

School Food & Transformative Change

YOUTH FOOD ADVOCATES NEWSLETTER



Cover Photo: Completing YFA Summer Leadership Training, August 2023
 Top row, left to right: Stephanie, Kamora, Assafaou, Umida, Jared. Bottom row, left to right: Crystal, Eric, Ameerah, Lakesha, Anna Lilia.

The Local & National School Food Policy Landscape

By Faith Catherine Jones

For the third year in a row, Youth Food Advocates (YFA) requested City funding to support enhanced cafeterias, which create a familiar and friendly deli style lunch line that increases efficiency and improves cafeteria experiences. In early 2023, YFA interns began to work hard to write their testimonials to be presented at the March and May city council budget hearings for the fiscal year 2024 (FY24). Enhanced cafeterias have been a long-standing priority for YFA and the Lunch 4 Learning coalition and we are hopeful for our success in ensuring all our school cafeterias are transformed.

On June 26, 2023, Mayor Eric Adams held a press conference revealing the budget for FY24. Mayor Adams allocated \$50 million to expand cafeteria enhancements into 100 middle and high schools in New York City. In the past Adams has shown his support and commitment to school food, accelerating the roll out of “plant-powered Fridays” (first called vegan Fridays) and with consistent determination to make New York City school meals healthier. Eric Adams especially emphasized the need for the focus on policy to shift in a direction that makes sure “food looks good, it must be good, and it must taste good”.

School Food Policy Landscape continues on page 3

In This Issue:

- School Food Policy Landscape - Pages 1 & 3
- Advocate Spotlight - Page 2
- YFA Updates - Page 4
- YFA Actions - Page 5
- Contact Us- Page 5

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 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.

Youth Advocate Spotlight

By Shirley Huang and Eliza Porsella



Sury Dewa Ayu (she/they) is a policy entrepreneur with a focus on urban design and planning to build more public spaces that represent democracy and equity. As a first-gen college graduate from Harvard University, she echoes the importance of underrepresented communities in public spaces and has been bridging local and international learnings about civic designs to advocate better policy outcomes and democratic practices. She joined YFA in January as a guest speaker and has testified with us before the NYC Committee of Finance. Sury incorporated an urban design lens in their testimony to highlight that school cafeterias are public spaces and meant for use by students. Their expertise together with YFA highlight the importance of a student-centered cafeteria.



Photo: Welcoming Sury at our YFA workshop Day

As an advocate for creating spaces of belonging and inclusion, particularly for historically marginalized communities, and now have the experience to talk with YFA, what infrastructures would you like to see be improved in the NYC school cafeterias?

I would like to see infrastructures ringing true to the Youth Food Advocates' calling - I want the cafeteria entrance to be more welcoming by implementing fewer checkpoints for when students can go into the cafeteria and take lunch. And purchase more modern seating that students would like when they sit in the cafeteria, such as rounded tables for better socialization and comfortable dining chairs. You all have advocated for a good chunk of budget, though honestly it could be more. You're doing a lot with a little, and we know that the design of the cafeteria can influence the health and well-being of young people. So we must take initiative to improve infrastructures within NYC school cafeterias.

What public policy issues inspired you to work at the Next100?

I applied to the Next100 in 2020 to focus on affordable housing because of my background in supporting affordable housing in Boston where I pushed for a 100% affordable housing overlay. As an Indonesian in America, I experienced housing insecurity and I knew housing was a basic human right so that pushed me in taking this route of policy. I saw that people had a lot of concerns about what public spaces would do in their neighborhood and I knew it was my calling. I am an urban designer so I used my tools to help them. In Massachusetts, I worked with young designers. We asked the people "Is this public space comfortable/uncomfortable" and "Does this public space make it comfortable for us to speak out?" We tried to work on getting the impacted public front and center at the policy table for equitable housing.

Have hearing from young people in their advocacy work on the cafeteria environment influenced your stance on how the government can support transformative change in this space?

Yes! Absolutely. I believe that in order for transformative change to happen the government needs to be centering the voices of young people. I think that oftentimes, a lot of the burden of community engagement falls on people that are maybe working two to three jobs, are going to school and working, and also taking care of their siblings. In order to give feedback on designs; certain policies or plans it really is asking a lot of folks who have direct experience, and are overburdened in a lot of ways. And so one thing I do believe that the government can do, and can learn from Youth Food Advocates is to prioritize centering the people with direct experience. And in order to do that people need to be compensated for their time, and their expertise.

Communities that are the most impacted by policy are less likely to be engaged in the policy making process such as NYC students. They directly experience their school's food services and cafeteria space, but their concerns are not prioritized at the local level. How could young people get engaged in seeking a change for their respective environment?

In high school, I had to manage studying and college applications. I really want to honor YFA for using their time to work towards an important cause and being fearless advocates, especially when the group is full of high schoolers. If we are really about restorative practices, really investing in radical inclusion in policy-making spaces, we need community spaces. Not only to say it, but create the structure of the policy. YFA is a powerful group that sets an example - young people should connect with local policymakers or join a team like the Next100. Don't be afraid to reach out! I hope that those who are interested in any type of justice reformation join the Next100 to be part of a cohort that believes the best policy is made when you are centering directly impacted people. After all, get into some and cause some good trouble.

[Watch the full interview on our YouTube channel!](#)

School Food Policy Landscape

Continued from Page 1

Transformative policy that emphasizes the quality of school food and the lunch environment has been present in the city for a couple of years. In 2017, Community Food Advocates persuaded then Mayor DeBlasio and City Council Members to pass Free School Lunch for All for all NYC public schools providing free lunch for all students regardless of their income. This was an incredible feat as NYC is the largest school district in the country serving 1 million students. After 2017, the participation increased dramatically, allowing all students to benefit from healthy lunches at schools. It is worth noting that Free School Lunch for All is only applicable citywide and not statewide.

Currently, on the state level the [Healthy School Meals for All](#) Coalition successfully advocated for policies that have expanded universal meals for eligible school districts. The coalition is working to expand this to every NYS student. The current policy leaves out many small rural and suburban districts in NYS. In the schools that were left out, the meals provide healthy school lunch to all students, however, the lunch is only free for those who meet a certain income bracket. This is problematic, especially in smaller school districts, as there are many students who might be just slightly above the income bracket but can't afford school meals and are exempt from benefiting from free school lunches. Ultimately, this results in disparity in school lunches across New York State.

While there is strong bi-partisan support for Healthy School Meals for All in NYS, and most legislators support the idea of improving the environment, access and quality of our school meals and time in the day dedicated to the next generation's nutrition, there is division on the issue in many states and at the federal level. At the moment that this article was written, [8 states have enacted policies](#) that allow universal meals for students, with Michigan being the latest state to pass the legislation in July. Though, 24 states will revisit the discussion of universal meals in the following year, with NYS among those in this status of limbo. Stay connected to us for updates and potential actions to support statewide [Healthy School Meals for All](#) campaign.

In this post-pandemic recovery era, the topic of free school meals has become a heated political debate. Despite overwhelming public support, some Republican elected officials declare they will eradicate universal free school meals because the program does not take account of an individual's economic eligibility ([TNR 2023](#)). In contrast, many Democrats believe students should have access to school food regardless of family income and have proposed legislation to provide three free school meals and snacks to kids in school ([Fox News 2023](#)).

We, the YFA interns, the collective voice of NYC students, believe that transformative policy for school lunches should take an equitable approach. All students have the human right to enjoy healthy and free school lunches during their school day. YFA will continue to advocate for transformative change in our schools, in our city, and in our state. If you are a public school student in NYC or in NYS, stay connected as we share ways you can become part of these changes in NYC, in Albany, and across New York state.



Photo: Aarmeen, Faith, and Aliyah present at Youth Summit NYC



Photo: Youth Food Advocates at Youth Summit NYC

How YFA is Leading Transformative Change

By Yasmine Bonilla

Spring & Summer Highlights

After a fall of giving back and a winter of forming partnerships with 14 schools representing thousands of students across NYC, we spread our reach to youth-led groups, parents, and policymakers. Here are some highlights!

Transforming National Policy

This spring the [USDA proposed an update](#) to the School Nutrition Standards. Kumar Chandran, Senior Advisor to the USDA Secretary invited us to learn more about the USDA’s 4-pillar strategic approach and proposed updates to School Nutrition Standards and to share our feedback. After hearing from Mr. Chandran and committee members, we offered our own comments and responses. This is a key step to ensure student voice is involved in decisions about school food and we look forward to more partnerships like this with the USDA.

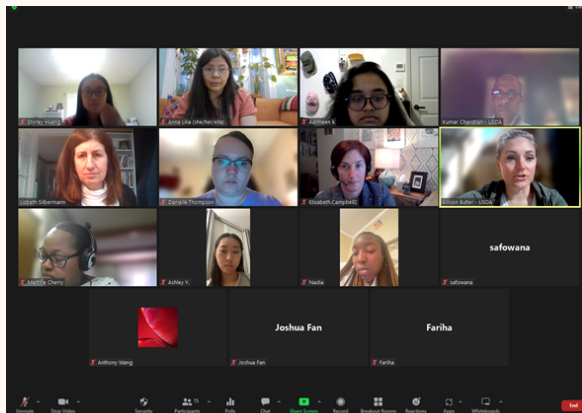


Photo: Youth Food Advocates meet with USDA

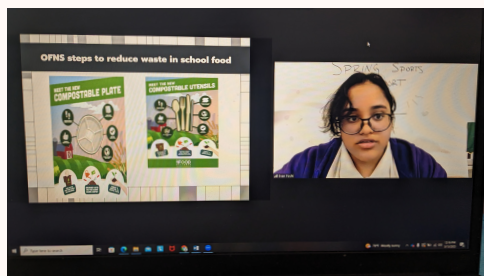


Photo: Aarmeen presents to The Brooklyn Latin School student body

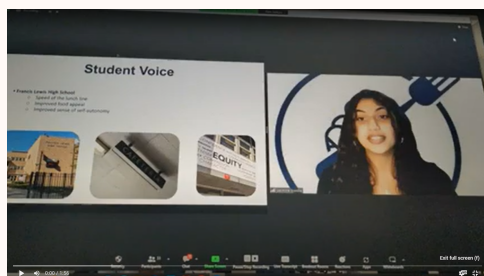


Photo: Yasmine presents to the Queens High Schools President’s Council

Transforming Our City

In preparation for testimony, we connected with youth leadership groups across NYC public schools and asked for their support to secure funding for enhanced cafeterias for all NYC middle and high schools. After discussing enhanced cafeterias in several schools across the five boroughs and gaining their support, we headed to City Hall and presented a strong case before the Committee on Finance. We trained other young people to testify alongside us. We gathered the support of 29 school youth leadership groups who signed on to our letter! Our efforts helped secure \$50 million for enhanced cafeterias. [Ask your student leadership to sign our letter of support this year!](#)

Transforming Our Advocacy

Community Food Advocates launched a new website. Visit the **Youth Leadership** section featuring three surveys for NYC students to share their thoughts on school food. We’ve updated these surveys to best reflect our experience in school cafeterias and to help capture the best possible student feedback.

The surveys help us share student insights with researchers and advocates. For example, we were guest respondents of the [CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute’s Open Data Week presentation](#) and provided insights on why student participation varies from school to school. Visit our new website, take our surveys, and share your thoughts!



WATCH NOW

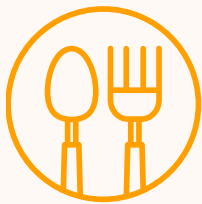
Share Your Experience, Transform School Food

As students enter school cafeterias for the 2023-2024 academic year, it is essential that we hear your opinions on the current state of school food. By delivering up-to-date, time-relevant presentations, reports, and testimonies with your feedback to our city's policy makers, we can transform the national landscape of public school lunch and transform school cafeterias in NYC!

[Check out our YFA surveys](#)

You can rate popular hot and cold items currently on the OFNS menu and give feedback on specific fruits, vegetables, grains, and proteins you want to see in your school cafeteria.

YFA Menu Survey



How would you grade your school food experience? How welcoming is the environment? Does the menu make the grade? How well does your school communicate with students?

YFA School Food Report Card



Does your school food meet the dietary needs and embrace the cultural diversity in your community?

YFA Menu Inclusivity Survey



Twenty Years of Transformative Change



2013

NYC started offering free Breakfast to all NYC Students



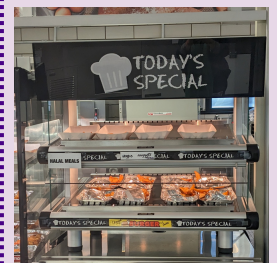
2014

The five largest school districts: NYC, Chicago, LA, Dallas, Miami-Dade, and Orlando-Dade united to demand antibiotic-free chicken leading to new production practices that ensured all the chicken meat served to students is antibiotic-free.



2017

The NYC DOE implemented the Free Lunch for All policy in schools and guaranteed every student the right to free lunch.



2017

The NYC-DOE OFNS pilots enhanced cafeterias. High schools that were enhanced cafeterias saw a 35% increase in students who eat school lunch food after the revamping.

2023

It is expected an additional 80-100 school cafeterias, across NYC, will be upgraded and enhanced with the \$50 million investment YFA helped recently secure in FY2024.

Contact Us



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