A Lesson on Childhood Obesity

By Richard Buczy

Obesity in the Bronx is getting a run for its money.

Food Fight, a nonprofit that works to reduce obesity rates in the five boroughs hosted a conference entitled “Educatiing America’s Teachers,” or E.A.T. at Montefiore Medical Center. Throughout the day, guest speakers schooled city teachers on nutrition, food politics, and sustainability so that they may share these values to their students.

Since 1997, the United States has had what the World Health Organization refers to as an obesity epidemic. The U.S. has the second highest obesity rate in the world with nearly one in three adults suffering from obesity, and one-third of children are either overweight or obese. “For the first time in human history, this generation of children is expected to have a shorter life span than their parents,” said Carolyn Cohen, the co-founder and executive director of Food Fight.

The Bronx in particular has a problem with obesity, a stigma that has been linked to the Bronx for well over a decade. Health experts consider the Bronx the most over-weight borough. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), over 20 percent of Bronx adolescents are obese. Health experts say that this is partly due to the steep lack of healthy dining options in the borough, with the Bronx also home to more fast food restaurants than the rest of the city.

“Kids these days are often able to recognize logos better than they are able to differentiate different vegetables,” said Melinda Hemmelgarn, a well known dietitian who spoke at the conference on July 2.

Access to cheap healthy food was a recurring theme throughout the conference. It became increasingly clear that school lunches are the frontline in the fight for access to healthier food, thereby serving as a key weapon in the battle for a leaner Bronx. At one point, improving school lunches became the focal point.

“How can the richest country in the world treat their children like this?” asked James Costa, director of Lunch Hour, an investigative documentary about public school lunches. Costa is referring to the dismal state of public school lunches in the US, which are notoriously unhealthy.

Why are school lunches so unhealthy? One needs to look no further than school budgets which allocate 90 cents for each child’s meal. “Of course school lunches are unhealthy. With a budget that small, it’s impossible to provide anything that doesn’t come out of a can” reiterated Cohen of Food Fight.

The federal government appears to be listening to activists like Costa. New regulations passed by Congress are set to drastically improve school lunches with new nutrition standards. The House of Representatives is pushing back on the guidelines, following protests and lobbying by large food corporations that currently supply school lunches.

Towards the end of the conference, the mood was hopeful. The teachers at the conference were encouraged to make pledges to promote healthy eating among their students, and to set an example by changing their own eating habits for the better.