

Bringing Free Lunch to All of New York City's School Children

September 2020





Background

GRANTEES	COMMUNITY FOOD ADVOCATES & GLOBAL STRATEGY GROUP
GRANT PERIOD	2015 – 2017
GRANT AMOUNTS	Community Food Advocates: \$300,000 (2015) Global Strategy Group: \$70,000 (2016); \$179,000 (2017)

Before 2017, in New York City, 75% of the 1.1 million public school students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, but only one-third of eligible students took part in the program. Food is the one arena in public schools that segregates children by family income. Students, especially in high school, skip the lunch program to avoid the embarrassment and bullying associated with being poor. Nutrition and overall health and wellbeing in children are indisputably linked, but social acceptance trumps healthy eating habits for children and young adults. Making meals free for all students delinks school food from family income and removes the barrier to lunch participation. When all kids have access to universal free school lunch, that stigma lessens and more students participate.

School districts across the country and in New York State had already implemented universal school lunch, such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Boston, and Buffalo. New York City was a laggard, even though it made sense health-wise and financially to implement the program. Schools with universal lunch have higher participation rates of students eating lunch and more positive student interactions. And although universal school lunch would require an estimated investment of an additional \$8.75 million by the City, it would yield additional federal and State reimbursements, according to an [analysis](#) by Community Food Advocates (CFA). Higher levels of school lunch participation also increase schools' purchasing power, allowing them to provide more local and fresh food options.

Securing buy-in for universal school lunch from the City, with its multitude of competing budget priorities, would require coordinated educational and advocacy efforts on multiple fronts. In 2013, CFA launched its Lunch 4 Learning Campaign (L4L) to make free and healthy school meals available to all New York City public school students, regardless of income.

In its first two years, the L4L campaign was partially successful: in June 2015, the City approved funding to make universal lunch available to all middle school students. Within the first six months of implementation, participation in the lunch program at middle schools



Background (continued)

increased 8.5%, with no additional marketing efforts or outreach to parents. CFA estimated that a system-wide implementation in all City public schools, coupled with well-planned marketing activities, would increase participation by at least 20%—or an additional 120,000 students. The biggest jump in participation was expected among high school students, as the incidence of bullying associated with free lunch increases with age.

To help bring universal school lunch to all New York City public schools, NYSHHealth awarded CFA a [grant](#) in support its advocacy efforts. NYSHHealth also awarded Global Strategy Group (GSG), a public affairs and communications firm, grants in [2016](#) and [2017](#) to help advance the goals of CFA's campaign.





Grant Activities & Outcomes

BUILDING A PRO-HEALTH, PRO-CHILD CAMPAIGN

CFA used a multipronged approach in its campaign, including building coalitions, organizing stakeholders, and advocating for policy change.

Community engagement and organizing around universal school lunch, particularly with students and parents, had been instrumental in achieving free lunch for all New York City middle school students. As CFA pushed for universal lunch for students in all grades in 2016, it was vital to engage a wide array of stakeholders to be at the forefront of the effort. CFA organized a coalition comprising hundreds of parents, students, cafeteria workers, educators, funders, medical professionals, public officials, and philanthropic organizations to advocate for the new policy.

CFA also trained and mentored more than 150 students and more than 100 parent leaders to advocate for system-wide expansion of universal school lunch. Students learned about other hunger issues throughout the City and gained skills to push for policy change, such as how to organize a press conference, present testimony in the City's budget process, and speak to elected officials.

In addition, CFA partnered with three major school-based unions—United Federation of Teachers, Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, and DC 37—leveraging their political power to build support for universal school lunch. The unions' leadership invested significant political and staff resources in the campaign, ultimately declaring universal school lunch as one of their top budget priorities. They also called on their connections at City Hall to keep the Mayor and the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education focused on the issue of universal school lunch expansion.

To help build the case for universal school lunch, CFA also actively monitored and facilitated student participation in the middle school free lunch program by:

- Conducting interviews and surveys among students, parents, school principals, and school food staff;
- Promoting the free lunch program to all middle school parents and students;
- Working with school food staff to increase student participation in lunch programs by evaluating food and cafeteria appeal and menu selection;
- Conducting school visits to identify best practices in schools with the highest participation rates, as well as barriers in those with low participation rates;



Grant Activities & Outcomes (continued)

- Analyzing Office of School Food data and documenting the impact of best practice strategies in middle and high schools; and
- Meeting regularly with key City Councilmembers, committee staff, and caucuses to brief them on the benefits of universal school lunch.

To help support the campaign for system-wide implementation of universal school lunch, NYSHealth awarded GSG a grant in 2016 to partner with CFA. GSG identified key influencers, helped create messaging to reach the right audiences at the right time, and used social media and press outreach to build broad support for the program, including:

- Garnering dozens of media stories about the issue;
- Organizing a public rally on the steps of City Hall; and
- Engaging City Councilmembers to become champions for universal school lunch.

NYSHealth went beyond just contributing grant dollars, actively working with CFA, GSG, and a coalition of other funders to raise the visibility of universal school lunch and educate the public and policymakers about the issue. NYSHealth held [events](#) and met with key stakeholders such as First Lady of New York City Chirlane McCray; published [blog](#) posts; and supported a range of advocacy efforts, including a direct mail campaign, television advertising, digital and social media, and public rallies. GSG also surveyed New York City voters on how they viewed universal school lunch. The [results](#) showed they were overwhelming in favor of it—82% of New Yorkers surveyed supported universal school lunch and two-thirds said they would be more likely to vote for a mayoral candidate who supported the initiative.

Despite the best combined efforts of NYSHealth, CFA, and GSG, universal school lunch was not included in the preliminary New York City budget for fiscal year 2016–2017. However, the increased media and public attention to the issue led the City administration to begin discussing the prospects of expanding the program.



Grant Activities & Outcomes (continued)

MAKING FREE LUNCH A REALITY FOR ALL NEW YORK CITY STUDENTS

Undaunted, NYSHealth doubled down on its support for the campaign, continuing to back CFA and GSG in their efforts to ensure the City would adopt universal school lunch beginning in the 2017–2018 school year.

During the next phase of this grant, CFA and GSG worked intensively to push the campaign over the finish line. They:

- Worked with L4L school-based partner unions DC37, UFT, and CSA to place an op-ed in the *New York Daily News* to draw attention to the campaign.
- Organized a rally of parents, students, and union members at City Hall to attract media attention, which garnered coverage from outlets such as *Spectrum News NY1* and *News 12 Brooklyn*.
- Collected more than 8,000 postcards signed by public school parents, which were delivered by parent leaders to City Hall.
- Secured the continued support of the City Councilmembers and the Public Advocate, as well as garnered the support of all five Borough Presidents. The bipartisan, all-borough support received significant media coverage and helped to keep the issue front and center with the Mayor.
- Organized a Youth Justice League to further rally and engage high school youth in the fight for universal free school lunch and other school food and food equity issues. The Youth Justice League continues to provide a pipeline of students of color who organize around and advocate for food justice policy change.

NYSHealth also continued to champion the issue through additional [blog](#) posts and other [commentary](#), social media, and meetings with stakeholders.

This time around, the unwavering commitment and partnership by NYSHealth, CFA, and GSG paid off. In June 2017, the Mayor and City Council Speaker announced a budget that included a substantial expansion of free school lunch to 1,471 schools (90%) covering 838,000 students (84%). This was followed by a September 2017 announcement by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) of the “Free School Lunch For All” initiative—fully system-wide, universal free school lunch in New York City public schools. Now all 1.1 million public school students, and millions more in future, would have access to a free lunch every school day, regardless of income.



Grant Activities & Outcomes (continued)

CFA's knowledge and experience also informed the implementation of the universal school lunch program. For example, CFA knew from its experience with the middle school pilot program that making lunch free would not be adequate to ensure that students would actually eat at school. To ensure increased participation, it was vital to alert parents, caregivers, and students that this option was now available to all public school children. Previously, many schools had only sent home flyers via students' backpacks, a notoriously ineffective means to inform families. The City allocated \$3 million of the universal school lunch budget for a bus and subway ad campaign to help raise awareness. From hundreds of conversations with public school parents and students, CFA also knew that the DOE's innovative cafeteria design would have an impact on whether students would eat lunch at school. The City allocated \$9 million for cafeteria redesign in middle and high schools to improve the environment where students eat and further encourage participation for these age groups. By spring 2018, the DOE had renovated 27 middle and high school cafeterias. In schools with both redesigned cafeterias and universal school lunch, the DOE reported a doubling of lunch participation in some schools and, on average, a participation increase of 27% across all schools. And although the food is largely the same, students are eating more fruits and vegetables.

Two years after the system-wide expansion of universal school lunch, the results have been positive:

- An additional 26,000 New York City students are now eating lunch at school—4.5 million additional meals per year. And when free lunch is available to all students, both those newly eligible and those who were previously eligible are more likely to eat lunch at school.
- Researchers from Syracuse University's Center for Policy Research recently found that making free lunch available to all students [boosted academic performance](#) among New York City middle school students.
- Syracuse's research also shows that universal school lunch does not lead to increased obesity among students; in fact, it may increase the likelihood of students having a healthy weight.

In November 2018, NYSHHealth hosted a [conversation](#) with CFA and other school food champions to share lessons learned from the campaign and highlight new efforts to improve the quality and environment of New York City school food.



Looking Ahead

The successful advocacy campaign to bring universal school lunch to all 1.1 million New York City public school children was a powerful first step in helping kids have access to the food they need to be healthy and learn well. But effective policy change requires strong implementation. CFA has since shifted its focus from fighting for system-wide expansion of universal school lunch to ensuring that there is maximum participation by children in this pro-health measure.

With continued [support](#) from NYSHealth, CFA is now playing a critical role in monitoring and partnering with school communities to improve the quality and environment of New York City school food, including:

- **Meeting regularly with key officials and stakeholders.** CFA continues to meet with the new Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education and the Executive Director of the DOE's Office of Food and Nutrition Services to further the shared goal of increasing school lunch participation and improving the quality of school food.
- **Advocating for a food court-style cafeteria redesign program.** The DOE's 2019 budget included \$25 million earmarked for cafeteria redesign and upgrades, a CFA priority. Universal school lunch participation in New York City high schools with redesigned cafeterias has increased by 31%, and fruit and vegetable consumption has increased four-fold in those schools.
- **Providing City-wide halal and kosher food options.** New York City's school food program is the only food-serving agency in New York City that has not offered halal and kosher food options to all who need it. In spring 2019, a pilot program was rolled out in 11 schools in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens that have high concentrations of students who observe either halal or kosher dietary laws.

Co-Funding and Additional Funds Leveraged: As a result of the success of the campaign, NYSHealth's investment has leveraged approximately \$38 million each year from the federal government and \$10 million from New York City to help fund universal school lunch in New York City public schools. Additional funders for the L4L campaign included the New York Community Trust (\$75,000), New York Foundation (\$40,000), Mertz Gilmore Foundation (\$40,000), the Sirius Fund (\$50,000), Levitt Foundation (\$20,000), and North Star Foundation (\$25,000) to support CFA in its goal to see maximum student participation in universal school lunch.



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