



School Food & Our Cafeterias

YOUTH FOOD ADVOCATES NEWSLETTER



Cover Photo: I.S. 7 in Staten Island. More enhanced cafeterias are coming to NYC schools.

Welcoming Cafeterias Make an Impact

By Faith Jones and Eliza Prosellia

School Cafeteria environment is a major factor in a student’s school experience. A comfortable cafeteria should be a place where students can relax and eat nutritious food in order to gain energy for academic success. Having an environment in which a student is unable to relax in the cafeteria could have negative effects on their ability to learn, and cause undue stress.

This is evidently a prominent issue, with 25% of students responding to the YFA survey saying they don’t participate in school lunch because of the cafeteria environment.

Data from Brooklyn Technical High School (BTHS), the largest school in the country, further supports this point. Before the cafeteria redesign, lunch participation at the school was below 30 percent. However, after the addition of the updated cafeteria, BTHS lunch participation received a boost, peaking at over 50 percent (see: BTHS CHART on page 4). Illustrating that high impact intervention through implementing enhanced cafeterias in all middle and high schools in NYC is an effective way to improve the cafeteria environment.

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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 Spring & Summer Highlights

We visited **6 NYC high school campuses** in Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn, met OFNS staff and shared our goals. We presented at two youth summits, organized events across the city, and more!

WESS Burger Day - May 2022

Based on the results from our fall **YFA Menu Survey**, the school food item that was rated in highest need of improvement was the hamburger. Thanks to the support from Ms. Brittany Saffold, the School Food Manager at West End Secondary and her staff, we hosted a **WESS Burger Day** to see how the school hamburger could be improved. The staff prepared an assortment of cheese varieties to be added to the burger as well as fresh vegetables including lettuce, tomatoes, and pickles. The staff also prepared fresh cut seasonal strawberries as the fruit of the day. Cheddar and mozzarella cheese were the preferred toppings (59%), the strawberries received a 4 or 5 stars rating by 54% of students, and **food appeal improved by 10% from our original survey**.



WESS Burger Day: Did you know all NYC-DOE OFNS food is baked and not fried?

School Visit at BSGE - June 2022

We visited the Baccalaureate School for Global Education in Queens to talk with the administrators about the cafeteria environment and efficiency in the kitchen. While talking to administration, we learned there was no head cook in the school kitchen, and the kitchen has been supported by the assistant cook. The DOE-OFNS lost personnel in the past two years due to the pandemic and has been actively recruiting. The DOE is in the process of hiring a new head cook for BSGE, and reopened the salad bar before the end of the school year. We toured the small dry foods storage space, which doubled as an office for the cafeteria staff. We asked many questions about the menu, and learned about how the food was approved to be in the cafeteria. The administrators made sure we understood that the OFNS standards on sodium and fat content, which keep school food nutritious, can impact the flavor of meals.



Leslie @ OFNS Taste Test in LIC Central Office

OFNS Taste Test - June 2022

We were invited to a school lunch taste testing at the OFNS in Long Island City. This tasting was the first one for our group. Chef Emily and Ms. Chantal from the Menu Management team and Nelson Quiles, the OFNS Chief of Staff, organized and led the tasting, and they were visibly excited to have students in the building. The YFA team tried about six meals, writing notes and rating each one. To rate the meals, we flipped an interestingly-shaped barcode a certain way to denote if we would or wouldn't eat the meal again. The image was then scanned and placed into a database, so that all our ratings were combine to be easily shareable. Overall, I really enjoyed the tofu burrito and the experience altogether. Going to the tasting made me feel that my input as a student did matter and I hope that the input will make an impact in the future.

NYC Youth Summit Resource Fair - June 2022

YFA participated in a Resource Fair at the **3rd Annual NYC Youth Summit**. We showcased all of our accomplishments throughout the year to students and residents of NYC. The experience was a great way to end the 2021-2022 YFA program. In addition to presenting YFA at the summit, we met so many incredible groups focusing on youth mental health and advocacy. YFA was also lucky to watch wonderful performances of youth dancers and poets. We can't wait to return to this event next year!



Faith @ NYC Youth Summit Resource Fair

Our School, Our Food, Our Voice

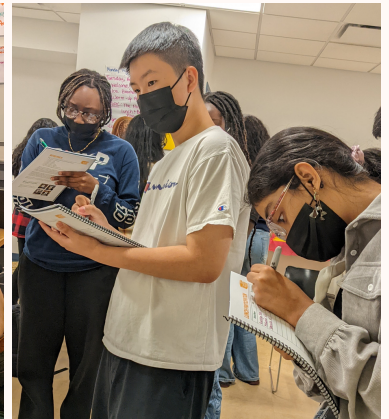
Starting October 2022, we will be hosting a monthly forum for youth across NYC public schools to share their feedback on school food and their day-to-day experiences in our school cafeterias!

If you or someone you know is interested in learning more, please complete the **YFA School Food Forum Form**.

ALL ARE WELCOMED!



Your VOICE MATTERS



YFA-GFPP Training (top left), YFA Summer Leadership Training (top right & bottom)

Youth Advocate Spotlight

By Faith Jones

Ameer Alnasser is a member of the Brooklyn Arab Youth (BAY) Program in the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn. He is a great YFA supporter and partner. Ameer prepared alongside YFA to testify at NYC Council budget hearings. We caught up with him this summer to hear more about his perspective.

Why is school food as an issue important to BAY? Child poverty has been a growing issue among Bay Ridge residents, and as a result food insecurity grew too. Children should be worried about their school assignments, and not be forced to deal with their food insecurity. This overhaul helps members of our community. There is one specific member of BAY I talked to about the issues they were dealing with. It's one thing to see a stat, it's another to see it firsthand. The funding helps address food insecurity immensely and it is phenomenal that we got some of it passed.

Why is it important for BIPOC students to be at the forefront of school food advocacy? Students of color represent the backbone and the core of the NYC public schools system. It is a travesty to see budget cuts to schools given that many communities rely on schools to break the cycle of poverty many families go through.

What are ways that you think BIPOC students can be represented in school food and in the cafeteria? School foods primarily focus on some popular foods to cater towards the entire student body. However, it would be nice to see more cultural dishes. As an Arab myself, there are many dishes I enjoy that I wish I could share with the rest of the student body. I suggest making a day in the week "culture day" where students can enjoy meals from around the world, and also learn something about their classmates on the way.

You participated on behalf of BAY to testify for more funding to go towards enhanced cafeterias in NYC schools. Is there any testimony that struck you or was memorable? I wish I could remember the name of the person but there was a teacher testifying and they brought up the looks on children's faces and the hopelessness of it given they cannot do much to address this issue by themselves and that really struck me because I think the teacher mentioned that it was more than half their class and it really stuck with me.

After our year-long advocacy, including the testimony, we secured \$50 million in the city budget for cafeteria updates. These funds will be used to update 100 middle and high school cafeterias. What do you think this new funding to school cafeterias will bring to BIPOC students? School cafeterias will hopefully bring more community building in communities of color and I hope to see more bills adding money to schools.

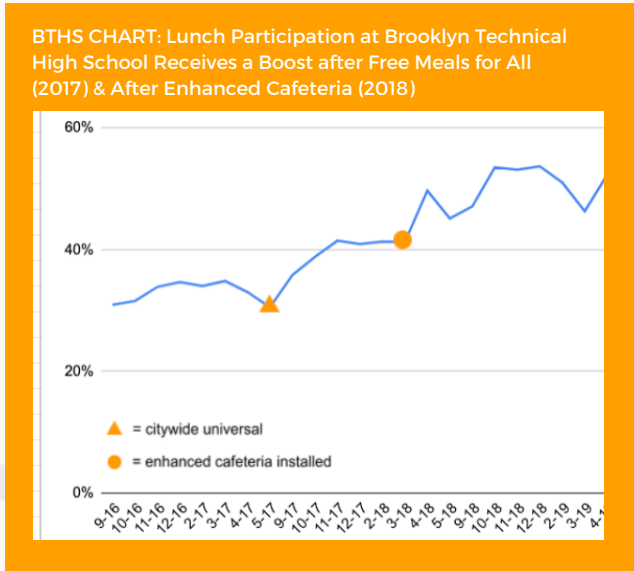


The Arab American Association of New York

Welcoming Cafeterias

Continued from Page 1

Based on the previously stated results, Youth Food Advocates thought it was imperative to allocate funding towards enhanced cafeterias. In order to achieve this goal YFAers used various methods to express the need to policymakers. To begin our advocacy journey for cafeteria enhancements, before joining budget hearings, each YFA member participated in meetings with city council members on zoom to introduce the idea of funding for cafeteria enhancements. During these meetings, YFA members gave a presentation on current school food issues caused by inadequate and outdated cafeterias and how the \$250 million funding to enhance cafeterias could help rid school food of the problem.



After meeting with city council members individually, YFA members testified in front of all city council members at preliminary and executive budget hearings. We all prepared a two minute statement to say in front of the council about why we believe school food needed a better budget, with most of us waiting hours in the zoom room to be called to testify. Most statements consisted of short anecdotes about our own experience in the cafeteria, with statistics about lunch participation and environment. In addition to YFAers giving their testimonies at the hearings, we also connected with, invited, and trained other groups such as Brooklyn Arab Youth from Bay Ridge (BAY) and Active Community Teamwork Club from BTHS (A.C.T.) to share their own testimonies and support our advocacy.

The Lunch 4 Learning coalition and Youth Food Advocates (the youth leadership arm of the coalition) were successful in securing an additional 50 million dollars in the city’s budget to be used exclusively on enhancing the cafeteria at 100 city public schools. Mayor Eric Adams announced the budget plan agreement on June 10th, 2022. [An ABC7 article \(link\)](#) that detailed the highlights of this new budget plan explained what this money would be used for specifically, with the plan being to “Upgrade school cafeterias at 100 schools located in Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) neighborhoods to improve the dining environment and encourage proper nutrition (\$50 million in capital funds).” YFA testimonies ended up proving successful, garnering an additional \$50 million in the budget for the enhanced cafeterias.

We are not done yet! Youth Food Advocates have many actions ahead to reach a complete and equitable improvement to school food. YFA plans to stay in contact with the Office of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) and the public schools being remodeled to ensure the process is efficient and monitor results. The goal is to ensure that both students and faculty are actively involved in the enhancement process, and benefit from the renovations done to the cafeterias. YFA will continue to talk to cafeteria staff as well as students to see how everybody in a school community reacts to these new changes, and if these changes continue to produce positive results. YFA is advocating to get enhanced cafeterias at all high schools and middle schools to ensure equity across our schools.

Watch YFA @ NYC Council Testimony on our YouTube Channel

Eliza Prosella, Faith Jones, and Leslie Gomez-Rivera Testify before City Council

Contact Us

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