



Student Testimony

**in Support of Universal Free School Lunch Expansion
before the New York City Council Education Committee**

Hearing on the Preliminary Budget

March 16, 2016



Aminata Abdouramane

Hello, my name is Amina Abdouramane and I am in the 12th grade at the Academy of Urban Planning at Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn. Thank you Council Member Dromm and the Education Committee for your continued support on universal free school lunch. As a student who has been fighting for this issue for three years, I am also here to urge the Mayor to expand this program.

Imagine someone who has been trying to stay unseen for the longest time in a game of hide and seek. You may be asking, who is this person and why are they hiding? This scenario I am talking about is not just a hypothetical. It is a reality that plays out in school cafeterias throughout New York City.

This person tries their best to not show any evidence at all of their hiding area. Why are they hiding? Because they don't want to be seen by other members of the game. Why not? Because if that does happen, they lose. In the case of school lunch, many students play this game: of hiding and being unseen. Why do students not want to be seen on the lunch line? Because of the fear of getting caught. Why? Many reasons to answer that: Let's go through the main points:

1) A social class system is reinforced by the school lunch process.

2) Stigma/Bullying: All over the world, the motto is treat people the way you want to be treated. Well, this motto doesn't exist in our school cafeteria. Name calling, put downs, bullying, labeling students, etc. Can you believe that school lunch causes this? People are ashamed to get up and get lunch. What if they're hungry? What if that lunch is the one and only meal for their whole day? What if their parents don't have money to give them to buy lunch? Then what? The answer is obvious. They are hungry for that whole day until hopefully they get home and eat. The reason why students don't get on line is because they are afraid to get caught eating what our world knows as "free-free". Getting labeled or being bullied for being a free-free eater is like getting labeled an outcast. Being an outcast in schools without universal free school lunch means that everybody knows who you are -- and in a very bad way. It has the same stigma as a person who is homeless and is on public assistance. You can believe what I'm saying to be credible because I was a victim and I am still a witness.

I know this is not what the Department of Education was aiming for, but this is what happens in students' cafeterias. Students should have all the resources and nourishment they need to reach their potential. As a graduating senior of 2016, I want to make sure that my years of fighting for universal free school lunch will banish the "free-free" stigma once and for all. As our city's leader, Mayor de Blasio has the power to do this and I urge him to take a stand for all NYC public school students. Thank you.



Tianhao Zhang

Good afternoon Council Member Dromm and fellow members of the New York City Council Education Committee. My name is Tianhao Zhang, and I'm a senior at Francis Lewis High School in Fresh Meadows, Queens. I am here today to represent a student advocacy group Teenergetic. Inspired by a student protest at my school about lunch appeal, I founded Teenergetic with my classmates and set as our mission to launch Universal Free Lunch, improve the appeal of school food, and enhance the overall learning experience in NYC schools. With your support, Teenergetic and other community based organizations aim to make more progress this year toward universal free school lunch.

At Francis Lewis High School, we have a significant population of immigrant students. Having immigrated to this country with my family 4 years ago, I witnessed firsthand some of my friends who are hesitant about filling out school lunch forms. They will say it's because their parents are unwilling to reveal certain information out of concern of their immigration status. Additionally, in my school, many students' families barely miss the eligibility threshold to qualify for free or reduced price lunch and therefore struggle to pay for their children's meals. What this means for many students is choosing between food or a review book. Unfortunately most students will choose to pay for the latter, a decision that affects their health and academic progress. This situation is not limited to my school. In fact the lack of universal free school lunch leads to problems throughout New York City in different forms depending on the school. By implementing universal free school lunch, the two aforementioned problems can be immediately and effectively addressed.

While the city tried to remedy the crisis in our school food system with initiatives in elementary and middle schools, high school students continue to be left out of this critical conversation. That's why I am here today. I am here to ask the Mayor to make universal free lunch a priority. To Council Member Dromm and the fellow members of the Education Committee, I thank you for your support and hope you continue to be strong champions of this issue. All students should be guaranteed full access to school lunch regardless of individual family situations so that every student can become more productive in their educational endeavors.



Jahnice Johnson

Hello , my name is Jahnice Johnson and I am a student at George Westinghouse High School. I'd like to take the time out today to deliver my support for the Lunch4Learning campaign for universal free school lunch for all NYC public school students. Cyber bullying, embarrassment, pressure and fear are all factors under school lunch system and the ones who have opportunity to obtain it. A while back, I was unaware of the originator of the term called for school lunch to be renamed "free free". The word has more meaning than it seems, better yet more impact. Last year when we were allowed to have our phones in school, students would go out of their way just to take pictures of people eating school lunch. I happened to be a victim of this situation and I must admit it got me highly upset to know later on that night I would be clowned on social media. This caused mental frustrations to my well being, it made me not want to show my face in school. I was one with a high popularity level as well as one who was more fortunate and this was happening to almost everyone so I can only imagine what it did to those who knew free lunch would be their only meal. Did they make the pain unbearable and overwhelming enough to sacrifice health, and cause starvation? Bullying isn't the only issue with school lunch. There were times where there wasn't enough food, it was undercooked, or just a bad taste. Nevertheless, I think the first approach would be to make all school lunches universally free and soon enough the factors behind students not eating school lunch will become obsolete. I am asking you Mr. Mayor and Council Members, to make universal free lunch a priority. We need to stop the stigma and get better access to food in our schools. Thank you for your time and your support for this meaningful, momentous, necessary issue .

Solomon Aniemeka

Hello, my name is Solomon Aniemeka, a sophomore at East New York Family High School. I stand in front of you today to discuss a troubling issue currently existing within our schools today. As a student, in order for me to receive lunch, I'm required to pay 0.75 everyday due to my father's income. To you 0.75 may seem to be small issue to argue about, but what I request is for you all to consider the fact that many parents today are being suffocated by responsibilities, including my own parents. My father's income makes us ineligible for free school lunch, but he still has other basic responsibilities such as rent, taxes, educational expenses, as well as placing food on the table at home.

All these other expenses , tend to reduce his yearly income leaving him with insufficient funds, thus, limiting payment distribution for school lunch. For many other students with situations similar to mine, this can lead to health issues, lack of focus in class, low grades, and much more. In my school, the appeal of school lunch is an issue, but how can we improve the lunch in a public school if not everyone can eat it?

What I ask of you, Council Members and Mayor de Blasio, is to establish free school lunch for all NYC public schools. You have the power to make sure that the youth of our current generation can get a proper diet to help strengthen our ability to focus in class. It's your choice to proceed toward the right path into supporting today's youth. Thank you to the City Council for your support this year and the last. for your full attention and have a good day.



Hello, our names are Stephanie Almodovar, Chenlee Carrasco, Kimberly Fuentes, and Brandon Valdivieso. We are high school students in the Hunts Point area who form part of a teen activist group called A.C.T.I.O.N. in a local community organization known as The Point CDC. We would like to first thank the City Council Education Committee for their continuous support through the Lunch for Learning campaign. Through this testimony we would like to express why we need universal free school lunch to be implemented in all NYC public schools.

As youth who work for and advocate for positive change in our community, it is important to us that we share with you the importance of creating a universal free school lunch system throughout all of NYC's public schools. Most school age youth in this community depend on the nutrition we receive from our schools. Students in school need breakfast and lunch to help them operate their day. Most students eat lunch in school because we all know how important it is for our health and education. As you may be well aware of, Hunts Point is home to the largest food distribution center in the United States. However, we are also a food desert with few healthy food options available in our community. Once youth transition out of middle school into high school, the security of a school-wide free lunch is gone. That is why supporting the creation of universal free school lunch from pre-k through high school is important.

Implementing universal free school lunch along with improving the quality of school food will help ensure better school environments for young people in our public school system. School lunches are unappetizing. Access to more varied foods, along with better refrigerated dairy products served in schools will benefit us in the classroom. We are asking you Mr. Mayor and City Council members to institute universal free lunch. We need better food options in all our schools. Thank you again for your support and thank you for your time.