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C. Fred Engelhardt Jr., PhD, Director of Grants & Program Development

January 4, 2024

Hon. Joanne Cunningham
Chair, Albany Country Legislature
Harold L. Joyce Albany County Office Building
112 State Street, Room 710 | Albany, NY 12207

Dear Ms. Cunningham:

I write in support of the Albany Fund for Education's (AFE) application for Albany County ARPA funds to fight food insecurity in the City School District of Albany (CSDA) by expanding the network of school-based food pantries in the district and providing healthy snacks for teachers and school staff to share with students.

AFE has been a key partner in the City School District of Albany's efforts to alleviate food insecurity in the District. Addressing this issue is key to our mission as educators, because, as multiple studies have shown, students who are experiencing hunger struggle in school, have lower academic achievement and are more likely to have social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties that negatively impact their ability to learn and have effects on the overall climate of the classroom. AFE initiated the *Feed and Read* weekend backpack partnership with HATAS and Grassroot Givers, which sends students who show signs of pervasive hunger home with a bag of food and an age-appropriate book each Friday during the school year. In 2020, in response to the pandemic, AFE launched a summer weekend backpack program to help stave off hunger; last year this program served more than 400 students in almost all District buildings.

Upon seeing that the *Feed and Read* program – while helpful for many students – became less effective as students entered the upper elementary grades due to perceived stigma, AFE worked with the three district middle schools and the Albany International Center to establish food pantries to serve students and their families. These pantries are equipped with refrigerators and freezers to provide access to healthy produce and proteins, which is especially important since many CSDA schools are located in “food deserts.” Since the pandemic, many of the corner stores that families in food desert neighborhoods depend on have also closed, forcing students and families to rely heavily local food pantry programs. The CSDA provides “match” funding by supporting Food Pantry salaries and providing shipping from the Regional Foodbank to school through its Operations and Maintenance Department.

A unique feature of AFE food pantries is the support provided so that pantry coordinators can work with refugee and immigrant families to identify culturally specific foods not available through the Regional Food Bank and purchase them from local ethnic markets to have on hand in the pantries, strengthening connections between these families and their schools and reducing stress by providing familiar comforts in a completely new and unfamiliar environment. This project will establish full-service food pantries in schools with high levels of economically disadvantaged families, including Giffen Memorial Elementary School, Arbor Hill Elementary School, Delaware Community School, and Pine Hills Elementary School, and will enhance the capacity of existing pantries at Roots Academy, Sheridan Preparatory Academy, and TOAST. The school food pantries will be augmented by snack boxes to be made available to all elementary school classrooms, allowing teachers to quietly assist students who are demonstrating signs of hunger.

In addition to its primary goal of providing **food access**, this project will also address several of the County's identified ARPA goals. Studies show that parents who are unable to provide regular meals for their children, experience high levels

VISION STATEMENT

The City School District of Albany will be a district of excellence with caring relationships and engaging learning experiences that provide equitable opportunities for all students to reach their potential.

MISSION STATEMENT

We will work in partnership with our diverse community to engage every learner in a robust educational program designed to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

of stress which affect the mental health and wellness of their children. Students who live in households experiencing food insecurity are twice as likely to have seen a psychologist than students from food secure households (Cook & Jeng, 2007, p. 23). By addressing one of the root causes of emotional and behavioral challenges, this project addresses the ARPA goal of **behavioral health**. Children who are food secure are more likely to stay in school and less likely to drop out and engage in anti-social behaviors, which touches on the goal of **preventing and responding to violence** and leverages the benefits of ARPA funded **youth service** programs.

Our experience with AFE gives us confidence that, if funded, they will be able to successfully implement this program to the benefit of Albany students and families. Their quick response to pandemic related challenges and their familiarity with the district will allow them to “hit the ground running,” while the December 2026 funding end date gives the district ample time to assess program impact and seek continued funding once ARPA funds have been phased out.

Sincerely,



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