

February 7, 2023

Senate Education Committee
Chair, Senator William Soules
Vice Chair, Senator Harold Pope
Ranking Member, Senator Steven Neville

House Education Committee
Chair, Representative Andrés Romero
Vice Chair Representative Joy Garratt
Ranking Member Representative Jack Chatfield

Senate Finance Committee
Chair, Senator George Munoz
Vice Chair, Senator Nancy Rodriguez
Ranking Member, Senator William Sharer

House Appropriations & Finance Committee
Chair, Representative Nathan Small
Vice Chair, Representative Meredith Dixon
Ranking Member, Representative Gail Armstrong

RE: Please invest in healthy universal school meals in the FY24 budget

We, the undersigned organizations, wholeheartedly support SB 4, the establishment of the Kids Kitchen, an initiative to protect the right of every child—regardless of income or circumstance—to healthy, no-cost school meals. We thank Senator Michael Padilla and Senator Leo Jaramillo for sponsoring the legislation and applaud Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham for including the proposal in her FY24 Executive Budget Recommendation. School meals are an essential resource for our children—and often the only source of nourishment for New Mexican students facing food insecurity at home. In fact, [in as many as 35% of New Mexico households with children, kids are not eating enough because food is unaffordable](#). Healthy universal school meals would allow all students to enjoy free school breakfasts and lunches—and help more of those meals to be packed with fresh, scratch-cooked, and locally-grown ingredients. The Governor’s proposal is a much-needed investment in ensuring that every student in our great state of New Mexico is nourished and ready to learn, and we urge the state legislature to include these critical programs in the final budget.

New Mexico has proudly led the nation in reducing childhood hunger and fostering a resilient food system, thanks to the leadership of Governor Lujan Grisham and our state legislators. Past successful state policies—such as the popular New Mexico Grown Grants, the nation’s first Hunger-Free Students’ Bill of Rights Act, the elimination of student co-pays for reduced-price school meals, and the Food Initiative—have contributed to tremendous progress toward reducing food insecurity. However, at the beginning of this school year, the pandemic-era nationwide child nutrition waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which had allowed schools nationwide to offer free meals for the last two years, abruptly ended. This left many families without a vital lifeline—one that has kept millions of children from going hungry. This moment is a critical opportunity for state leaders to take action for our children by building upon New Mexico’s legacy of school nutrition investments. SB 4 would do just that.

Two years of implementing the USDA waivers proved that offering meals to all students at no cost results in more equitable access and more economic resiliencies for families. It eliminates the stigma associated with free school meals while fostering a sense of community in the cafeteria, where all students are welcome and have opportunities to form positive relationships with food. Furthermore, it ensures no kid falls through a crack by eliminating unnecessary barriers to access. The logistical requirements for the current income-based free school meal program make it difficult for many families to participate, due to

hurdles such as language barriers, immigration status, or simply not being able to find enough time after long work hours to fill out the paperwork. Moreover, with [supermarket food prices growing more than 11% in 2022 and expected to increase even more in 2023](#), it is imperative to support families by taking their children's breakfast and lunch bills off their plates. On average, a family with two children spends nearly \$1,000 a year on school lunches alone—a significant expense for a family of four with an income of \$52,000 that currently doesn't qualify for free lunches. The additional funding will also provide school nutrition departments with the financial security and stability to plan ahead and feed their students, while ensuring that school nutrition professionals—essential workers who kept our kids fed during a worldwide crisis—are well supported.

The Governor's proposal goes even further to ensure students can enjoy nutritious and high-quality foods. The proposal establishes meal quality requirements and incentivizes schools to take steps toward serving more local, fresh, scratch-cooked foods, provides funds for school kitchen infrastructure updates needed to process those foods, and ensures students have ample seated time to eat. Access to nourishing meals is a foundation for every child's ability to learn and thrive. In fact, poor nutrition in children is linked to slower progress in math and reading, lower grades, absenteeism, an inability to focus, and increases in anxiety and depression. Furthermore, promoting scratch cooking helps create more flexibility in menu development, allowing schools to serve foods that are appealing and reflective of students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, when fresh, scratch-cooked foods are offered, more students eat and also enjoy what they're eating, [which can lead to increased meal participation and a reduction in food waste](#). We also know that long cafeteria lines often leave many students only a few minutes to eat; thus, ensuring everyone has at least 20 minutes of seated lunch time is critical in increasing consumption.

Lastly, by supporting schools in sourcing local ingredients, healthy universal school meals further strengthens our thriving agricultural sector and ensures that local products are consumed here in New Mexico. In the past decade, the popular New Mexico Grown Grants Program has enabled schools to cultivate connections with hundreds of small- and mid-sized producers, resulting in more fresh, local foods on nearly 190,000 kids' plates. This allowed many schools to mitigate severe disruption during the pandemic because shorter distances between producers and consumers ensure resiliency to supply chain shocks. Furthermore, smaller producers keep more of the food dollars when selling directly to schools, stimulating the local economy. In fact, [every dollar spent on local food generates up to an additional \\$2.16 in economic activity](#).

Investing in school nutrition programs now is a commitment to children's well-being—today and for generations to come. Please pass SB 4 and support FY24 Executive Budget Recommendation for the Food Initiative.

Sincerely,

Agriculture, Implementation, Research, and
Education (AIRE)
El Valle Community Center
Alliance for Local Economic Prosperity

American Heart Association
Basic Needs Project
Bidii Baby Foods LLC
Black Farmers and Ranchers New Mexico Global

Breath of my heart birthplace
CESOSS
Community Engagement Center
Covenant Pathways
Desert Verde Farm
Dine' Food Sovereignty Alliance
Dirty Earth co
Farm to Table New Mexico
FoodCorps
FoodPlay Productions
Interfaith Hunger Coalition
LA Cares
La Plazita
La Semilla Food Center
Agri-Cultura Network
Los Amigos del Parque/Prison Project of Santa Fe
Los Jardines Institute
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry - New Mexico
Meals on Wheels of Albuquerque
Mothers of Santa Fe
Mora Independent School District
NACA Inspired Schools Network
New Mexico Appleseed
New Mexico Asian Family Center (NMAFC)
New Mexico Conference of Churches
New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

New Mexico School Nutrition Association
New Mexico Thrives
New Mexico Voices for Children
NM Healthy Soil Working Group
One Generation - Indigenous Farm Hub
Public Allies NM
Public Charter School
Raices del Saber de Xinatchli
Rehoboth Christian School
Rio Grande Farmers Coalition
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
San Martin de Porres Soup Kitchen
Santa Cruz United Methodist Church
Santa Fe Farmers' Market Institute
Santa Fe Public Schools
Share Our Strength
Shiprock Traditional Farmers Cooperative
Southwest Organizing Project/Project Feed the Hood
San Juan College Harvest Food Hub
The City of Socorro
The Community Pantry
The Food Depot
The Mountain Center
Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge EJ Leadership Team
Wagner Farms
Zia Queenbees Farm & Field Institute