

School Food & Back To School

YOUTH FOOD ADVOCATES NEWSLETTER



Cover Photos: YFA meets in person to work on YFA Menu Survey results & we visit school cafeterias to improve school food

Impact of Supply Chain on School Food

By Shivani Shah

Grocery store shelves went bare during the pandemic, demonstrating how the pandemic impacted the food supply chain - all steps in the process of getting food from farm to table. The food chain disruption has also altered the availability of ingredients in school cafeterias, something that students may have noticed in the lunch line at school. Due to the pandemic, public schools have been suffering from supply chain disruptions. Ninety-seven percent of school nutrition directors nationally are concerned about the continued pandemic supply chain disruptions.

In our own schools, we have seen differences in lunch since pre-pandemic times including the drastic changes in packaging and configurations of lunch tables to reduce the spread of COVID-19. School lunch itself has altered, and students have noticed. Students have heard of supply chain disruptions in the news, have seen changes when returning to school and are left wondering whether the two are related. Sophia Shiu, a junior at Stuyvesant High School, noted that ketchup packets have been in short supply, with the packets running out very quickly into the lunch period. She mentioned how the school lunches now lack holiday-specific foods, like the Thanksgiving lunch. Instead, lunch has been replaced with more non-perishables. For example, Sophia noticed new menu items in school lunch, such as bean burritos.

Impact of Supply Chain Continues on Page 4...

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Who We Are

Youth Food Advocates are **food justice leaders** and **school food experts** from across multiple NYC public high schools. Our goal is to ensure all 1.1 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.

YFA Menu Survey Results & Action

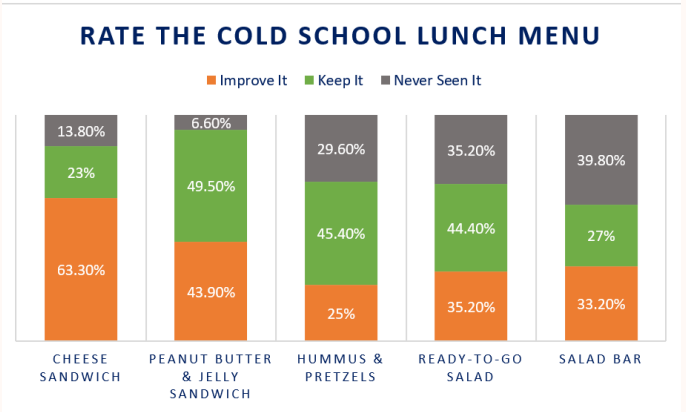
By Leslie Gomez-Rivera

This **YFA Menu Survey** was created to receive feedback on NYC school meals. School food has a significant impact on all aspects of student life, such as improving academics, and helping with focus and overall health.

The idea started as we explored ways students can provide feedback on school food. We reviewed the **OFNS School Food App**. In the School Food App, students are able to review school food menus and rate eight food items.

Unlike the School Food App, our survey allows students to:

1. Provide feedback without downloading an app
2. Provide feedback anonymously
3. Submit comments in their own words
4. Submit comments for suggested menu additions



We surveyed nearly **200 students from more than 15 campuses across NYC**.

Hot Items with highest "Improve It" rating:

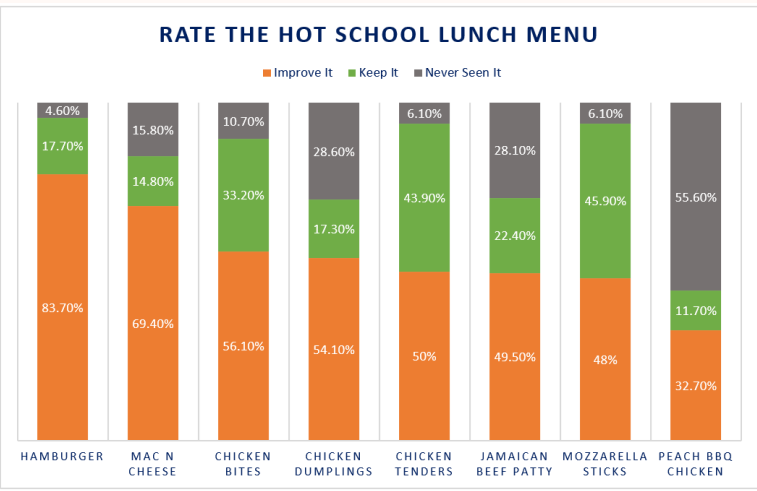
- Hamburger
- Mac n Cheese
- Chicken Bites

Cold Item with highest "Improve It" rating:

- Cheese sandwich

We have already started using the results to come up with **solutions and recommendations** to improve school food. We are meeting with school food staff in our schools and students will see some of these changes in the next couple of months.

We're using your feedback to upgrade and improve the food so that students can have good and appetizing meals everyday.



Our 2nd Annual YFA Cafeteria Heroes Campaign

By Clem Paarlberg

For Thanksgiving of 2021, we wanted to continue to call attention to, and show appreciation for, the cafeteria workers who provide school meals for students across New York City.

We started the **Cafeteria Heroes Campaign** in 2020 to thank all of the cafeteria workers across the city and show them appreciation. We especially wanted to thank them through the tough times following the start of COVID-19. At the peak of the pandemic, cafeteria workers were handing out to-go lunches to students and families. During the summer of 2020, cafeteria workers prepared 420,000 to-go lunches daily, compared to pre-COVID times when cafeteria workers served a total of 180,000 meals each summer.

In appreciation of the work done by cafeteria workers, YFA worked together to start a social media campaign asking students and families to post pictures displaying messages of appreciation and using **#YFACafeteriaHeroes** on Instagram.

Youth Advocate Spotlight

In September, we met with members of the Department of Education's Borough Student Advisory Council (BSAC) and the Chancellor's Student Advisory Council (CSAC) to see how we could support each other in bringing changes to school food. We're excited to collaborate with BSAC and CSAC more in the future. **YFA member Elisha Verebes interviewed Reana Akthar to spotlight their work!**



What are the main goals of the BSAC & CSAC?

The BSAC aims to foster youth-adult partnerships and implement community-based changes. We identify, discuss, and tackle issues within our schools with the support of adults and ideas from our peers. The CSAC takes advocacy and action on a larger scale. We collaborate with DOE stakeholders to disrupt systemic inequities and push for city-wide recommendations to the Chancellor.

Why do you think it's important for students to be involved in school advocacy?

Being involved in school advocacy puts young people closer to finding their voices and speaking their truths. We often hear of our future depending on youth empowerment. And it is true, we should equip young people with skills necessary to dismantle societal barriers. We must also recognize that youth presence does not solely live in the future—our convictions exist now. We must establish the pillars of change now.

How can students get involved in advocacy and student voice?

Students should join their student governments! Student government is a great way to work with all kinds of stakeholders involved in decision-making on a school level (administration, teachers, and students). Being a student government representative allows individuals to assess what their student body needs the most, and implement changes to support their peers.

How do you think COVID-19 has changed the work that your group does, and students taking action in their schools in general?

COVID-19 has brought attention to many issues that existed before and during the pandemic but are only now part of the conversation. Student mental health and racial justice are two examples that should have always been at the forefront. Our experiences during COVID-19 teach us to approach issues with compassion, realizing that they are multifaceted and require collaboration from all stakeholders to create an equitable solution.

Youth Voices At The Table

By Faith Jones

Lunch 4 Learning (L4L) is a coalition formed to advocate for an equitable school food program. Youth Food Advocates (YFA) are the youth leaders of the L4L coalition. As those who are most directly impacted by the issue, we are able to take part in creating the solutions to inequalities concerning school food. We are happy to announce our exciting new partnership with the Office of Food Nutrition Service (OFNS). OFNS is responsible for feeding all NYC public school students. They create the menu that adheres to USDA guidelines, prepare meals, and serve students.

We use L4L meetings to communicate with OFNS. Before the start of the school year, YFA crew member Alex was able to join the L4L meeting in September. At the meeting Alex saw first hand the way the coalition used collaborative thinking to improve school meals. L4L meetings with the OFNS occur during school hours, so we currently develop questions to be submitted and answered at monthly L4L meetings.

Being able to submit our own questions allows us to voice our concerns and gather insight on the current status quo of school meals as students return to in-person learning for the first time since mid-March 2020. An example of this is getting to learn about the different grab & go stations available at some NYC schools. **Share your concerns and questions with us anytime so that we can bring your voice to the table!**



Continued from Page 1- Impact of Supply Chain...

By Shivani Shah

To get more clarity on the issue, I was able to speak with Nelson Quiles, the Special Assistant to the Senior Executive Director at the Office of Food and Nutritional Services (OFNS) to get an insider perspective on the school food challenges due to the pandemic. Nelson mentioned the supply chain issues disrupted both lunch menu items and their alternates with similar nutritional value. Cafeterias needed to make substitutions they would not usually make. Nelson emphasized that these disruptions made the menu unpredictable and inconsistent, and acknowledged that it could be frustrating for students eating the meals as well as the staff making the meals. Nelson noted that supply chain disruptions have improved, but he is looking forward to when the consistency matches pre-pandemic times.

Through school lunch, New York City ensures each child receives a lunch that covers at least three of the five meal components: grains, fruits, vegetables, dairy, and protein. These regulations ensure that students receive adequate nutrition, as 35 to 40 percent of a child's daily calories come from school lunches. Receiving enough nutrients helps students focus and perform better in their classes. Multiple studies have found that healthier school lunches lead to higher test scores. A University of California Berkeley study that looked at all California public schools and a Syracuse study that looked at New York City middle schools came to similar conclusions on the impact of universal free school lunch.

Students with dietary restrictions, like dairy-free or vegetarian diets, have a harder time meeting their needs. One of my dairy-free classmates can rarely have the main meal, forcing her to bring her own lunch many days. However, NYC public schools launched Plant Powered Fridays (vegetarian and vegan options) on Friday, February 4, with the goal of combating climate change, aiding animal welfare, and exposing more young children to a conscious, healthy lifestyle.

Positive changes like vegan-friendly Fridays have been made to school lunch throughout the years, like the implementation of universal free lunch in New York City schools in 2017. Giving all students access to free lunch increased school lunch participation by 31 percent. In addition, the universal free lunch program helped in eliminating the stigma for students who had previously qualified for the free lunch program. Nelson commented that eliminating the stigma is an ongoing issue, made harder to combat with tools like social media. Other positive changes, more specifically, during the pandemic include pre-packaged lunch, improved cleanliness throughout the cafeteria, and improved taste for some foods. In addition, the pandemic forced OFNS to utilize technology to communicate with their team, improving the speed and regularity of the communication.

Like Sophia, I noticed changes in my cafeteria: a cleaner and less crowded cafeteria. In addition, I would see last-minute changes to the lunch menu and wondered if this was all related to the food chain disruptions. Nelson is hopeful, that while the pandemic has revealed some vulnerabilities in the public school lunch system, OFNS can use this time to develop long-lasting changes to enhance student nutrition and health. I asked Nelson what he wants to voice to the students, and he emphasized that OFNS wants meaningful feedback from students. As the world slowly returns to normal, the Youth Food Advocates crew is here to make sure student voices are heard.

YFA MENU SURVEY @youthfoodadvocates

5-10 minutes.
Rate school lunch menu items.
Let's change school lunch.
Bit.ly/YFAmenusurvey21

Our School. Our Food. Our Voice.

Help us collect 1,000 responses this fall! Share with friends!
Students who provide their email will be entered into our raffle to win a \$25 gift card.

Thank you to all the NYC public school students who took the time to complete our YFA Menu Survey!

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE YFA MENU SURVEY RAFFLE WINNER:

CHRISTIAN @ FOOD & FINANCE!!

PLEASE CHECK YOUR EMAIL FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO GET YOUR \$25 GIFT CARD!

"Make it look better cause most of the time kids don't wanna eat food if they don't like the way it looks"

-Senior @ Midwood HS

Contact Us

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