

EcoStation:NY

FOOD JUSTICE + URBAN AGRICULTURE

Student Testimony before the New York City Council Education Committee
EcoStation NY & Make the Road NY
Universal Free School Lunch
Hearing on the Preliminary Budget
March 20, 2014

Aminata Abdouramane

Hello, my name is Aminata Abdouramane and I am a student at Academy for Urban Planning. I want to express my support for the Lunch 4 Learning Campaign for universal free school lunch for all NYC public school students.

Bullying, name calling, threatening, oppressing and the oppressed. The lunch food and those who receive it are the leading causes of bullying at my school. In most schools, kids often get bullied because they eat the food which, state-wide, is nicknamed "free-free." This name is uncomfortable to most. Just last week, I witnessed a boy getting bullied over getting in line for "free-free." The bully was yelling over the entire cafeteria, "You got free free. Yo!" This causes depression, feeling left out, and encourages students not eat the lunch even if it is their only meal of the day. More often than not, the lunch food is the thing that determined who gets bullied or not. There are many issues with the school lunch including the portion size, freshness, undercooked food and not enough fresh fruits and veggies. However, I believe that one important first step we can make is to make all school lunches universally free and get rid of the bullying and teasing that happens because of it. I am asking you Mr. Mayor, Councilmen and women, to make universal free lunch a priority. We need to stop the stigma and get better food in our schools. Thank you for your time and your support for this important issue.

Iyeshima Harris

Good Afternoon, Mr. Mayor, Chancellor and the New York City Council members, my name is Iyeshima Harris and I attend the Academy for Environmental Leadership in Bushwick, Brooklyn. As a strong supporter of Universal Free Lunch, I believe making school lunch available to everyone is a great cause, because it eliminates hunger and classism within the school environment.

I have witnessed students getting bullied just because they would go to the front of the line for lunch. These are the students who have never missed a day of breakfast nor refuse school lunch. One student in particular, who attends the same school as myself, has to deal with bullying every day for eating free school lunch. Some students will do things just to upset him and make him feel small.

Eating school lunch is not a "bad thing" nor should one think that way, however, students automatically make assumptions about their peers environment whenever they are seen eating school lunch. Making Universal Free Lunch available would end this stigma. Another key point is that our parent's taxes are contributing to the funding of public schools and their food. My questions are: why is it that only people of certain economic statuses are receiving free lunch? Shouldn't this be available to all? What about those who make more than the suggested poverty level but who still can't afford to spend the \$1.75 a day? What happens to them?

I myself do not eat school lunch, not because I cannot afford to, but because it is not well prepared. Though we are not addressing quality here today, it is also a key factor in students refusing to engage in school lunch. For the students who cannot afford school lunch, it is not fair for them to sit and watch other kids eating, while their stomach is growling. Some students who

have access to free lunch do not take advantage of that resource because of both other people's opinions and the quality of the food. Others collect their lunch, take out the fruits and dump the rest without giving it a second thought. Why would they waste something so important that others don't have access to? The answer is in the quality of the food.

The system as it is now means that many who are eligible for free lunch don't participate because of the fear of being labeled as lesser than and because of their distaste for the food itself. In order for one to understand the testimonies that are given here today, they would have to experience where it is coming from. Statistics only show numbers based on research and correlations, however, statistics are not the ones that are being excluded from eating lunch and going hungry.

If we are united and are all viewed as equals, then we should be treated as such. The phrase "food for thought," is commonly heard and it means anything that provides mental stimulus for thinking. We would like for you Mr. Mayor, and the Council to make that phrase carry a true meaning by making Universal Free Lunch accessible for everyone. Thank you for your support.

Benia Darius

Hello! My name is Benia Darius and I'm a student at the Bushwick School for Social Justice. I believe it is not fair that students spend most of their time in school, but cannot afford to eat. School lunch should be available to everyone of every economic status. Often school lunch is the only meal that students can count on have for the whole day. So many kids are not eating because they are afraid of being labeled. New York City Public School Lunch is the 2nd largest public food program in the United States. It is a huge program but not enough students are participating.

I remember last year my friends and I refused to eat school lunch because we always saw it arriving in packages. In order to implement these changes in our school, we have to make school meals available to everyone. We want to create a safe learning environment. Food is the cornerstone of a productive day. Last year way before the day would end I would be so tired that I wasn't able to sit through a 45 minute class. We need universal free lunch. We need students to focus on school not on what they're going to eat. We need to give those students an opportunity to learn. Just because a household is making more than \$36k per year, that does not mean that their should be disqualified from free lunch. \$1.75 is not easy to come by. My peers should not go on the school line ashamed or afraid to be humiliated. We need this move forward as a city. New York City should lead the way towards a more equitable education system.

Aminata Coulibaly

Good Afternoon, my name is Aminata Coulibaly and I attend Bushwick School for Social Justice. My testimony around the issue of universal free lunch is that all students should have access to free lunch. I have had personal experience in having to fill out a lunch form to see if I was qualified for free lunch. I asked my dad to fill out the form and he said "why do they need

my income to decide if my child can eat lunch or not?" One of my friends was not eligible for free lunch. She has 7 sisters and her parents are struggling to put food on the table. Since I get free lunch she asked if I could share my lunch with her so she can eat because she wasn't able to eat otherwise. Even though she didn't qualify for free lunch she couldn't afford to pay the \$1.75. If I wasn't able to share my lunch with her she would go through her day hungry and unfocused. Based on my experience I think that school lunch should be free for everybody. It shouldn't be based on your income. This leads to students being bullied and being called names. We are all human beings. It's hard to learn when you are hungry. Thank you for supporting universally free school lunches. Thank you for your time.

Ricky Santana

My name is Ricky Santana and I am a student at Bushwick School for Social Justice. I want to express my support for the Lunch 4 Learning Campaign for universal free school lunch for all NYC public school students. I believe those who don't go to bed hungry or wondering about breakfast in the morning should be the ones on the front lines fighting without rest to make sure those who do experience food insecurity, can eat. This is because food is one of those things that we as people are all entitled to. Whether it be middle school, or high school students, we need to be fully productive in the class room. We need everyone who fights so hard to keep us in class, to also fight to feed us before it. I am asking the Mayor and City Council to make universal free school lunch a priority in the budget. Thank you very much for your time.

Joshua Rosario

My name is Joshua Rosario and I am a student at Bushwick school for Social Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to speak about the Lunch 4 Learning Campaign for universal free and healthy school lunch for all NYC public schools.

I think the problem in the NYC cafeterias is that people are being made fun of because they eat school lunch. They call the food "free-free." So any student who is caught eating it gets made fun of. The New York City students get made fun of because this relates to their families income. So if you are are eating it, you are seen as a poor, and that comes with lots of negative ideas and stereotypes.

I rarely eat breakfast. And I never eat the lunch at my school. By about 11 am I am tired and can't concentrate. Most days I don't get to eat until I go home to dinner. Its very hard to concentrate in school when I barely have any energy.

Universal Free Lunch can change the way we feel about school food. People won't feel like they are being "caught" eating the free-free. I believe in Free Lunch for all Public School Students.

Thank you for your time.

Kristina Erskine

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kristina Erskine. As a member of the Food Justice Team at the Academy for Environmental Leadership, I am

here to speak in support of the Lunch 4 Learning Campaign for universal free school lunch for all NYC public school students. I certainly acknowledge the peace of mind I get from knowing that my parents don't have to worry about meeting a form's income standards for me to be able to eat. I am lucky enough to not depend on school lunch, because I am able to bring my own food each day. Now, imagine if every student could seek comfort in knowing they could always count on eating lunch. Why shouldn't they?

Eliminating stigmas associated with getting free lunch, the feeling of classism, and having to report parent's finances, would create a sense of unity within New York City Public School's students. This program would create a greater sense of food security for students throughout New York City. Universal free school lunches would mend the empty stomachs and unfocused minds of today's youth. I am asking the Mayor and City Council to make universal free school lunch a priority in the budget. Thank you for your time.

Rayven

My name is Rayven and I am a student at Bushwick School for Social Justice. I am here to talk about free universal lunch for all students in NYC. The reason I am talking about this is because there is a giant stigma around free lunch now. Students fear being labeled as the kid who eats the "free free" because they're not to bring their own food or to pay for it.

There is also the fact that only 38% of high school students eat the free food even though 68% of students are eligible. This is because students fear being labeled and then will go hungry for the rest of the school day. Students don't have the energy later in the day, this means that student's grades are lower and they are not able to be excellent students.

Universal free lunch can fix this by providing everyone lunch without having to prove a certain need. This would get rid of this stigma and allow kids of all income to eat without the negative labels that often accompany it. If this passes, most kids would start eating and have more energy during the day, increasing student's grades across NYC. Mr. Mayor make universal free lunch your priority, my education is mine. Thank you for your time.

Marc Vidal

My name is Marc Vidal. I am a student at BSSJ. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to speak about the Lunch 4 Learning campaign for universal free and healthy school lunch for all NYC public school students.

I rarely eat school lunch. In my school there are students that get teased and labeled. This teasing goes on because they categorize you as poor, and all of the negative assumptions that come with that. This is because to qualify for the free food your family's income must be below \$36,000 a year. Another reason I don't eat the school lunch is because of the way it tastes and makes me feel. This past Tuesday, I ate the food and afterwards in class I felt drowsy, tired and it was hard to still be active during 8th period.

Universal free lunch could create a needed sense of equality in public schools. And I hope this

can mean we can also work to change the quality and freshness of the food. There should be free lunch for all. I believe in free and healthy school lunches for all students in NYC. Thank you for your time.

Angel Velasco

My name is Angel Velasco. I am a student at BSSJ. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here to speak about the Lunch 4 Learning campaign for universal free and healthy school lunch for all NYC public school students.

The Lunch at my school is bad because the food is never hot, the food is very greasy, and its not healthy. It think we need to change the food in my cafeteria through universal free lunch so students can eat without having to pay. I plan on going to college and becoming an immigration lawyer. But college is expensive and my family is trying to save, and we cannot afford the 35 dollars a month for the school lunch. Luckily, I don't have to pay for lunch but there are many families not much different than mine who do.

I don't like the food at my school and it does not support the people and affects their health badly. The students don't eat, and their grades are bad because of it. This also affect the self and body. I am and American. I am against the discrimination against poor people. America has a lot of food, not one should be hungry. This is my testimony. I want to change the lives of the students of New York City through free lunch for all. Thank you.