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**For Immediate Release: June 8, 2009**

## **Bushwick Students Discuss School Meals, Child Nutrition Reauthorization with Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez's Community Liaison**

Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez's community liaison, Evelyn Cruz, joined Brooklyn students for lunch in their cafeteria at the Academy for Environmental Leadership in the Bushwick area of Brooklyn to discuss school meals and how a strong Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act could fight hunger and improve the healthy food options in their community.

The students have worked with the New York City Health Equity Project to document the unhealthy food environment in Bushwick and to design and implement a survey to understand students' opinions of the school meals program. Despite the fact that schools are a potential source of healthy food, the survey found that many high school students do not eat these meals.

In a joint statement, the student leaders of the project stated that: "Many students feel that the lunch served often lacks variety and appeal. Many students also agree that they do not eat school lunch and buy junk food instead or eat nothing at all. This could greatly increase diet related illnesses and inflict dangerous eating habits."

For many students in Bushwick, healthy food is both unaffordable and unavailable: One in five children in Brooklyn lives in a household that is unable to afford enough food. As Batista noted, a lack of access to healthy food is related to serious health conditions in the community: 15% of the Bushwick population has diabetes as compared to 8% of the population of New York City as a whole (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene).

Said Milyoung Cho of the New York City Health Equity project, "As is true for other areas in the city that have obesity rates of over 30% and diabetes rates over 12%, the availability of healthy food is low while fast and junk food is widely available, cheap, and heavily promoted. School food could potentially improve the diets of hundreds of thousands of children in NYC. Unfortunately, the 70 cents that goes to the price of food for each student's lunch can't come close to providing good food."

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAHA) worked with the students to write letters to their Congressional representatives to advocate for a strong Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, which will be considered by Congress this year. In their letters, the students advocated for more funding to provide healthier food in school meals and for reducing the administrative burden of the program by making the school meals program universal in low-income areas. NYCCAHA is a part of the NYC Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization, a group of anti-hunger, public health, and community organizations working to improve the policies that fund and administer school meals and other federal child nutrition programs.

Said Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger: “President Obama pledged to end child hunger that 2015 and our nation has the ability to make significant progress towards this goal in the Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. I urge everyone to contact their representatives about this critical legislation and am encouraged by these students’ important work around these issues. I began my career as a student activist when I was 14 years old and strongly believe that students can be important leaders for change in their communities.”

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