its farmers, students, and communities, and setting them up for a brighter, healthier future.



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