



June 2, 2016

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Office of the Mayor
City Hall New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

We are leading pediatric/adolescent health organizations representing thousands of health care providers throughout New York City. We call on you to keep your promise to bring universal free school lunch to New York City public school students. We have a wide range of experiences working with children in New York City, including work within the community, academic centers, and in school-based health centers. Our collective experience with working with the youth of New York City has highlighted the impact of poverty and hunger on children. We are urging you to ensure that the program is expanded to all students in this budget. Hungry students and their families cannot wait. Each year that passes we are missing an opportunity to ensure children have the essential nutrition needed to thrive.

We know directly that many children and adolescents who are eligible to participate in free school lunch often do not. Despite the far-reaching impact of hunger on these teens' lives, we as pediatricians know that adolescent development makes it such that youth often have a such a strong desire to be accepted by their friends and not be labeled as "other" that they will forego school lunch altogether, despite their hunger. Approximately one-third of the children eligible for free/reduced price lunch do not participate, especially as they get older. The stigma of being the "poor kid", even in the lowest income schools, has for decades had a very strong impact on children's participation and mental well-being, and often serves as a stimulus for bullying and separation in the lunchroom. We believe that, by removing the income stigma of free lunch, universal free lunch can allow children to participate in school meals without the fear of being bullied.

The scientific literature points out a strong association between adequate nutrition and fueling the brain for academics. Furthermore, inadequate nutrition has been tied to increased rates of mental illness, including mood, anxiety, behavioral and substance abuse issues. Currently, food insecurity impacts the vast majority of New York City's 1.1 million public school students. We need you to make good on your promise and expand universal free school lunch to all public school students. As pediatricians in New York City, we believe this is the year to make this happen, and we are counting on you.

Sincerely,

Lori Legano, MD, NYU School of Medicine, President, American Academy of Pediatrics, Chapter 3
Elie Ward, MSW, Executive Director, American Academy of Pediatrics, Chapters 2 and 3 (all boroughs NYC)
Jenny Francis, MD, Columbia University Medical Center, President, New York Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine
Sara Murphy, Executive Director, New York School-Based Health Alliance
Cristina Fernandez, MD, Columbia University Medical Center, Chair of Nutrition & Obesity Committee, American Academy of Pediatrics
Janet Lee, MD, Chair of Advocacy Committee, New York Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine

Cc:

Chancellor Carmen Fariña, New York City Department of Education
Deputy Chancellor Elizabeth Rose, New York City Department of Education