

# Governor Murphy Signs Legislation Expanding Access to School Meals for New Jersey Students

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**Trenton** – Advancing efforts to eliminate food insecurity among New Jersey’s young learners, Governor Phil Murphy today signed legislation expanding eligibility criteria under the Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act, [A5684/S4055 \(https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2022/A6000/5684\\_R1.PDF\)](https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2022/A6000/5684_R1.PDF). Under the legislation, public and non-public schools participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or federal School Breakfast Program will provide a free school lunch and/or breakfast to students whose families have an annual household income of up to 224 percent of the federal poverty level, which will make over 60,000 families newly eligible.

“Access to nutritious food is a basic necessity for our kids,” **said Governor Murphy**. “We have made great strides in our fight against food insecurity, working together with those on the front lines to ensure our most vulnerable community members have access to a warm meal and empowering our schools to meet the needs of their students. Expanding student eligibility under the Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act will provide more of New Jersey’s young learners with a free school lunch and breakfast so that they can go to class ready to learn, rather than wondering where their next meal will come from. Thank you, Speaker Coughlin, for your partnership in bridging the gap in food access.”

“I’m grateful to Governor Murphy for continuing to lead New Jersey’s efforts to combat food insecurity at its root causes and position our state as a national leader in food security work. With champions like Speaker Coughlin, Senator Ruiz, and our partners in the Legislature, New Jersey continues to utilize one of our most powerful tools for combatting hunger: policies that ensure more and more of our students are healthy and fed in school,” **said Mark Dinglasan, Director of the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate**. “New Jersey’s food security work is comprehensive, ambitious, and multi-faceted, and we are able to create goals that are larger than the problems we’re tackling. It’s through our leaders like Governor Murphy and Speaker Coughlin that we are able to keep dreaming AND keep working towards a more food-secure New Jersey.”

“All students deserve access to healthy meals and this legislation provides a clear path for those in need,” **New Jersey Department of Agriculture Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison III said**. “Having nutritious food available at school each day allows children to perform better academically as well as during extra-curricular activities. This necessity is something no child should ever have to worry about.”

“Expansion of eligibility criteria under the Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act is a monumental step in nurturing an environment where students can thrive without the burden of hunger,” **said Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan, Acting Commissioner of Education**. “Widening eligibility criteria ensures that more students and their families have access to essential nutrition support. This legislation is aligned with our vision of fostering the most conducive learning environment for every student, as it directly addresses the intersection of education and basic needs. This expansion will positively impact the educational well-being of countless students and families across our great State.”

“Students learn better and are more prepared to take on challenges every day when they don’t have to worry about going hungry. This bill will help young people across New Jersey have access to food so that they come to school ready to focus on school – not an empty stomach. At the federal level, I have consistently supported assistance for the families who struggle to put food on the table. I applaud Governor Murphy and the state legislature for getting this important bill across the finish line,” **said Congressman Frank Pallone, Jr.**

Assembly Speaker Craig J. Coughlin and Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz are prime sponsors of the legislation. Additional prime sponsors include Senator Shirley Turner and Assemblymembers Shanique Speight, Carol Murphy, Shama Haider, and Benjie Wimberly.

“The children most in need of nutritious meals at school will now receive breakfast and lunch,” **said Assembly Speaker Craig J. Coughlin**. “I thank Governor Murphy and Senator Ruiz for their partnership on this. We’ve made incredible progress to provide healthy meals to New Jersey’s students and this is another step toward universal free school lunch. No child should feel any shame or face any stigma over receiving a decent meal. We know this

improve health and learning outcomes and we are going to get it done. We are on our way to realizing my ultimate goal of ending hunger in our state.”

“Today we mark another key step in making more families eligible for free breakfast and lunch programs in schools,” **said Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz.** “In New Jersey, 9.0% of children live in homes without consistent access to adequate food for everyone to live healthy, active lives. Seventeen percent of Blacks and Hispanics in New Jersey are food insecure. No student should be worried about where their next meal will be. I’m grateful to have a partner like Speaker Coughlin in this endeavor and a Governor who is always willing to sign laws that create real, tangible solutions for New Jersey’s families.”

“Food is a basic need that, when met, sets up our students for success,” **said Senator Shirley Turner.** “However, many families are living paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford to pay for school meals every day. A hungry student is distracted, irritable, and unenergetic, and no child wondering where their next meal will come from is engaged with learning. Increasing access to free school meals is the best way to keep our students nourished and focused on academics.”

“This landmark legislation reinforces New Jersey’s commitment to prioritizing the welfare of its citizens, particularly its youth,” **said Assemblywoman Shanique Speight.** “We are committed to supporting the state’s most vulnerable populations and fostering educational success for our children.

“By providing access to food, we are creating an environment where all children have the resources they need to thrive,” **said Assemblywoman Carol Murphy.** “The temporary expansion aims to assist families even beyond the academic year, providing numerous children with access to food through the summer meals program.”

“Free meals in schools are more than sustenance. They’re a safety net for many students and a promise to children that hunger will not be an obstacle in their education,” **said Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly.** “By broadening eligibility requirements and including breakfast, we’re taking a stance against food insecurity.”

“In 2019, there were 762,530 New Jersey residents – including 192,580 children – who were ‘food insecure,’” **said Assemblywoman Shama Haider.** “That’s hundreds of thousands of children who don’t know where their next meal is coming from or if they’ll have a next meal. By giving more students access to meals, we are providing a lifeline for them and their families.”

“School meals are critical to children’s health and well-being, and they ensure that students have the nutrition they need to learn throughout the day. Hunger Free New Jersey applauds Governor Murphy, Speaker Coughlin, Majority Leader Ruiz, and all the sponsors of this legislation for championing efforts to expand access to healthy free school meals, helping NJ’s children to reach their full potential,” **said Lisa Pitz, Director of Hunger Free New Jersey.**

“More than 175,000 children in New Jersey are food insecure. Lack of access to nutritious food can hinder their physical, mental, social, and emotional development,” **said Elizabeth McCarthy, President & CEO of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ).** “We at CFBNJ commend Governor Murphy, Speaker Coughlin, and the whole state legislature for this recent expansion of eligibility criteria for free school meals. This is a huge help for so many working families who are struggling to make ends meet.”

“Governor Murphy’s signature of A-5684 brings New Jersey one step closer to a more just, more equitable, more whole-child-centered public education system in which every student has unfettered access to two nutritious meals each school day,” **said Dr. Timothy Purnell, the New Jersey School Boards Association’s executive director and CEO.** “We commend the governor, Assembly Speaker Coughlin, Senate Majority Leader Ruiz, and the entire New Jersey Legislature for expanding on the progress made by 2022’s Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act to combat food insecurity among New Jersey’s youth.” Purnell continued. “This bill represents lawmaking at its best: realistic yet ambitious; deliberative yet decisive; planning for the future while addressing the needs of the now; a clearly resource-backed and support-oriented approach to empowering school districts to foster healthier school climates where every student has the resources they need to reach their full potential.”

“The American Heart Association thanks Governor Murphy, Assembly Speaker Coughlin, Senate Majority Leader Ruiz and all the sponsors of this legislation for their leadership in addressing food insecurity. Meals served through the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program are required to meet stringent nutritional standards. Eating healthy meals at school can help students perform better academically and develop healthy eating habits. The legislation will help to ensure that more children are able to access healthy meals while at school and can fully focus on learning,” **said Corinne Orlando, Director of Government Relations New Jersey American Heart Association President Timothy F. McGoughran.**

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