

NEW YORK GROWN FOOD FOR NEW YORK KIDS

October 7th, 2020

The Honorable Andrew Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

On behalf of schools, farm families, producers, processors, and food and farm organizations across New York, we thank you for your ingenuity and championship of Farm to School in New York. Taken together, your Farm to School Incentive and Grants programs provide a powerful impetus for K-12 schools to improve our state's economy by increasing their spending on food from New York farms—especially from dairy farmers poised to provide quality New York milk, yogurt, and cheese to kids in school. **We are writing today because the pandemic and a recent federal policy action are threatening the future of your nation-leading Farm to School incentive program.** The good news is a swift stroke of your pen can put us back on track towards over \$210 million in economic growth statewide by 2024.

With the onset of the pandemic and school closure in March, schools across the state switched to one of two summer meal programs to provide free meals to students and their families: the Summer Seamless Option (SSO) or the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). When this happened, the State Education Department (NYSED) determined that as an extension of the National School Lunch Program, New York grown food purchased for meals served through SSO count towards qualifying for the Farm to School incentive while the same purchases under SFSP do not. This fall, the USDA extended a waiver allowing school districts to continue to serve free summer meals through the end of 2020 due to the pandemic. After this announcement, NYSED reported that at least one half of school districts in New York chose to deliver meals through SFSP given its greater ability to meet school meal service needs and protect public health during the pandemic. While this is great news for schools, kids and their families, this means that currently, at least one half of New York schools are ineligible to participate in your nation-leading Farm to School incentive program during the 2020/21 school year, due to this administrative determination.

To correct this issue and keep this program on track, **we ask that you issue an Executive Order as soon as possible before the end of October 2020 to enable all purchases of New York Food Products made for school lunches during the 2020/21 school year to qualify for the New York State Farm to School Incentive, regardless of summer meal program used.** Time is of the essence—due to COVID-19-related revenue shortfalls and school budget deadlines this month, even our greatest Farm to School champions will be forced to end their support to New York producers soon without your action.

The loss of eligibility for the state's Farm to School Incentive program for half of schools could have dire consequences for kids, farmers, schools, and the state's farm and food economy.

- **For Kids and Families:** thousands of students would lose access to fresh, healthy local food in schools during a public health crisis. According to the Department of Labor, the state's unemployment rate reached 12.5% in August—exacerbating food insecurity for many families and children. Effective farm to school programs like this one increase access to healthy, fresh, local food at school where

kids consume about half of their daily calories, bolstering the health of kids from all socioeconomic strata when they need it most.

- For Farmers and the State's Economy: critical new markets would be lost now, and perhaps permanently. A recent survey by New York Farm Bureau found that 43% of New York's farms lost business, and 37% of farms and agribusinesses experienced cash flow issues due to COVID-19. To counter this, the recent Growing Opportunity for Farm to School report found that if kept on track, your incentive program has the potential to generate \$150 million in school spending on food from New York farms—with over \$210 million in economic impact—by 2024. New York's Farm to School Incentive program has already built market momentum, with local and international businesses alike opening new markets for our farmers by creating products for schools like New York yogurt, mozzarella sticks, apple sauce, and grape juice. Pandemic related changes to meal service are already decreasing revenue for school meal programs, and if schools serving SFSP are no longer eligible for the New York Farm to School Incentive, half of schools will have no choice but to stop spending dwindling resources on buying these and other local products when New York farmers and businesses need stable markets the most. This setback would stifle the momentum for this program, and there is evidence that it could cause permanent closures for the small businesses that were created to meet this burgeoning market demand.
- For Schools: this would indelibly damage schools' trust in this program. Schools using SFSP that worked hard to successfully qualify for the program during the 2019/20 school year will not receive the extra reimbursement from the state when they need it most. These schools committed to continue supporting New York farms even during the height of the pandemic when it was most difficult, and they should be rewarded for this heroic work and dedication, not penalized based on this administrative determination.

The pandemic has laid bare the necessity of investing in our food security and resilience, local food systems, and community health so that our children grow up strong, our farms and businesses remain vibrant and innovative, and our communities and economies thrive. The state's Farm to School Incentive program has the potential to do just that while helping our state rebuild. At this time of economic downturn and the resulting rise in unemployment and food insecurity—we cannot afford to set the clock back on the hard work we have done to build Farm to School in New York State. Taking action to ensure program eligibility for all schools during the 2020/21 school year is an easy and simple way to protect families, jobs, businesses' health, and farm viability when New Yorkers need it most.

Thank you for your continued leadership, and your time and efforts to address this issue. We look forward to working with you to continue to foster a nation-leading Farm to School movement that uplifts student health, farms, businesses, jobs, and communities across the state as we rebuild.

Respectfully,

See Attached Signatories

Cc: Richard Ball, Commissioner, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
Betty Rosa, Acting Commissioner, New York State Department of Education
Senator Jen Metzger, Chair, Senate Agriculture Committee
Senator Shelley Mayer, Chair Senate Education Committee
Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, Chair, Assembly Agriculture Committee
Assemblyman Michael Benedetto, Chair Assembly Education Committee

Kate Fish, Executive Director, Adirondack North Country Association

Brittany Christenson, Executive Director, AdkAction

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Graham Savio, Co-Owner and Co-Manager, Conrad Hill Farm

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Tom O'Brien, Key Impact Sales and Service, & Adam Collins, K12 Sales, East McCain Foods USA

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Central School

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