

Dear Senators and Assemblymembers:

We, the undersigned health care providers, nutrition experts, public health organizations, and environmental groups, join the many teachers, parents, and students from around the state in strong support of S996 (Hoylman-Sigal) / A3708 (Rajkumar). This vital legislation would ensure public schools in New York provide plant-based meal options upon request. Passage of this legislation would be a win for our children's health and for the planet.

Providing nutritious meals at school will help students in both the short- and the long-term. In the short-term, a better diet has been shown to improve students' grades by minimizing absences and disruptive behaviors. Healthier school meals will also have lasting long-term health effects. A study published in *JAMA* found that the prevalence of type 2 diabetes among U.S. children ages 10 to 19 increased 95% between 2001 and 2017 with the greatest increases in African American and Latino youths.<sup>1</sup> Decades of research show that a plant-based diet, endorsed by the American Diabetes Association,<sup>2</sup> can help prevent, improve, and even reverse type 2 diabetes. Diabetes alone costs New York taxpayers about \$22 billion per year,<sup>3</sup> and that number is only expected to rise unless we start improving what children are eating.

It is a much better course of action to invest in healthy school meals now rather than responding to the increased number of diet-related diseases in the future. New York should be providing the most nutritious school meals in the country. Other states, like California<sup>4</sup> and Illinois,<sup>5</sup> are already investing in plant-based school meals, and New York can do even better. Students should reap the many benefits of health-promoting foods like fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes—many of which are grown in New York.

Besides being healthy and nutritious, plant-based meal options expand equity in the public school system. After infancy it is normal for most people not of European descent—about 70% of the human population—to become physically uncomfortable after consuming dairy.<sup>6</sup> The American Medical Association recommends removing barriers to children who need nondairy alternatives because “lactose intolerance is a common and normal condition among many Americans, especially African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, with a lower prevalence in whites, often manifesting in childhood.”<sup>7</sup> The majority of New York public school students—82.6%—fall into ethnic and racial demographic groups that typically cannot digest lactose.<sup>8</sup> Providing meals without lactose ensures all students in New York are being served nutritious and accessible meals.

Some school districts in the state are already providing plant-based meal options, but all students in New York deserve to have plant-based options. Not only has it been shown that these meals can be lower in cost, but they do not create any additional burdens to the schools.

Additionally, plant-based meals save water, reduce land use, and even lower greenhouse gas emissions. One study found that when Oakland Unified School District in California added more plant-based meals to its menus, the district reduced its carbon footprint by 14% and saved 42 million gallons of water and \$40,000 over the course of two years.<sup>9</sup> Students are increasingly expressing concerns about climate

change and are choosing to eat plant-based because of their commitment to environmental sustainability. Allowing students to align their school meals with their values is important in meeting students' individual needs.

In order to ensure healthy and more equitable school meals for New York students, we ask for swift passage of S996 (Hoylman-Sigal) / A3708 (Rajkumar).

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

American Medical Student Association  
Balanced  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Coalition for Healthy School Food  
League of Humane Voters of New York  
Plant Powered Metro New York  
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine  
True Health Initiative

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence JM, Divers J, Isom S, et al.; SEARCH for Diabetes in Youth Study Group. Trends in prevalence of type 1 and type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents in the US, 2001-2017. *JAMA*. 2021;326(8):717-727. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.11165

<sup>2</sup> American Diabetes Association. Standards of medical care in diabetes-2017 abridged for primary care providers. *Clin Diabetes*. 2017;35(1):5-26. doi:10.2337/cd16-0067

<sup>3</sup> American Diabetes Association. The burden of diabetes in New York. Accessed January 24, 2024. <http://main.diabetes.org/dorg/PDFs/Advocacy/burden-of-diabetes/new-york.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Physicians applaud California's Senate Education Committee for advancing bill promoting nutritious plant-based school meals. Physicians Committees for Responsible Medicine. June 22, 2022. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://www.pcrm.org/news/news-releases/california-senate-education-committee-advances-bill-plant-based-school-meals>

<sup>5</sup> Illinois plant-based school lunch law goes into effect Aug. 1. Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. August 1, 2023. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://www.pcrm.org/news/blog/illinois-plant-based-school-lunch-law-goes-effect-aug-1>

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<sup>6</sup> Heyman MB; Committee on Nutrition. Lactose intolerance in infants, children, and adolescents. *Pediatrics*. 2006;118:1279-1286. doi:10.1542/peds.2006-1721

<sup>7</sup> American Medical Association. Culturally Responsive Dietary and Nutritional Guidelines D-440.978. 2018. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://policysearch.ama-assn.org/policyfinder/detail/D-440.978?uri=%2FAMADoc%2Fdirectives.xml-0-1522.xml>

<sup>8</sup> New York City Department of Education. DOE data at a glance. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance>

<sup>9</sup> Hamerschlag K, Kraus-Polk J. Shrinking the Carbon and Water Footprint of School Food. Friends of the Earth. 2017. <https://foe.org/resources/shrinking-carbon-water-footprint-school-food/>