



The Baltimore Algebra Project: Organizing for Better School Food

From its founding in the early 1990s until 2003, the [Baltimore Algebra Project](#) was just that—a nonprofit dedicated to improving the math skills of low-income students and students of color so college could turn from dream to possibility.

"They were the largest youth employer in the city, 200 people," Jamal Jones, the organization's vice president, said in an interview for this report.

But in 2003, with the school system in a financial crisis, almost all the project's teachers and aides were laid off. The students in the Baltimore Algebra Project decided to switch from algebra to organizing to fight the decision and formed an advocacy team that got many of the jobs back, Jones said.¹

The advocacy committee stayed together, spearheading campaigns around school funding, youth employment, transportation, and ending the school-to-prison pipeline. They also worked with groups around the country in support of a National Student Bill of Rights, which included a plank calling for high-quality and healthy school food.

Jones said the healthy school food issue suddenly moved to the head of the organizational cafeteria line in 2010 following a dramatic incident in a school lunchroom: "One of the girls found maggots in her corn." This was the birth of the Baltimore Algebra Project's Quality Food Justice Campaign.

From 2011 to 2013, the Baltimore Algebra Project was one of 12 youth organizing groups from around the country selected to participate in *ReGenerations: Healthy Communities*, a project designed to help combat childhood obesity by advocating for healthy food in schools and communities. The project, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing in New York, provided technical assistance and funding to each of the 12 youth groups. For more information, read the [Program Results Report](#).

¹ The Baltimore Algebra Project is a chapter of the national group, The Algebra Project, whose founder, Bob Moses, was both a math teacher and a civil rights leader. Jamal Jones says, however, that Moses was not directly involved in the Baltimore chapter's decision to move from math teaching into advocacy.

Concentrating on the issue of school food, the Baltimore students:

- Conducted child obesity research with the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.
- Surveyed thousands of students across the school district to learn how they felt about school food.
- Developed a long-term vision for the school system based on scratch cooking of healthy foods in all schools. Scratch cooking (or cooking from scratch) uses basic fresh ingredients instead of processed and pre-packaged food.
- Developed short-term goals, including expanded salad bars and restrictions on unhealthy “competitive foods,” sold in school vending machines or as à la carte items in lunchrooms.

The students collected petitions, testified at school board meetings, and met with school district officials. They organized “food days” in which young people worked with local chefs to demonstrate preparing healthy food in school kitchens.

Under the *ReGenerations: Healthy Communities* project, the Baltimore Algebra Project reported these advocacy campaign victories:

- Convinced the school district to open salad bars in all high schools with sufficient applications for free and reduced-price lunches.
- Convinced the district to hire a salad bar coordinator.

The Baltimore Algebra Project still provides algebra tutoring in the schools, Jones says, but the main focus is now advocacy. The advocacy project is active in four high schools, with two paid organizers and three to 15 volunteers in each. The project recently became a fully youth-run leadership structure, with all staff under 25 years old.

“The student-driven vision is what’s cool about this,” says the 21-year-old Jones, a graduate of the local schools. “The students have been taught powerlessness, and organizing gets people to understand that they have a say and a way to go about things. It’s not that the fire isn’t there. Organizing helps us focus it.”

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