



Student Testimony

**before the New York City Council
Committee on Education**

**Hearing on the Preliminary Budget
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Ksenia Novikova
New Utrecht High School
Youth Justice League at Community Food Advocates

Hello Education Committee of the City Council! My name is Ksenia Novikova and I am currently a student at New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn, NY. I am also a student leader in the Lunch 4 Learning campaign. First, I would like to thank everyone for giving me the opportunity to testify here today. I will be discussing the detrimental effects of the existing public school lunch system, my own personal experience with this process, and why implementing universal free school lunch is so important.

As a student at a school where 75% of the students are economically disadvantaged, I know firsthand that the current school lunch program has so many negative results. Our school, and all NYC public schools, emphasize how important our grades are, but the current school lunch system does not support that claim. Doing well on exams and being able to focus in class correlates with whether or not the student has eaten and feels well. Without eating lunch we are more likely to do worse in classes. Also, there is significant bullying facing those who receive free school lunch from those who do not. This largely has to do with the social divide between those who receive free lunch and those who have the opportunity to eat their own lunch, eat outside of school later, or are at the point where they can almost receive free school lunch but they don't because they are above the income requirement. In my school's case, many students tend to stay after school for extracurricular activities or tutoring, so most would rather wait until they can eat outside but not all students can afford this.

Finally, the tedious and intrusive school lunch forms tend to be a major problem and are often not filled out. The intrusive lunch forms tend to be something we do often ignore, but when many immigrants come to America, they often flee terror, regimes, and horrible circumstances in their home countries. Therefore, when filling out this information on their financial situation, they often feel paranoid that giving out this information will hurt them. My mother was born in the Soviet Union. She fled a horrific regime where she had little to no freedoms. Eventually, she came to America and had to become accustomed to life here. However, that mindset and feeling that she was being watched and the government knew everything about her, has never left her. These forms may not seem intrusive to some people, but to my family and many others, they are. As a low income student that does stay in school until up to 5 sometimes for extra curricular activities, free school lunch is a necessity. However, when my mother is paranoid and frightened to fill out this form because of her past experience, it is difficult to receive free school lunch. My mother's terrible experience in an oppressive regime should not impact me eating school lunch, but yet it does.

There are so many negative effects that come from not having universal free school lunch. We must not let bullying happen in the cafeteria. We must not let the social divide continue. We must not let children's financial status follow them into the lunchroom, causing them to feel insecure and compare their family's income to others. We must not let these excessive and unnecessary forms get in the way of students receiving school lunch. We must not let this current system hurt students eating and therefore focusing better in classes. We must not let anything get in the way of learning. We must implement universal free school lunch in NYC public schools to stop all of this from continuing. Thank you all for giving me the chance to speak here today on an issue that is so incredibly important to me and many other students. Thank you for supporting this issue and I hope that you will continue to support us in enacting universal free school lunch. Thank you for your time and support.

Shamsheer Sandhu
Fort Hamilton High School
Youth Justice League at Community Food Advocates

Good morning everyone. My name is Shammy Sandhu, I go to Fort Hamilton High School. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. I want to take this opportunity to speak about the effects that the current system has on students and how we think about race. The school lunch lines are many times the first time students become conscious of the concept of financial status and they begin to associate race with financial status. Personally, the lunch line in 6th grade was the first time I became conscious of my financial status and later I learned to associate race with that concept. Standing in line every day, for 5 days every week, for 9 months for many years can have quite an impact on you. I grew out of this toxic idea. However many hold onto those notions for the rest of their lives. And it's not their fault because we are responsible for the system failing them.

The school lunch lines reinforce racial stereotypes. When students see the ethnicities of people that go up to receive free lunch, it causes students, even the ones standing on the line, to subliminally form preconceived stereotypes and toxic notions about those specific races. This is important because school is where students learn to socialize and where they form many notions, among those notions may be stereotypes. These students grow up to be members of society and as a result might spread intolerance and hate, and vote against the best interest of people who are more looked down upon. This contributes to the racial tension that is prominent in this country and feeds into the division of people rather than working towards unity. If young people are truly the future of the country then why are we exposing them to such toxic ideas about race that contributes to racial division? If we want students to live in a more unified tolerant America than we do, then we shouldn't maintain the current system of lunch that divides students up. Ultimately the current system of lunch is toxic to the mental and moral development of students. I believe that New York should catch up to cities such as Washington DC and Boston. Thank you and I hope you take the aforementioned into consideration.

Jahnice Thomas
George Westinghouse High School
East New York Farms

Hello, my name is Jahnice Thomas and I am a student at George Westinghouse High School. I am here again to testify and give my support for universal free school lunch for all NYC public school students. Cyber bullying, embarrassment, pressure and fear are all factors under school lunch system and the ones who have opportunity to obtain it.

A while back, I was unaware of the origin of the term called for school lunch to be renamed "free free". The word has more meaning than it seems, better yet more impact. Last year when we were allowed to have our phones in school, students would go out of their way just to take pictures of people eating school lunch. I happened to be a victim of this situation and I must admit it got me highly upset to know later on that night I would be clowned on social media.

This caused mental frustrations to my well being, it made me not want to show my face in school. I was one with a high popularity level as well as one who was more fortunate and this was happening to almost everyone so I can only imagine what it did to those who knew free lunch would be their only meal. Did they make the pain unbearable and overwhelming enough to sacrifice health, and cause starvation? Bullying isn't the only issue with school lunch. There were times where there wasn't enough food, it was undercooked, or just a bad taste.

Nevertheless, I think the first approach would be to make all school lunches universally free and soon enough the factors behind students not eating school lunch will become obsolete. I am asking you City Council Members, to continue to make universal free lunch a priority. We need to stop the stigma and get better access to food in our schools. Thank you for your time and your support for this meaningful, momentous, necessary issue.

Evan Zamora Phillips
Millennium High School
Youth Justice League at Community Food Advocates

Hello my name is Evan Zamora Phillips and I am currently a Junior at Millennium High School. As a public school student who doesn't receive free school lunch, I know that I am in a fortunate position, and I see myself as an observer in the lunchroom of the relationships between students. Often I have noticed that students segregate and separate themselves based on who receives free school lunch and those don't.

Not offering free school lunch to all students creates a lunchroom where students are divided, a lunchroom where students can not only loudly but also silently judge others who get lunch for free. Students, sometimes without noticing it, judge other students because they are different from them. I did not judge loudly, by calling other students names, but I did judge silently, by gravitating towards students like me. This silent judgment is just as harmful as the name calling and verbal insults you can hear. Like many students, I approached and chose to interact with students who had similar traits as me, and one of these traits that stands out in the lunchroom is who eats school lunch vs. who brings lunch from home. As children we know no better than to group with people who are like us. If someone got lunch for free then he/she was too different for me to interact with, and we couldn't be friends. We shared nothing in common, and he/she was not from the same background as I was. At the time, I did not understand that these perceived differences had less to do with us as students, and more to do with the system that creates unequal statuses in the school cafeteria.

Our schools should not be a place that encourages students to segregate. Our schools should be a place where all students are equal, and where students are encouraged to bond, regardless of our differences and whether someone can afford to bring lunch from home or not. Universal free school lunch is one important step towards providing equality within our schools. Education does not only happen in the classroom, it happens in places like the lunchroom as well. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my concerns and I hope that we can work together to create a lunchroom where all students receive school lunch for free and all students are treated equally without regard to their family income, thank you.

Johnny Zheng
Brooklyn Technical High School
Youth Justice League at Community Food Advocates

Hello, my name is Johnny Zheng, and I'm a 16 year old junior at Brooklyn Technical High School. To give you some background, I never had to pay for school lunch, since my dad is a truck driver, and has a pretty low income. The only way I can mess this up is if I don't fill out the school lunch form before the deadline. But it's intimidating with all the blanks and technical terms. And sometimes small mistakes happen that can have a big effect such as when I forgot to turn in my form on time last year.

Because of this, I got to experience what it's like to not be able to eat free lunch even though I need it. It was not a pleasant experience. Everyday I wake up to a one hour commute, so I don't really have time for breakfast. Lunch should be my first real meal of the day. But, as I mentioned, I didn't fill out the lunch form last year. So how did I get lunch? Simple, I didn't. This caused a lot of problems for me, the most important of which was the amount of energy I had in school. Or rather the lack of it. I found myself nodding off during tests, chemistry, and even during my favorite class that year, Digital Electronics. You know it's bad when you're falling asleep in your favorite class. And to think, all this happened because I forgot to fill out a simple lunch form.

Some people may say, it's my fault I didn't turn in the form so I could get free school lunch. And many times, I fault myself too. But, let me ask you this: can we fault parents for being intimidated by the complicated school lunch form? Can we fault parents or students like me for making one small mistake like failing to submit the form in time? Can we fault the students whose parents make slightly above the income cutoff to be eligible? Should we be punishing those students for having parents who worked hard to give their kids a better future than they themselves had? To make sure their kids don't ever have to drive loud trucks around everyday while making barely enough to get their family through life? The answer to all these questions is no. But this is exactly what's going on in school right now- we're blaming students and parents when the lunch system is unfair and unequal at its core.

Not having universal free school lunch is detrimental for students, not just physically, not just emotionally, but mentally as well. It's harming our futures, putting in place more obstacles than would otherwise be existent.

Thank you City Council members for your on-going support. I hope you continue to fight for universal free school lunch to better everyone's future and beyond, as the students are the future. Again, thank you very much for your time.