



Student Leaders

May 24, 2016

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Office of the Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

As public school students from all five boroughs across New York City, we urge you as our Mayor to expand universal free school lunch to all schools in the fiscal year 2017 budget. We want to make sure that from now on, all students are on equal footing and can eat lunch without the fear that their family income will follow them into the cafeteria. Many of us are high school seniors who have been working for three years to bring universal free school lunch to all our schools. For all of us, this issue is deeply personal. We need you to keep your promise and make this necessary policy change so that all New York City students can be equal in our school cafeterias.

Although lunch is a break from the classroom, the typical New York City school cafeteria is not as comfortable as one might think. The poverty stigma that surrounds the current lunch system looms over the heads of many students as they navigate school lunch, highlighting and magnifying class differences. Though there is often loud chatter and movement in our city's school cafeterias, if one looks closely enough, you will notice the nervousness, anxiety, and embarrassment that pervades many school cafeterias due to the stigma around lunch. As a result of this system, many students who are labeled "free free eaters" by other students must decide if they will spend the year experiencing this humiliation and bullying or go through the day hungry. Why does a progressive city like New York City have a school lunch system that divides us so? Students carry this weight with them, from the lunchroom, to their classrooms, to their homes.

As students, we have to retain a lot of information as it is. We should not also have to struggle with the negative effects of school lunch as it affects our families' lives. Even though some families don't qualify for free or reduced price lunch because their income is above the threshold, many families still struggle to pay the \$1.75 lunch fee. This situation forces these students to go hungry or accumulate a bill their parents cannot pay. Some students might sit out lunch and resort to small snacks, or go through the school year with a bill chasing them. This

should not be our reality, but under the current lunch system this is the burden that we carry every day.

This weight also takes a huge mental toll on students by negatively impacting our grades and overall learning experience during this crucial adolescent stage in our lives. Most of us cannot reap the benefits of educational support if we feel sick, unfocused, irritable and weak. Hungry students cannot develop properly and fully utilize a learning environment that does not meet basic and fundamental nutritional needs, even with the best education initiatives in place.

We are the future of this city. As we mentioned earlier, many of us are graduating seniors who, for years, have put energy and passion into fighting for this policy that would bring equality into school cafeterias. We want this to be our legacy and we need you to make the right decision as our Mayor. We would love to have the opportunity to meet with you to discuss what this means to us.

Thank you,

(in alphabetical order)

Added Value



BronxWorks - Adolescent Development Program



Bushwick Campus Youth Food Justice Team (formerly Bushwick Campus Youth Food Policy Council)



Coalition for Asian American Children & Families - Asian American Student Advocacy Project (ASAP)



Children's Aid Society



Citizens' Committee for Children of New York - YouthAction NYC



East New York Farms



El Puente



Make the Road New York



Queens Community House- Pomonok Food Justice Youth Leadership Program



Resilience Advocacy Project - Youth Leadership Project



Teenergetic – Francis Lewis High School



The Point CDC - Activists Coming to Inform Our Neighborhood (A.C.T.I.O.N.)



Youth Advocacy Summer Institute



Cc:

Chancellor Carmen Fariña, New York City Department of Education

Deputy Chancellor Elizabeth Rose, New York City Department of Education

