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The Lower Hudson Education Coalition, which is a joint project of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents, Dutchess County School Boards Association, Rockland County School Boards Association and Westchester Putnam School Boards Association, respectfully urges our federal representatives to extend the flexibility granted to allow schools to serve free meals to all students for another year, while lawmakers agree on a more permanent solution.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has granted multiple waivers to allow school districts broad flexibility throughout the pandemic to provide free meals to all students. This flexibility allowed 10 million more children across the United States to be fed while families of all socioeconomic backgrounds faced unprecedented instability in all aspects of their everyday lives.

School leaders recognize that students need proper nutrition to be productive in the classroom. The USDA provided school districts significant flexibility during the pandemic to allow them to feed all students, in a wide range of settings. From this flexibility and guaranteed federal funding, school districts have seen positive outcomes. However, these allowances are set to expire after June 30, 2022.

This leaves students in a vulnerable and uncertain position right as they enter summer break. More students than ever are relying on the stability, structure, and consistent meals that their schools offer. Universal school meals programs will continue to ensure there is never any stigma for students unable to afford meals, increase the number of students fed during the school day, reduce paperwork for school staff, and assist districts in streamlining their meal service operations. Come summer, working parents will be facing an exacerbated childcare crisis, creating even more instability in the lives of students who rely on their schools to meet more than just their educational needs. Continuing free meals is necessary for these students through the summer and beyond.

Protecting the well-being of students comes first, but this flexibility also provides relief for schools facing staffing shortages, supply chain issues, and now from potentially falling out of compliance with the federal meals program's stringent rules. The staffing crisis has made this complicated administrative process all the more difficult.

Our new normal has become a world filled with uncertainty, but that uncertainty should never extend to where a child's next meal is coming from. For these reasons, we ask that USDA continue these flexibilities for another year to ensure students of all backgrounds are fed.