

Statement of Need: The Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act The Honorable Nydia M. Velázquez of New York

This legislation will create a pilot grant program to provide healthy, climate-friendly plant-based meals in our Nation's public schools.

Why help schools serve plant-based options?

Whether for health, environmental, philosophical, religious or other reasons, students and their families are increasingly asking for more plant-based options at school. In New York City, all 1,200 schools in our Nation's largest public school district, have begun to offer hummus and pretzels daily in response to demand for plant-based options – but the district faces barriers to serving a more robust plant-based meal option. Across the coast in California, a recent analysis found that despite the growing demand from students and efforts from school foodservice operators to scale up healthy, climate-friendly menus, only 4% of entrees in California lunches are plant-based.ⁱ This bill seeks to overcome several of the barriers to serving healthy, culturally appropriate, and climate-friendly lunches that schools often face. These include a lack of technical assistance, training, and student nutrition education, as well as cost since animal-based foods and beverages are heavily subsidized relative to plant-based foods and plant-based milk options.

Health:

Studies show that increasing consumption of plant-based foods has substantial health benefits, including reducing the risk of diabetes, reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, maintaining a healthy weight, and protecting against certain forms of cancer and other diseases.ⁱⁱ Students of color disproportionately rely on school meals as a primary source of nutrition, so improving the quality of school meals is a crucial point of intervention to mitigate racial health disparities, which emerge early in life.ⁱⁱⁱ Healthy, plant-forward diets can also boost academic performance and address educational inequities.^{iv}

Climate:

The food and agriculture sector accounts for between 21 and 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions,^v and research has shown that we cannot meet the Paris Accord targets without shifting our diets toward more low-carbon foods.^{vi} Animal-based foods tend to be more carbon-intensive than plant-based foods because of the high resource requirements for raising animals, including water and animal feed.^{vii} With 30 million children served lunch daily, the National School Lunch Program represents a crucial opportunity to mitigate food-related greenhouse emissions and environmental impacts, while also improving student health.

Equity:

Most people in the world cannot process lactose. The National Institutes of Health estimates that 95% of Asians, 60 to 80% of African Americans and Ashkenazi Jews, 80 to 100% of American Indians, and 50 to 80% of Hispanics are unable to process lactose.^{viii} Especially as our student population becomes increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, schools must be equipped to accommodate their needs by providing sufficient non-dairy options.

In short, the *Healthy Future Students and Earth Act* would establish a new \$10 million grant program for school districts to apply for a three-year pilot program to help them offer more plant-based entrée and milk options to students. School districts that serve a high population of food insecure students will be prioritized.

Funding can be used for:

- Culinary training and technical assistance for school foodservice operators and staff.
- Procurement costs of plant-based sources of protein and milk from socially disadvantaged producers, local producers, and women, veteran, and beginning farmers.
- Marketing and student engagement, such as conducting taste tests and providing nutrition education.
- Additional labor costs incurred in preparing and serving plant-based options.

- Partnering with small to medium sized plant-based food businesses for professional development training.

ⁱ Hamerschlag, K., & Kraus-Polk, J. (2021). The State of School Lunch in California. Friends of the Earth. <https://foe.org/resources/the-state-of-school-lunch-in-california/>

ⁱⁱ Micha, R., Wallace, S. K., & Mozaffarian, D. (2010). Red and Processed Meat Consumption and Risk of Incident Coronary Heart Disease, Stroke, and Diabetes Mellitus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Circulation*, 121(21), 2271–2283.

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April 30, 2021, 11:54 AM

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/bmri/2013/787616/>

^{iv} https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf

^v Hong, C., Burney, J. A., Pongratz, J., Nabel, J. E. M. S., Mueller, N. D., Jackson, R. B., & Davis, S. J. (2021). Global and regional drivers of land-use emissions in 1961–2017. *Nature*, 589(7843), 554–561. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-03138-y>; IPCC. (2019). *SPECIAL REPORT: Climate Change and Land*.

<https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>

^{vi} Kim, B., Neff, R., Santo, R., Vigorito, J. (2015). The importance of reducing animal product consumption and wasted food in mitigating catastrophic climate change.

Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Report prepared for United Nations Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21). Retrieved from https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/_pdf/research/clf_reports/2015-12-07e-role-of-diet-foodwaste-in-cc-targets.pdf

^{vii} Heller, M. C. and Keoleian, G. A. (2015), Greenhouse Gas Emission Estimates of U.S. Dietary Choices and Food Loss. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 19: 391–401.

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^{viii} US Department of Health and Human Services. "Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers." US Department of Health and Human Services (2006): 1-6.