

School Food & The Next Generation

YOUTH FOOD ADVOCATES NEWSLETTER



Cover Photo: YFA Interns take a selfie with NYS Senator Michelle Hinchey and NYS Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas

Renewing Hope In The Food System

By Shirley Huang and Crystal Alcock

We started this fall with renewed energy and hope for the future of school food. Our time in high school and as YFA interns is short, but we are hopeful about our impact for generations to come.

With \$100 million secured in the last two years alone for the Cafeteria Enhancement Experience (CEE), Youth Food Advocate and the Lunch 4 Learning Coalition prioritize the initiative for all middle and high school cafeterias as a matter of basic income and food equity. In November 2023, the Chancellor's Proposed Five-Year Capital Plan committed the full remaining \$150 million for cafeteria enhancement. This additional funding revamps existing institutional-style cafeterias into food-court style serving lines and student-friendly seating, which serve more fruits and vegetables. This is crucial in creating an inviting and appealing environment that encourages healthy eating habits among students, contributing to their overall well-being and academic performance.

Not only is the school food system being transformed in New York, it is also being transformed nationally. In 2023, the USDA proposed updates to school nutrition standards. NYC school food standards exceed the USDA's in terms of sugar, sodium, and more! However, these federal updates would help to improve standards for other school districts across the nation. If accepted, the standards will limit the amount of added sugars in certain products by 2025. Currently, the added sugars...

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Who We Are

Youth Food Advocates are **food justice leaders and school food experts** from across NYC public high schools. Our goal is to ensure all 1 million NYC public school students have **access to the best, most nutritious** school food. We know how important it is for students like us to have food that **fuels us and helps us succeed** in school. We represent NYC high school campuses **across the city** and **gather weekly to advocate** on behalf of all students.

Good Food for the Next Generation

By Umida ibragimova

Our food choices impact environmental sustainability and our health and wellness. A diet high in whole, plant-based foods promotes a more sustainable food system and improves health. A lower risk of chronic illnesses, including diabetes, heart disease, and some types of cancer, is one of the advantages of plant-based diets. Compared to conventional diets, adopting plant-centric eating habits uses fewer natural resources, emits fewer greenhouse gases, and reduces environmental deterioration. Holistic food sustainability must consider the whole food supply chain, from production to distribution and consumption, and go beyond personal dietary preferences. Selecting seasonal, local, and organic produce can lower the carbon footprint and use of dangerous pesticides and artificial fertilizers. Advocating for better policies that support systems change and conscious consumption can further enhance sustainability. Adopting programs like the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) can be key to realizing these ideals. With consideration for local economies, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, fair labor practices, and nutrition, the GFPP offers institutions a framework for prioritizing socially responsible and sustainable food procurement. By incorporating GFPP principles the city can contribute to a more ethical and environmentally friendly food supply chain, which has benefits beyond our own health. As YFA interns, we push for robust food policies that nourish our relationship with the environment, sustainability, and health and equity principles that will benefit current and future generations.



Photos (left to right): 1) At YA-YA Network panel, 2) Exploring 150+ years of School Food History, 3) GFPP Training for 2nd-year YFA Interns, 4) FDR High School Green Club gift YFA Gratitude Postcards to OFNS staff

Youth Advocate Spotlight

By Aarmeen Khan



Aya Abdelaziz (she/her) is an Egyptian American artist, organizer, and educator. She joined the **YA-YA Network** after years of working with young people in NYC public schools. YA-YA prepares young people to become the next generation of activists for social and economic justice. Aya invited YFA to join the "Youth Organizing under the Adams Administration" panel in November.

What public policy issues motivated your involvement in the YA-YA Network?

I grew up in NYC Public Schools and experienced the disturbing difference between schools with metal detectors and the schools without. After college, I worked as a teaching artist and writing tutor in NYC high schools and experienced the reality of NYC's segregated and severely underfunded school system. Many young people I work with read at levels far below their grade. Students talked about the heartbreak of losing their favorite teachers and favorite arts programs. I saw a system designed to push bright young minds into self-doubt rather than cultivating their incredible power.

Our theme is the next generation, what are your thoughts on the proposed \$150M for enhanced cafeterias and its implications for the youth?

More families are experiencing food and housing insecurity: 1 in 9 students are homeless. We need to invest in public services that support young people more than ever. That includes quality breakfasts and lunches in our schools, supporting teachers and resourcing classrooms, counselors and social workers, arts programs, SYEP, and public libraries that give youth opportunities to guide their own education.

People most impacted by policies, like students, often lack engagement in the policy-making process. How can young people effectively seek change for their environment?

This is an incredible moment for youth organizing in NYC where organizations like YFA, YA-YA, DRUM, RJI, NYSYLC, and more have built the infrastructure to support young people in organizing toward policy change. But we need power. Youth organizers in NYC need to build their base so they can harness the power they have to take collective action — like the citywide student walkouts that happened this November in support of a ceasefire in Gaza. Students have the power to strike. We have to use it.

Renewing Hope In The Food System

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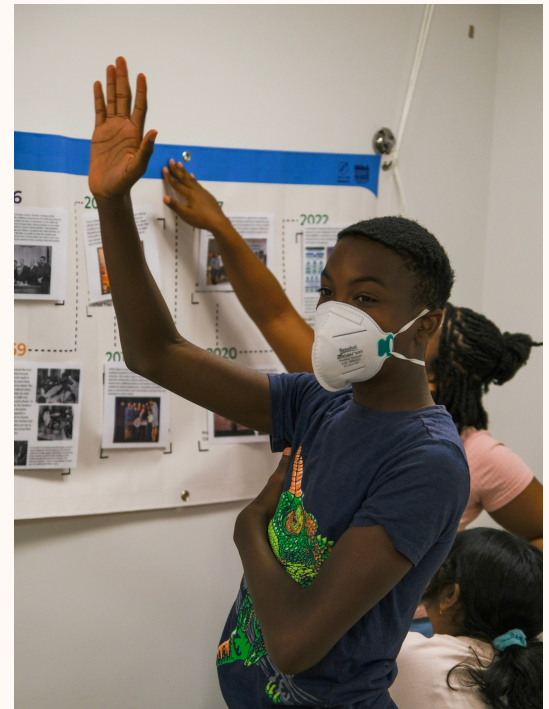
...in school meals exceeds the maximum amount recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans; this proposal will combat this problem. Introducing new flavors of milk to schools across the U.S., while still meeting nutrition guidelines, was also proposed. This will allow students in NYC and beyond to drink nutrient rich beverages that they enjoy. Children who consume more than the recommended amount of sodium are at risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. The USDA plans to gradually reduce the amount of sodium in schools. Lastly, the USDA proposed to prioritize whole foods, which is a source of fiber that lowers the risk of diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, while allowing schools to serve non-whole grain foods once a week. As school meal reform continues locally and nationally, changes will continue to enhance the cafeteria experience for future generations, as students will have access to foods that are richer in nutrition and more engaging to their age group! This will allow students to look forward to healthy meals that will benefit them in the long-run.

Beyond these achievements, returning Youth Food Advocates learned about the NYC Good Food Purchasing Campaign (GFPP). Community Food Advocates has led the NYC Good Food Purchasing Campaign since 2016 along with three other organizations. GFPP provides a flexible framework that encourages public agencies to direct their buying power through 5 core values. These include Local Economies, Valued Workforce, Nutrition, Environmental Sustainability, and Animal Welfare. Racial equity and supply chain transparency are additional critical elements of the program. GFPP also aims to hold large corporations accountable for better practices and to increase the diversity of vendors to contract with public agencies. The future of school food and the whole food system in NYC depends on a transparent and equitable food system built on principles of social justice and racial equity. YFA interns envision this as a pathway to sustain health and wellness for the diverse public and the environment. We hope to utilize quantitative research data from our YFA school menu survey to bridge OFNS's commitment to GFPP to improve school food practices and service. OFNS cannot innovate alone. They have many partnerships such as the USDA, EcoRise, and now YFA.

Across NYC schools, YFA will advocate for menu changes, consistent with the NYC Food Standards and informed by students' voices. This is why we have renewed hope in the food system and are thankful for the YFA generations before us who planted the seeds of change, and proud of the work we've accomplished for the next generation.



Assafaou, Clara Barton High School



Jared, Brooklyn College Academy



Faith (left), Brooklyn Technical High School
Shirley (right), Midwood High School

YFA Updates & Actions

By Faith Catherine Jones

Fall & Winter Highlights

The 6th generation of Youth Food Advocates had a strong start to the 2023-24 year. Here's a recap of what we've been up to:

- We began the school year by meeting with OFNS senior staff every month. These meetings allow YFA interns to ask insightful questions about the cafeteria environment that are crucial for us to stay up to date with the current status of school food and to brainstorm ways we can advocate for solutions in the future.
- Over 700 students shared their feedback and experience with school food in our [2023 Menu Survey](#). This survey elevates student voices to inform OFNS as they improve school meals. We've seen the OFNS use past YFA Menu Survey data to improve food. For example, you may not have seen mac n cheese on the menu lately because OFNS is revamping it in response to student feedback.
 - Stay tuned for our report this spring. It includes responses from September to December. We will continue to collect responses and update OFNS with a new insights by the end of the school year. If you haven't already, please fill out the [2023 - 2024 YFA Menu Survey](#) and share the [survey flier](#) with your school! Student responses provide critical data when we suggest specific improvements in the cafeteria to OFNS. Furthermore, it helps YFA brainstorm new ways to advocate for change.
- In November, we had our YFA Workshop Day #1 when we met Anthony Carrión, the Community Engagement Specialist at NYC Civic Engagement Commission. Anthony introduced us to the [Participatory Budgeting program](#) at the NYC Civic Engagement Commission where NYC residents submit budget proposal ideas and vote on what programs to implement in their communities.



Three Generations of YFA Interns (left to right): Kamora, Aarmeen, and Faith



- We conducted our 4th annual Gratitude Campaign (previously the YFA Thanksgiving Campaign). Every year YFA collect postcards from students with short and sweet messages to be given to cafeteria workers. YFA understand the hard work that goes into serving the largest school system in the nation and want to give our thanks during the fall season. This year, we gifted nearly 1,000 postcards to cafeteria workers across our 14 schools.
- In addition to these efforts, some of our YFA interns presented YFA goals and strategies on the city and national levels. YFA interns Joshua and Safowana presented YFA's current efforts for enhanced cafeterias at the [Hunger-Free Communities Virtual Conference](#). They shared YFA's accomplishments with people across the country and learned about ways others engaged with and attempted to solve the hunger issue. Likewise, YFA interns Faith and Shirley answered questions at the YA-YA Network Youth Panel concerning advocacy methods and how youth can strategize to make a change for a social justice issue.

We're in the second half of the school year and are focusing on next steps in our food justice actions. NYC is on the road to have cafeteria enhancements in all public high schools and middle schools in the five-year budget plan proposed by Chancellor David Banks. YFA will participate in the March and May City Council Budget Hearings. While, at the moment, full funding is proposed, we will continue to make our voices heard throughout the budget process to ensure it is in the final budget in June.

Contact Us



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