

**Testimony of the Bushwick Campus Youth Food Policy Council**

**In Support of Universal Free School Lunch Expansion**

**before the New York City Council Finance Committee**

**Hearing on the Executive Budget**

**June 9, 2015**

## **Aminata Abdouramane**

Good afternoon everyone. I am Aminata Abdouramane and I'm currently 16 years old attending the Academy of Urban Planning on Bushwick Campus. This is also my second year with the Bushwick Campus Youth Food Policy Council. I'm testifying today to expand universal free school lunch to all schools. Thank you to the Finance Committee and the Mayor for bringing universal free school lunch to middle schools. I want to make sure that universal free school lunch gets expanded to high schools and elementary schools, so I am here today to share why this is so important to students.

Imagine someone who has been trying to stay unseen for the longest time in a hide and seek game. They try 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 about 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 schools lunch means that

everybody knows who you are-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 DOE was aiming for, but this is what happens in students' cafeterias. We ask you to please expand universal school lunch to all schools in New York City, for this will be a great success and achievement for all.

## **Jeanaya Gaskins**

I am Jeanaya Gaskins and I am 15 years old. I go to the Academy for Environmental Leadership, and I'm a member of the Bushwick Campus Youth Food Policy Council. Thank you to the Finance Committee for being our champion and working with the Mayor to bring universal free school lunch to middle schools. I am here today because free school lunch cannot stop here – all students including elementary and high school students like me – also need this important program.

I believe in Universal Free School Lunch because in order to focus throughout the school day you need to eat so that you do not focus on being hungry. This also brings in situations related to health. Health is very important because with good health you do not have to worry about a barrier that prevents you from doing things. When students don't eat in the school day, they cannot concentrate in class which can cause failing grades. Classroom academics should not be affected by lack of nutrition and hunger. Also, in the case of many parents, they don't have the money to provide their child lunch because of low income.

Thank you to the Finance Committee for working with Mayor de Blasio and the Chancellor to take the first step last year. We should now expand free school lunch to all levels of schools.

## **Roshely Roy**

My name is Roshely Roy and I attend the Brooklyn School for Math and Research at the Bushwick Campus. I am 16 years old and currently in the 11th grade. I am part of the Youth Food Policy Council at my school. I would like to thank the Finance Committee for working with the Mayor to bring universal free school lunch to middle schools this year. Universal free school lunch is what everyone is talking about these days. Thankfully, free school lunch was officially instituted in some middle schools this year but I need the same to be instituted in my high school and all high schools citywide next year. Cost of school lunch is something that causes a burden on many parents. Not all parents who send their kids to public schools can afford to pay bills without worrying about a limit. My parents fit into the category of most parents who worry about the limit. Ever since I started high school, my parents were constantly stressing about how to balance all of the bills and also pay for both me and my brother's school lunch. Once free school lunch was established in middle schools, that was one less school lunch fee for my parents to worry about. I know I am not the only one who has parents struggling! Universal free school lunch shouldn't only be limited to middle school, it should reach out to all schools alike. Thank you.

## **Nafestia Caleb**

Hello my name is Nafestia Celeb, I am 17 years old and I attend the Brooklyn School for Math and Research at Bushwick campus. I am here to speak to you about the Lunch4Learning campaign. As some of you may know the Lunch4learning campaign was created to have universal free school lunch in all public schools. I would like to thank the Finance Committee for being our champion and working with the Mayor to bring universal free school lunch to middle schools this year. Although this is a great start it is not enough. Today you heard about the bullying and stigma many students face in the lunchroom, the impact on our parent's finances, and health implications of hunger. However I would like to make another point. What happens when a student has free school lunch in middle school then begins high school and no longer has it? The transition into high school is challenging enough, why create another barrier? We are asking that you expand universal free school lunch to all New York City public schools so this does not have to happen. In general if a student doesn't have access to school lunch that can affect them as well. Students can't focus when they are hungry. Education is the key to success so why take away something needed to get a good education?