

# YOUTH VOICE IS NOT A BOX YOU CHECK OFF!



The Story of  
#SaveSYEP  
January 2021



**HERE TO HERE** × **TEENS take CHARGE**  
Collaboration

## **Summary & Overview**

*This document tells the story of the young people that came together and worked with professional advocates to save the 2020 Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio attempted to eliminate without any consultation with youth or professionals in the field. Given that this work occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which largely restricted us to online communications, we decided it would be most fitting to tell our story through the images that came across our screens—phones, computers, and tablets—interspersed with quotes from young people and the adults with whom we interacted. In putting this work together, we realized that our effort, which ultimately saved 35,000 summer jobs for teens across the city, ended up being an extremely powerful work experience for us, as well. This report reflects on what we learned: about the importance of SYEP, and why real-world, hands-on learning experiences, like the ones we had to #SaveSYEP, should be part of every student's experience. We offer this project more convinced than ever of the importance of not only SYEP and summer jobs, but why work-based learning and career pathways programs need to be expanded and enhanced throughout our education systems.*

## **Acknowledgements**

*This report was authored by La'Toya Beecham, Student Policy Advisor at HERE to HERE, and Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp, both of whom are members of Teens Take Charge.*

*Teens Take Charge members Carmen Lopez-Villamil, Jorge Morales, Tiffani Torres, Sophie Mode, and Dulce Michelle also contributed content for the report, and were leaders in the #SaveSYEP campaign.*

*We are grateful to George Monje for his brilliant design of this report, and his helpful collaboration, more broadly.*

*Lazar Treschan, Vice President of Policy and Impact at HERE to HERE, and Taylor McGraw, Executive Director of The Bell, and adult facilitator of Teens Take Charge, served as advisors and helped guide the production of the report and the #SaveSYEP campaign.*



Photo Credit:  
Dulce Michelle



## ***About Teens Take Charge***

Teens Take Charge is a student-led movement for educational equity in New York City.

Too often, decisions about our schools are made without our voices. No longer. Our growing coalition of high school students from across the five boroughs will not rest until our public school system lives up to its promise of providing all of us an equitable education. Through oral and written testimony, direct-action organizing campaigns, and relentless advocacy, we — the students of New York City — are taking our schools and futures into our hands.

***TeensTakeCharge.com***

***@TeensTakeCharge***

## ***About HERE to HERE***

HERE to HERE enhances paths to rewarding careers for young people by uniting employers, educators, and community-based organizations beginning in The Bronx and New York City. Our vision is a thriving, inclusive economy, in The Bronx and elsewhere, driven by meaningful partnerships between young people and employers. HERE to HERE's northstar is an effective youth talent development system that works for all Bronx and NYC students, regional employers, and the economy.

We focus on elevating student career success as the primary, shared goal of educators, public agencies, employers, and others who seek a thriving, inclusive economy. We also amplify and champion the organizations and influencers that pursue programs, policies, and research that demonstrate the value proposition of focusing on student career success and model strategies that can expand best practice to reach all Bronx and NYC students.

***HEREtoHERE.org***

***@HEREtoHEREBX***

HERE to HERE works to elevate the efforts of partners such as Teens Take Charge.



# Meet the Authors

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## **Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp**

Manhattan, New York  
Organizer & Lead Author

***“We’re so proud of the work our youth activists put into #SavingSYEP and will continue working until our city invests in an equitable future for every NYC kid.”***

Kai-Lin is 16 years old and is a part of the Teens Take Charge steering committee and is passionate about creating a more equitable NYC, particularly through education and work-based learning. She is endlessly grateful for the opportunity to take part in this campaign, for all the support she has received this summer, and the opportunity to create real change.

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## **La'Toya Beecham**

The Bronx, New York  
Organizer & Lead Author

***“I have personal experience fighting for an education and it’s a battle no youth should have to experience.”***

La'Toya is a student that discovered her voice and her advocacy for fellow youth voices through HERE to HERE's work-based learning opportunities. As a Junior at HERO High School, she's had experience fighting for equity within the walls of the public school system and is now HERE to HERE's first ever youth policy advisor.

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Photo Credit:  
Dulce Michelle



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# Introduction

**In April of 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, when families across the city were struggling financially and students were lacking the structured support from in-person school, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the elimination of the Summer Youth Employment Program.** SYEP usually provides 75,000 paid six-week job experiences to young people, making it the largest youth employer in the nation.<sup>1</sup> Most of these jobs go to low income youth and youth of color, helping bridge gaps in social capital and work-based learning for the youth that need it the most. In addition, SYEP keeps youth off of the streets, increasing employment, and reducing incarceration rates.<sup>2</sup>

While the city was hurting from the financial strain of the virus, advocates and youth themselves were appalled by a 100% cut to this program, far greater than the reductions to other city initiatives. The Mayor claimed that the elimination was due to the inability to operate the program remotely—even though the city had been working with program providers for weeks to design such virtual summer internships, many of which were set to go.

**When the SYEP cancellation occurred, HERE to HERE, an intermediary organization that works to bridge the gap between education and meaningful, family-sustaining careers for all young people, sounded the alarm, and**

**immediately reached out to student advocacy group Teens Take Charge (TTC).** A group of teens from TTC, led by Carmen Lopez-Villamil, Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp, Jorge Morales, and La'Toya Beecham (the latter two of whom were also interns at HERE to HERE), decided to fight back. From the beginning of May, the student advocates worked to gain public support and media exposure to reinstate an inclusive, fair, and engaging SYEP, along with other youth programming. A public petition on change.org has over 40,000 signatures, seven op-eds were published, countless articles and thousands of emails to public officials were sent out.

The public pressure led to widespread support from City Council Members, the Public Advocate, and State legislators, among others. **The TTC members worked with its partners at HERE to HERE and Expanded to develop a plan for an innovative, socially distanced SYEP 2020, which would give participants unique opportunities to gain work based-learning experience while helping the city recover from the devastating economic effects of the COVID crisis.** More than 120 nonprofits organizations signed on to the plan, and United States Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez endorsed it.

Amidst this devastating crisis, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. The

The 100% cut to the SYEP program would have largely affected low-income youth and, particularly, youth of color.

Public pressure started by Teens Take Charge secured 35,000 slots and sent the message to legislature that the youth's voice is an important one to listen to.



*“Overall, the long fight was not for nothing, but we now know that we cannot solely rely on the Mayor, City Council, or any other adult to represent our interests—WE need to be out front, because WE are the only ones that truly have our interests at heart. As youth, we recognized through this campaign that our voice was and still is powerful. We were able to provide 35,000 youth with employment*

*opportunities this year and that is remarkable to know. In the process, our campaign allied hundreds of nonprofits and thousands of youth with one voice. We taught the message that although we might be young that doesn't mean our voices are not powerful and when we come together and fight for what we believe in, our voices are unavoidable.”*

long-standing Black Lives Matter movement gained broader support and momentum, and the focus of the campaign shifted to the inexplicably huge NYPD budget and gross cuts of youth programs, like SYEP.

On June 7, in response to protests, the Mayor made a verbal commitment that parts of the NYPD budget would be reallocated to youth services, in what appeared to be a major victory for youth advocates and allies, a month before SYEP would have normally begun—enough time to make the program work.<sup>3</sup> But no details followed this announcement and it quickly became clear this was just rhetoric. Cautious optimism quickly gave way to a realization that the fight was not over. In the final few weeks before the city budget was agreed upon by the Mayor and City Council, the student advocates raised the volume of their advocacy, appearing across social media, transitional media, and in remote panels, press conferences, and rallies. **The final budget deal restored 35,000 remote slots to SYEP—a partial victory, but a victory nonetheless.**

Our #SaveSYEP campaign helped teach adults about the power of youth voice, but we also learned a few things along the way. We learned about code switching, networking skills, teamwork and even helped us expand

on our vocabulary. This campaign has pushed us academically and has challenged our determination. That being said, we want to preserve SYEP not solely for us but for our peers, families and communities. We need to invest more into youth voices and programs because we are the future. There should be no reason for why marginalized groups should have to compete in a lottery for a chance to build resumes and earn an income while learning and discovering their paths for the future. Most of our white counterparts do not have to do the same; they're set ahead of us while we compete to catch up. We demand that our programs be funded and we demand more than 75,000 slots. We have to strive and push for a minimum of 100k. HERE to HERE and Teens Take Charge are not giving up this fight, nor are the young people of this city. **If we have learned anything, it's that young people need to be out in front of youth policy in New York City—for the long run.**

—La'Toya Beecham & Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp  
AUTUMN 2020

1. NYC Department of Youth And Community Development, “2019 SYEP Annual Summary [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dycd/downloads/pdf/2019\_NYC\_SYEP\_Annual\_Summary.pdf].”

2. Erin Jacobs Valentine, Chloe Anderson, Farhana Hossain, Rebecca Unterman, “An Introduction to the World of Work A Study of the Implementation and Impacts of New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program [https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/SYEP\_Embedded\_Full\_Report\_508.pdf], MDRC, April 2017.

3. Theresa Waldrop and Laura Ly, “New York plans to move some police funding to youth and social services,” [https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/07/us/new-york-city-police-funding-social-services/index.html], June 7, 2020.

# ***Peer Conversations***

Students learned about the SYEP cancellation and quickly mobilized through conversations with one another to fight back.

They sent each other lots of texts, emails, and Whatsapp messages—these communications tell the story of how they built their own advocacy movement.



# ***WE WANTED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.***

*I wanted people to listen to us.*

*I wanted to do something meaningful for my friends.*

*I wanted to advocate for youth voices.*

*I wanted to make a difference for my community.*

*—La'Toya Beecham & Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp*

**Markice**  
Student

Just seeing them, like, they're doing something for people like me who need opportunities. That was inspiring.

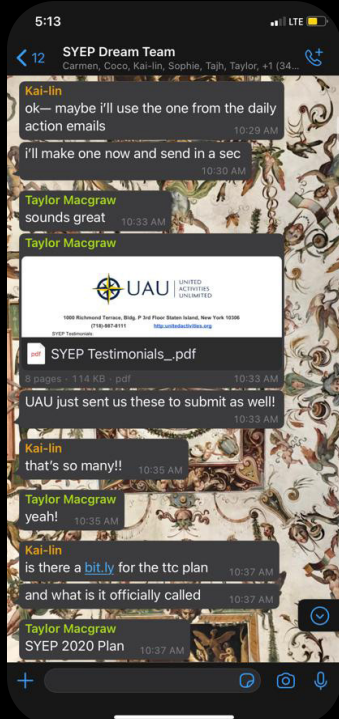
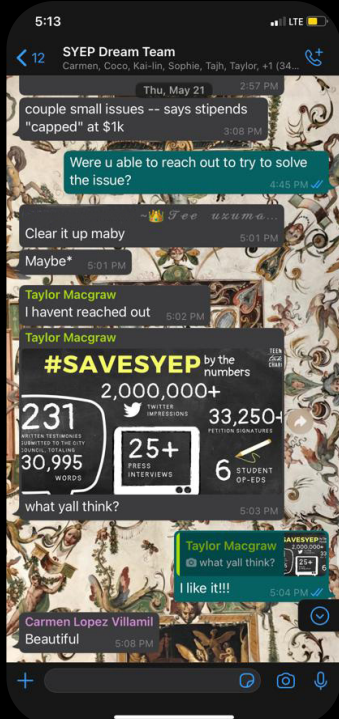
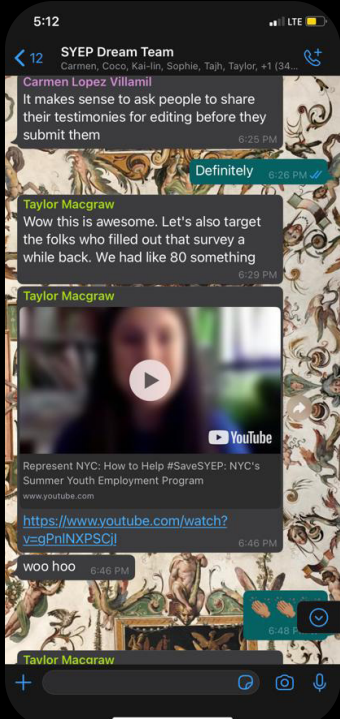
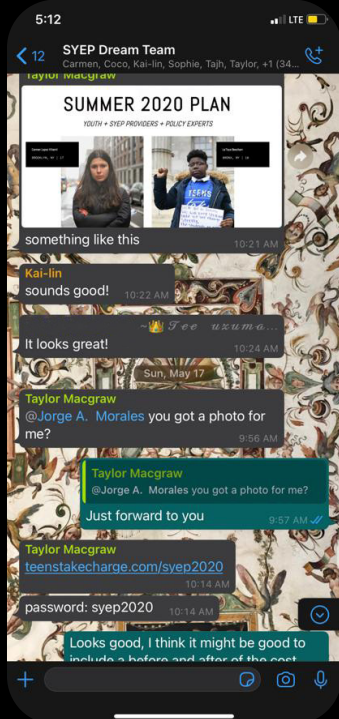
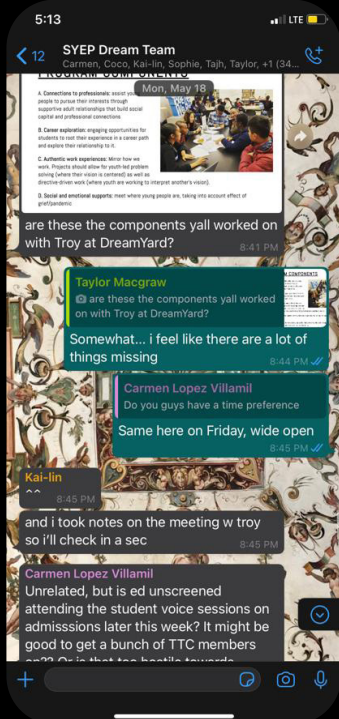
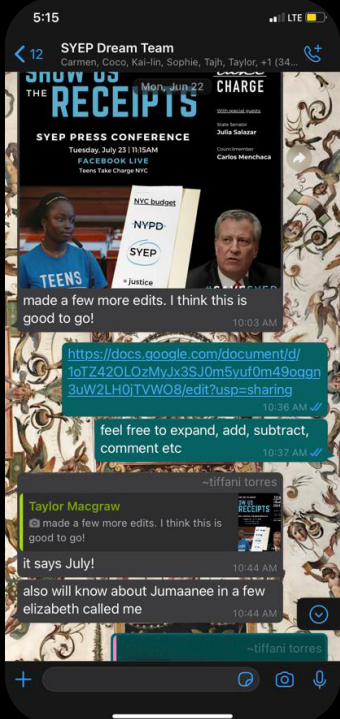
**Stephanie**  
Student

I was disillusioned once I heard that it'd be cancelled this year. Which I find to be ridiculous. In a time of economic hardship, having SYEP should have been a no-brainer. Once again, the gap between the poor and rich is widening, all due to the refusal to allocate some money toward SYEP. A program which would've served as an invaluable experience, in addition to being an essential one. Jobs, nowadays, are hard to come by, and SYEP was almost my guarantee at being able to help out financially. So, to find out that SYEP is being cancelled is something I find absurd, especially now when thousands have now filed for unemployment. Politicians preach the idea of ending the gap between the rich and the poor, in order to adequately do so cutting SYEP is a step clearly in the wrong direction. In a time of need cutting back programs that help lessen this curve is absurd.

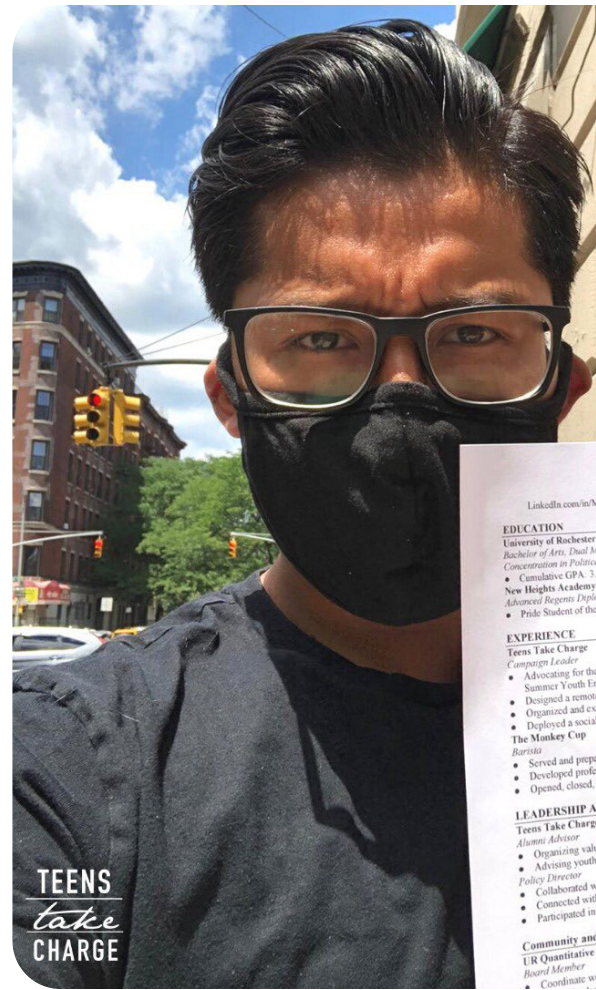
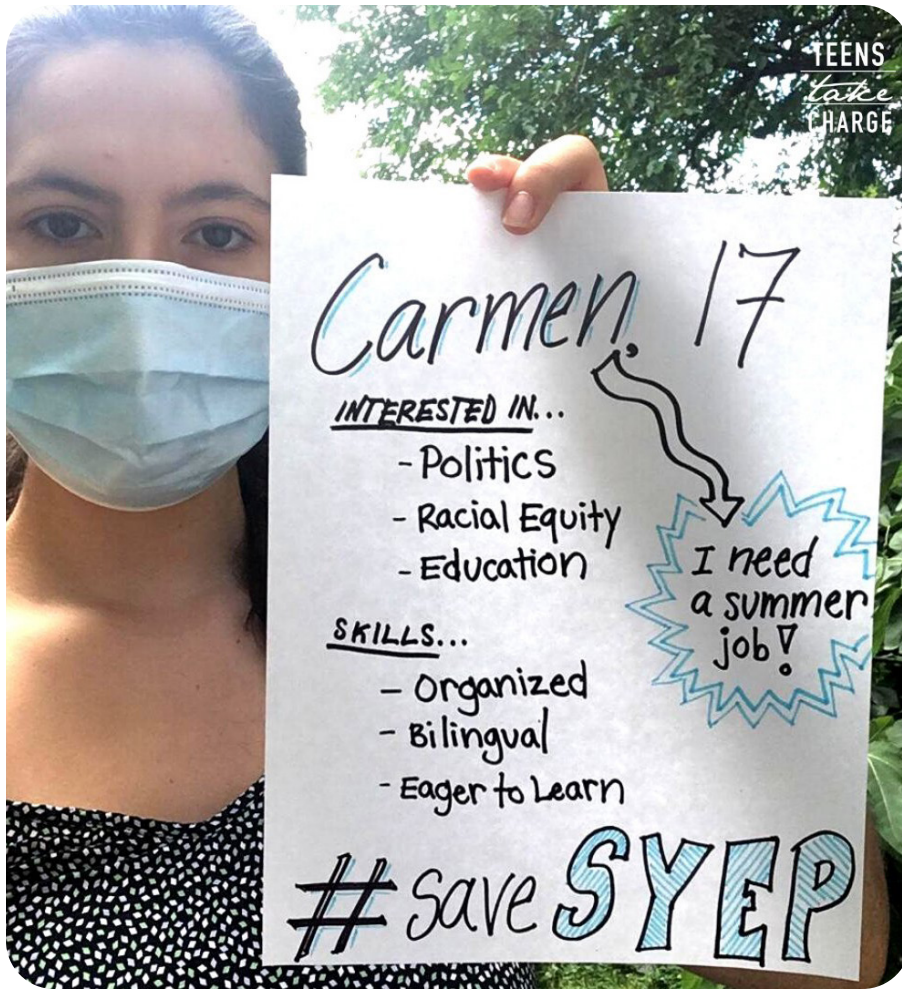
## ***The Digital Uproar***

Students flooded social media—Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok—with messages and videos that gained wide support and traction, including the #SaveSYEP hashtag, some of which went viral.









## Taking Resumes to the Streets

In the report issued by HERE to HERE with the support of Teens Take Change, *One Step Closer to Achieving What I Learned in School*, students from low-income high schools told us that their schools were aimed on helping them graduate. But students from higher income schools said their schools were about graduation, helping students figure out their personal goals, and develop resumes to help them meet those goals. SYEP is a rare chance for lower-income students to build their

resumes, to gain work based learning skills, and to grow a professional network. SYEP steps in where the school system fails, helping to bridge these gaps and give students a more equitable, well-rounded education. In one daily action, #SaveSYEP student advocates made this point through an in-person protest, calling attention to the need for support to help them build their resumes.

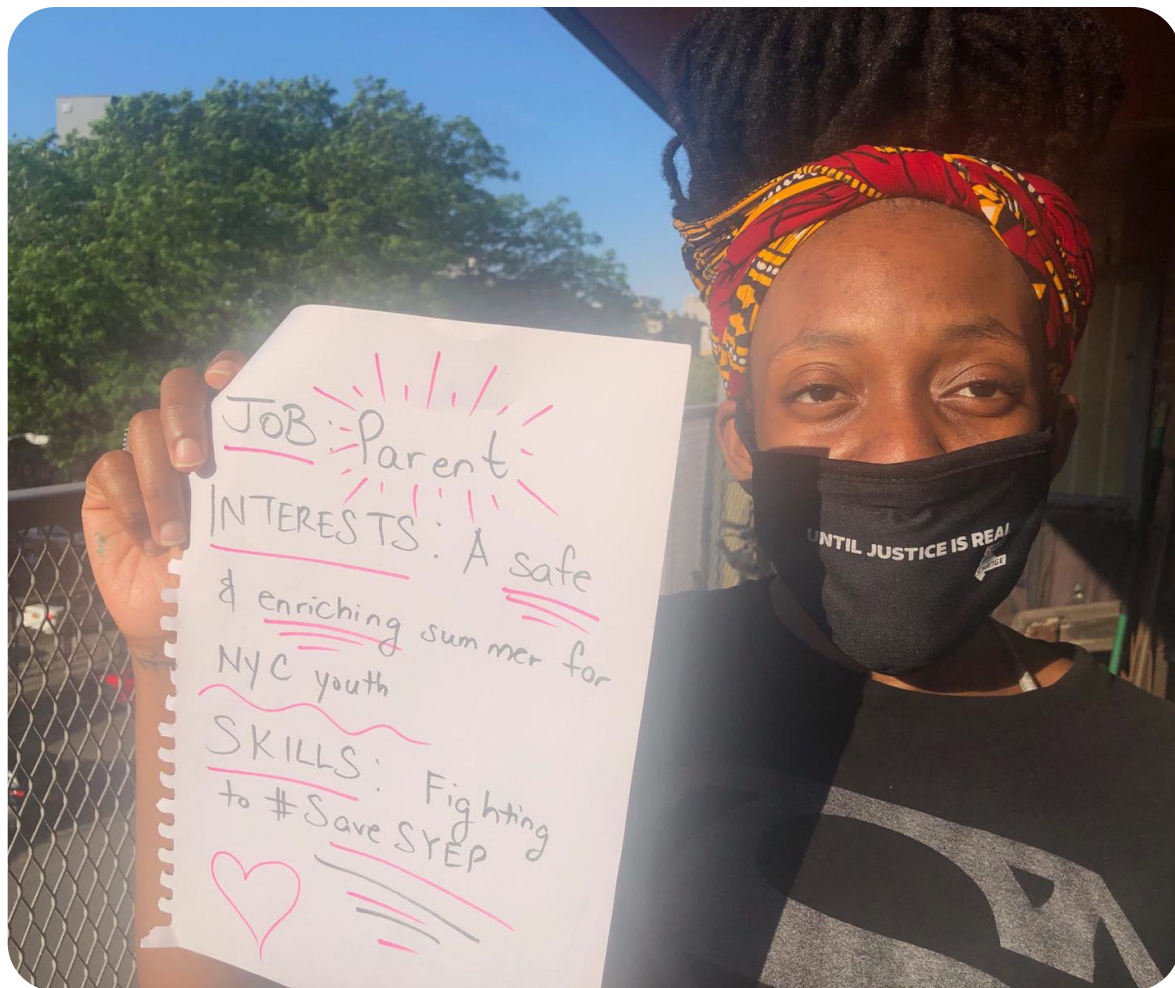
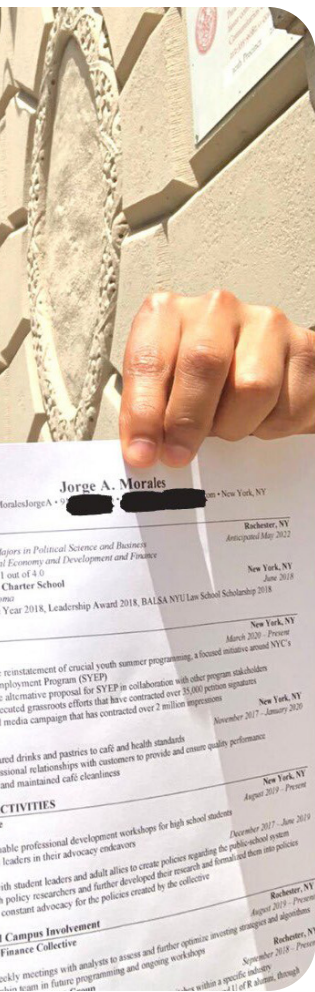


Photo Credit: Carmen Lopez-Villamil, Jorge Morales, Tajh Sutton

***“Every student deserves a chance to build their resume, and SYEP is the primary way for so many low-income students to do so.”***

***—Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp***



## The 5 Pillars of Y.E.S.

- **Connections to Professionals:** Assist young people in developing professional networks and social capital.
- **Career Exploration:** Offer opportunities for students to discover career pathways.
- **Authentic Work Experiences:** Provide hands-on opportunities so young people can explore various ways of solving problems.
- **SEL Support:** Help young people thrive during challenging times.
- **Skills-Building:** Create opportunities for young people to build interpersonal skills and earn industry-standard credentials.



## ***Reimagining a Virtual SYEP***

Working with advocacy partners at ExpandEd and the BEAM Center, among others, Teens Take Charge and HERE to HERE helped to craft alternative models for SYEP that could be operated under social distancing imperatives during the pandemic. The Youth Empowerment Summer (YES) initiative was a key effort in convening program providers and experts to help the city and private funders figure out what was possible in what would be a virtual summer program in 2020. By centering youth voice,

and combining with private resources, the YES initiative created a program that had an enormous impact on summer opportunities for NYC youth and redefined collaboration.

*As things took off, we were picked up by the press, retweeted by politicians and notable activists across NYC. Eventually, AOC retweeted us, which completely blew our minds.*

**Teens Take Charge circulated a Change.org petition that generated over 40,000 signatures.**

## Cut NYPD budget >> Invest in Summer Youth Employment!



TEENS Take Charge Teens Take Charge started this petition to Mayor Bill de Blasio

**The Mayor has proposed cutting the Department of Youth and Community Development's budget 32%, while cutting the NYPD less than 1%. This is budget racism. Demand that the Mayor cut the NYPD budget and invest in youth programs like SYEP!**

42,127 have signed. Let's get to 50,000!



Sam Ruiz signed this petition

Sterlin Matas signed this petition

Thanks to your support this petition has a chance at winning! We only need 7,865 more signatures to reach the next goal - can you help?

[Take the next step!](#)

## Change.Org Petition

At a time when low-income families across New York City are in crisis, the government needs to use every opportunity it has to put cash directly into the hands of young people and families. That's why we are calling on Mayor Bill de Blasio to expand the city's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) this year.

SYEP is the nation's largest youth employment program. It currently provides paid summer jobs to 75,000 NYC youth ages 14–24 every summer. But last year 151,000 young people applied for the program, meaning 76,000 were turned away due to lack of spots.

- 1** In the richest city on earth, we should be able to provide a summer job to every young person who wants one.
- 2** Families around the city are in financial crisis. A paid summer job for a young person helps the whole family.
- 3** If we can shift a 1.1 million student school system to remote learning in a week, we can certainly find a way to offer meaningful summer jobs to a fraction of that number of young people in 3 months, whether those jobs will be remote or in person.

# ***Social Media***

Social media became the way for students to connect with one another about meaningful work, during a time when they were disconnected from each other due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

# ***WE NEEDED TO DO SOMETHING.***

*I knew that not having a job would affect me mentally. I would lose my exposure to the world —I needed to be connected with other youth.*

*I needed something to do simply for the sake of my mental health.*

*I spent time being productive [doing this advocacy work], which I hadn't felt during remote learning.*

*—La'Toya Beecham & Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp*



**Carmen**  
Student

I was getting bored and restless quarantining, and remote learning wasn't very engaging, so this internship was an exciting and interesting use of my time —precisely why SYEP was so important to reinstate.

**Kareem**  
Student

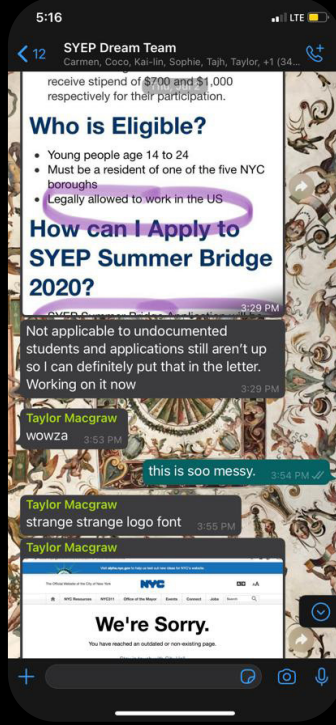
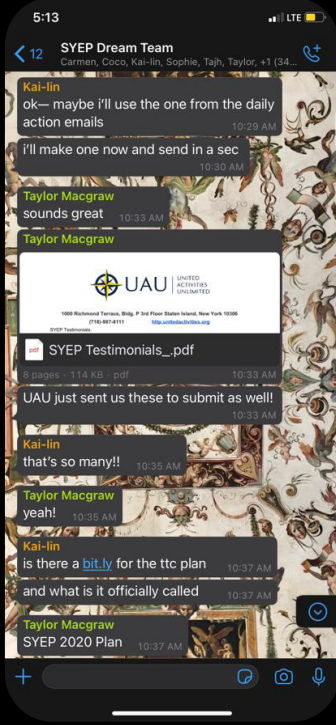
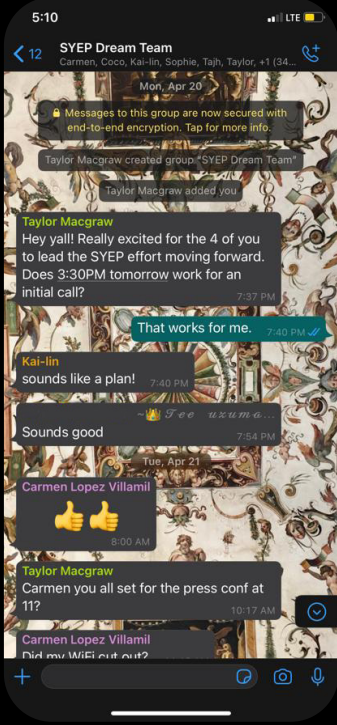
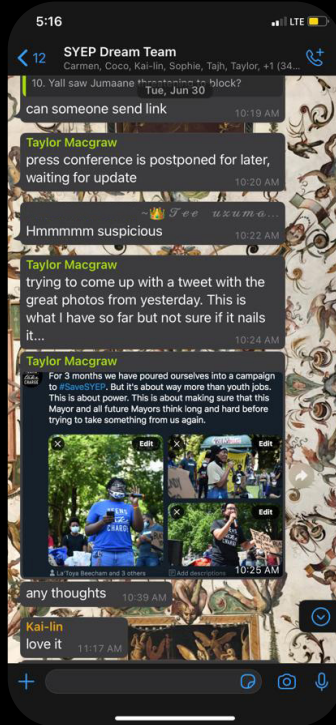
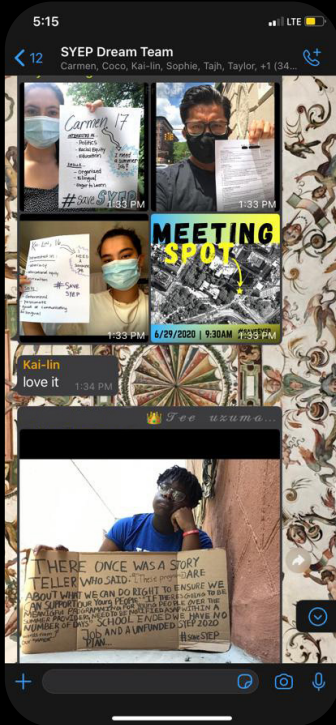
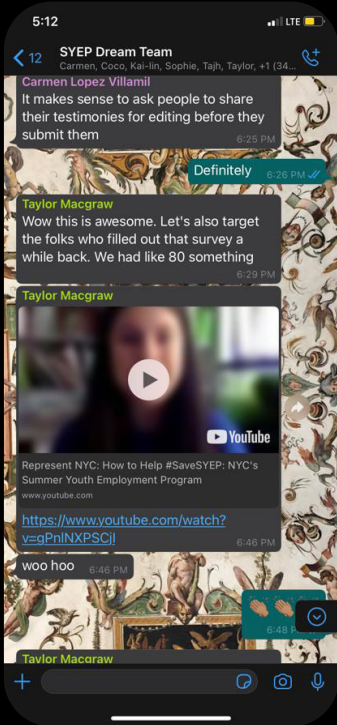
I am a 16-year-old that's participated in summer youth since the age of 14. Through summer youth I learned skills that help me in my day-to-day. Summer youth helped me buy my clothing and school items because I have 4 brothers and my mom's income is just enough for rent and bills.

My mom is a hardworking lady but supporting for us is a lot. SYEP helps me and my brothers help out with clothing costs and our cellphone bills; sometimes food and snacks.

## ***Listening & Community Organizing Over Social Media***

Word got around quickly about the SYEP cancellation, which was particularly tough news after a complicated Spring of remote learning. But things took off pretty quickly once we got engaged over texts, chats, and social media. I made a *TikTok* that I did not think would be a big

deal—but it kind of took off! We realized this was not just a chance for us to try to take power back, but to be creative and have fun doing so through posts, graphics, and memes. From there, things escalated quickly!



**WHEN MAYOR DEBLASIO  
CANCELS 75,000 YOUTH JOBS**



**TIFFANI: WE WILL FIND YOU,  
AND WE WILL SAVE SYEP.**

**MAYOR DE BLASIO:**

**SHOW US  
THE RECEIPTS**

**TEENS  
take  
CHARGE**

With special guests

State Senator  
**Julia Salazar**

Councilmember  
**Carlos Menchaca**

**SYEP PRESS CONFERENCE**

Tuesday, June 23 | 11:15AM

**FACEBOOK LIVE**

Teens Take Charge NYC

**MAYOR DE BLASIO'S  
PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS**

**NYPD:  
0.4% cut**

**Education: 2.3% cut**

**Youth & Community  
Development: 23.5% cut**  
*includes 100% cut to SYEP*

**#SAVESYEP**

**10,000**

signatures in **1 week**, but still no  
word from Mayor de Blasio.

**We aren't stopping!**

**#SAVESYEP**

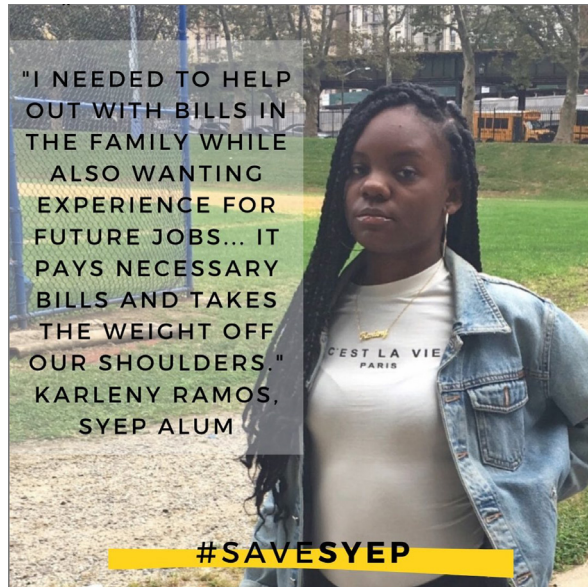
***Social Media Graphics***



#SAVESYEP



### Coronavirus Update: Student Activist Group Out To Save NYC's Summer Youth Employment Program



"I NEEDED TO HELP OUT WITH BILLS IN THE FAMILY WHILE ALSO WANTING EXPERIENCE FOR FUTURE JOBS... IT PAYS NECESSARY BILLS AND TAKES THE WEIGHT OFF OUR SHOULDERS."  
KARLENY RAMOS, SYEP ALUM

#SAVESYEP

**READY TO WORK** TEENS *take* CHARGE

**YOUTH RALLY FOR SYEP** CITY HALL  
SCROLL FOR MAP >>

**BRING YOUR RESUME** WEAR A MASK  
← STAY 6 FT APART →

**6/29/2020 | 9:30AM** #SAVESYEP #NYCBUDGETJUSTICE

teenstakecharge

**JULY 1** deadline for budget approval

**Mayor + Speaker**  
Last year's budget "handshake" on June 15

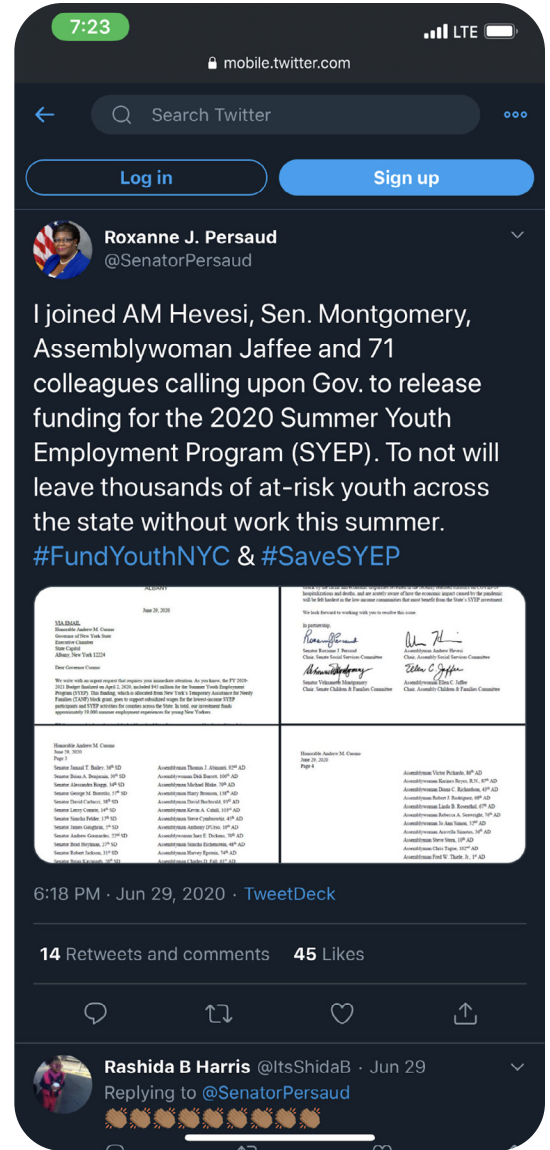
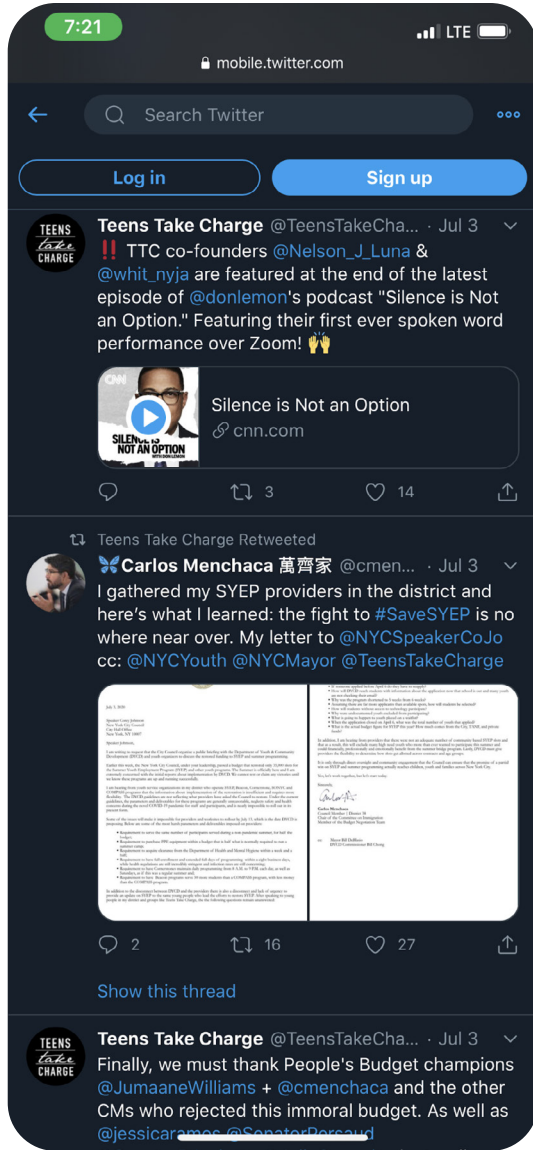
**The Mayor proposes a budget. The City Council\* then holds hearings, negotiates, and ultimately adopts the budget.**

\*51-member elected body  
look up your CM at [council.nyc.gov](http://council.nyc.gov)

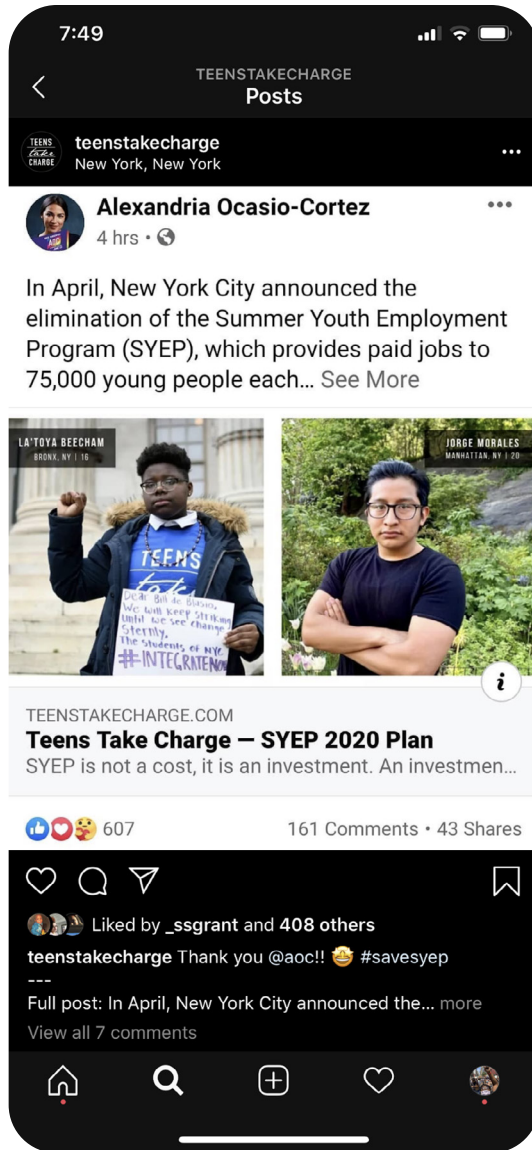


NYC Council Member Carlos Menchaca listened to youth voices and drafted a letter to NYC Speaker Corey Johnson.

State Senator Roxanne Persaud joined members of the Assembly of NYC to #FundYouthNYC and #SaveSYEP!



# Gaining Momentum



NAACP Legal Defense Fund President Sherrilyn Ifill uses her platform to amplify youth voices.

#SaveSYEP was picked up by U.S. Congressmember Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez!

As things took off, we were picked up by the press, retweeted by politicians and notable activists across NYC. Eventually, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez retweeted us, which completely blew our minds.

# ***Press Coverage***

A series of major news articles brought attention to the SYEP cancellation and the youth leaders were front and center. Many of the articles, including a major one in the New York Times, focused on the economic impact of COVID and the importance of SYEP.



# ***WE NEEDED INCOME.***

*I wouldn't have been able to pay for school supplies, cover groceries, or pay my phone bill.*

*I wanted this to learn how to budget and to contribute to my college fund.*

*—La'Toya Beecham & Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp*

# Testimonials

Over 230 teens and adults shared their experiences when they became aware of the SYEP cancellation. They are presented throughout this report.

**Eliza**  
Student

You folks were very clear to me about your policy goals. Your clarity has helped me communicate to the reader what issues you're striving to work on!

**Markice**  
Student

What I think they did well was making sure the message got out there. I definitely noticed how, throughout the whole summer, they were still fighting for it, even when it wasn't guaranteed for us all. I noticed how it was very much present in the media, on social media platforms, and amongst friends. If it wasn't for the amount of news coverage this had, I wouldn't have known about it the way I do. It's through work like yours that gave kids these working opportunities; unfortunatley, just not as many as there usually were.

**Mirella**  
Student

I'm a 16-year-old Latina student and like many of others, SYEP has helped me during the summer; by having great opportunities in programs where we get to learn new things and earn money while doing so. The money has helped my mom pay the bills and any money leftover, I save for college.

**Elizabeth**  
Adult

I am a licensed mental health professional, doctor of organizational development, former SYEP site supervisor, parent, and community member. Simply put: there is no NYC without SYEP. It is an engine for our city. Our young people will pay back the investment with their future contributions. Don't perpetuate the inequities that Covid has laid bare by freezing out the very young people and their families who depend on SYEP

**Eliza**  
Education  
Reporter  
The New  
York Times

I think in order to really tell the story properly, you want to hear from people who are most directly affected. So it was really helpful to talk to you and just hear about what your experience was like, you know, remote learning and your family situation. I think that's why the story got attention, because people could really, you know, put a face and a name to this policy issue, I would say.

**Tajh**  
Adult  
TTC

Because SYEP is the entry point for a lot of young people, particularly young people of color into the workforce, it's almost like you know, a guaranteed slot which you don't get elsewhere. A lot of times for young people, you have to have experience before someone will hire you and how can you get that experience if no one will hire you? So SYEP does a really great job of introducing people to the workforce. And I think these testimonials really highlight that.



Photo Credit:  
Dulce Michelle



May 20, 2020

## **Dear City Council Committee of Finance,**

*I am a 17 year old boy who has a little working experience. I volunteered with my sister at her old job with her helping little kids with their homework, things like that. I was hoping to work this summer because I heard that SYEP helps kids open a bank account. This could help me pay the bills in my house. I'm in a household of three people: me, my mother, and my older sister. My mother hasn't been working for 5 years now. All the bills were paid by my older sister and I wanna do something. I wanna help pay bills in the house. Without SYEP this summer, I don't think I could help my family out. SYEP would provide an opportunity for these institutions to build themselves back up financially by hiring SYEP participants. —Alexander Charles*

*I was trying to be a part of the SYEP summer program this year in hopes to save money and gain experience. Being in foster care, resources I need aren't often available to me and this money would've helped me gain stability. It would've helped many other kids who are also in the foster care system. Not only would the money be beneficial, but the experience I'd gain would help me find other job opportunities. When applying for a job, right now, you need experience and references: this would've been an opportunity for me to gain that necessary experience. College is on the way, and this would've been especially helpful for my application. I think SYEP is extremely important for NYC students, particularly for low income students and kids in foster care. These opportunities are important and crucial because they provide experience, a way to make money, a sense of responsibility, and even friends. —Sue Najim*

*The summer after my freshman year of high school, I worked for the Crime Victims Advocate Program at the Queens District Attorney's Office through the Summer Youth Employment Program. It was my initial exposure to a system that I have been learning and thinking about since. That summer taught me so much, and I would not be who I am today without it. The program catalyzed critical thinking about my work and passions, and closed gaps in work-based learning and social capital between myself and my peers at my specialized high school. The city must fund the Summer Youth Employment Program this year. Young people are creative, engaged, and resourceful—give them an opportunity to show it. —Kalley Huang*





## ***NYC Council Hearing: Over 240 Youth Submitted Testimony to #SaveSYEP!***

At a City Council hearing on May 21<sup>st</sup>, over 240 young people flooded the City Council with written testimony in support of saving SYEP. Their powerful stories, shared throughout this document, helped present a compelling case to city legislators that their constituents were watching them.

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***Media Coverage***

***KQED***

***LinkedIn***

***Lightly News***

***Chalkbeat***

***New York 1***

***The New  
York Times***

***Teen Vogue***

***CBS  
New York***

***Gotham  
Gazette***

***Fox 5 News***

***Politico***

***News 12***

***Flipboard***





Photo Credit:  
New York Times

New York Times, *All the Reasons This Will Be a Bleak Summer for N.Y.C. Children*, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, by Eliza Shapiro |

## ***Media Reception***

So yeah, I was in the New York Times. That was pretty great. But it made me realize that getting press was just a step in the right direction. We had to use that momentum and visibility to make sure everyone saw what was happening, and that none of our public officials could pretend like

this wasn't a big deal. I was a little nervous speaking to the press, but after a while I realized that I have a powerful voice, one that folks need to hear.

—La'Toya Beecham



## ***Panels & Events***

Through panels, events, and other high profile meetings and conversations with public officials, advocates, and lobbyists, students gained a broad set of skills that will be useful to them as they explore and pursue careers in the future. Many of these crucial skills are not available to them in traditional high school classroom settings.

***WE WANTED TO LEARN  
THE SKILLS THAT COME  
FROM REAL WORK.***

*I wanted to build my network, add onto my communication skills, and develop my resume.*

*I wanted to find my voice.*

*I was excited for my first job opportunity.*

*—La'Toya Beecham & Kai-Lin Kwek-Rupp*

# More Testimonials

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**Tajh**  
Adult  
TTC

I think young people listen better, they're more open to new ideas and information. They're more likely to, when presented with new information, say, "Oh, wow, you know what? I didn't know that before. And now that I do, I'm going to change my thinking", which is really great to see because it's how we should all be. I think adults are more resistant to new ideas.

**Regina**

Adult  
Social Worker

Instead of trying to change who they are to fit into a system they didn't make, I like that youth really try to change the system to work for them.

**Markice**  
Student

Whenever you talk to somebody older, it always seems like they try to downplay what we have to say because we're kids and don't understand. It's all you hear. When you're talking to somebody your age you're definitely able to relate. You feel more comfortable and your feelings are heard.

**Carmen**  
Student

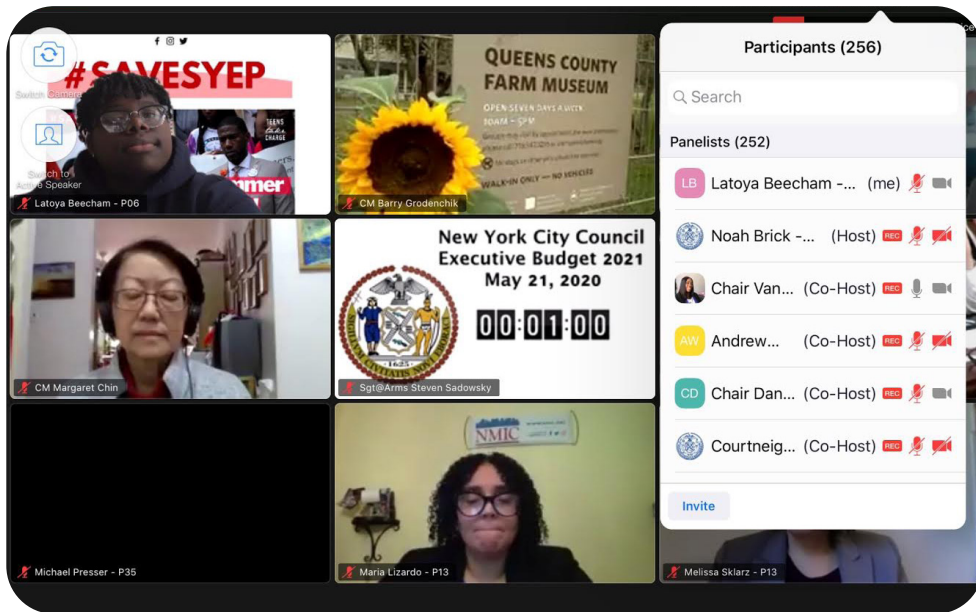
My entire life sort of revolved around SYEP advocacy for a few months. It was also challenging, and not completely fair, to be one of a very small group somehow representing all NYC youth. But I learned so much and genuinely enjoyed the work and time we spent on the campaign. I learned that the city's political systems are excruciatingly tedious and unresponsive, that the media loves to feature/tokenize youth voice and advocacy. This work taught me how to collaborate with a team on a long-term project, and organize and manage my role in that project so that I could work most effectively on things that interested me. This internship felt a lot more like what a real job will be like than school does. It also entrusted the team with a huge responsibility, which I found empowering and exciting. It connects to school because it taught me a lot of the things that school professes to —collaboration, responsibility, and time and project management.



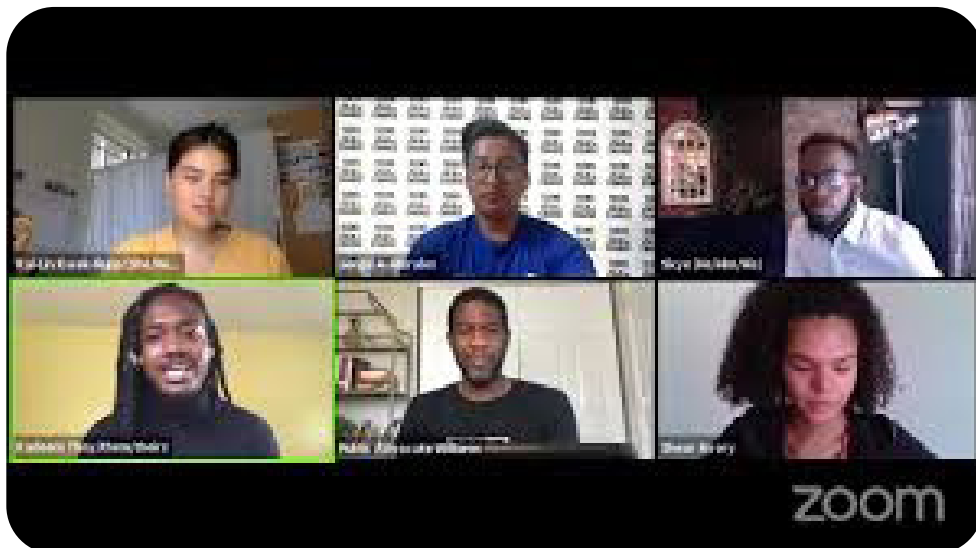
# Zoom Town Halls

As things picked up, Teens Take Charge was asked to participate in numerous city hall meetings. There came a point when there wasn't a meeting without teens in it. Youth voices were beginning to be allowed to participate in politics pertaining to their interests.

La'Toya speaking at a Town Hall Meeting about #SaveSYEP to NYC Council Members.



Kai-Lin and Jorge participated in Zoom events such as this one with NYC Public Advocate Jumaane Williams.



## ***The Outcome***

The city budget came down to the final days of June and students advocated intensely not just virtually, but started showing up in person to rally at City Hall for a budget that would save SYEP. In the end, the city restored 35,000 slots to the program. It was still a major cut from 75,000 proposed before the pandemic hit, but given that there was a need to shift to remote internships and the fact that the city had to fill a major budget gap, the 35,000 slots were a major victory. And so much of it was thanks to the leadership of these youth.

***IT'S ABOUT WAY  
MORE THAN YOUTH  
SUMMER JOBS.  
THIS IS ABOUT POWER.***

*This is about making sure this Mayor and all future  
Mayors think long and hard before trying to take  
from us again.*

*—Teens Take Charge June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020*



**GUYS!!! Not sure if you're watching the Youth Services hearing, but it's clear that SYEP has been SAVED. Still lots to figure out and unclear how many spots there will be, but the commissioner keeps name dropping Teens Take Charge. We are meeting with them on Friday and they said they look forward to hearing from us about details on how to run the program this year. Can't pop the champagne just yet, but we kinda did that.**

**Jahdia**  
Student

I got accepted to the online summer youth program and I thought it was going to be like online school, but it wasn't bad. I made a good amount of money and enjoyed the program.

**Tajh**  
Adult  
TTC

It was amazing. Like y'all literally saved some of our employments. We didn't get every slot we wanted, but the fact of the matter is that if it hadn't been for Teens Take Charge and all of its allies, there'd be no summer youth employment, there'd be no summer advocacy Institutes and no Teens Take Charge. There'd be 35,000 youth right now with no access to a way to gain additional income for their families during a pandemic. So I think it's a huge win. And I think that moving forward, people should really remember that and remember the power of youth voices and youth organizing; to be more willing to allow young people to lead and really shape what the city looks like, and it provides for young people and their families.



#SaveSYEP is about way more than summer youth jobs. It's about power.

We're glad we got 35K jobs back, but when someone steals \$100 and then gives you a \$20, it's nothing to celebrate.



## The Budget Hearing

In the end, the city restored 35,000 slots to SYEP. We had been pushing for a full restoration of 75,000, but given the budget crisis and questions about how to mount a virtual program quickly, we were satisfied that

so many young people got these important, paid experiences. Perhaps more importantly, we realized that we have a voice and it is powerful.

# What did we learn?

In reflecting on the #SaveSYEP campaign, we learned, above all, that young people have a voice. A voice that needs to be heard. Youth voice is not a box that you check off. We learned that young people need to lead—not just other young people, but we need to lead adults. Because as Mayor de Blasio showed us in cancelling SYEP without

any warning or consultation, adults will act with their interests in mind. Yes, there are many adults that want to help young people. Our city is filled with amazing teachers, social workers, public officials, and advocates, many of whom have done great things to help young people.

## 1 | We have a voice.

*La'Toya  
Beecham*

This work helped me find my voice. I have always wanted to be a doctor, but this experience has made me wonder whether I should be a public servant and political leader. I saw the ability that public officials have to help their community, and I've started wondering if that's the path for me. My community needs the help, and I now know that I have a powerful voice.

*Kai-Lin  
Kwek-Rupp*

The single biggest skill I am taking from this experience is confidence. Before this project, I had never sent a professional email, taken part in interviews, or sent zoom invitations. The community of my peers and adult allies around me provided a compassionate environment for me to learn, and importantly make mistakes. Because of this environment, I grew into a role of leadership that I will take with me now in the classroom and later on as I figure out a career. Every single teen in NYC deserves a chance to be challenged in an environment of work-based learning, and an opportunity to grow.

## 2 | Internships and real-world learning experiences make a real impact on young people.

I learned what I really need to succeed in the real world, whether that meant setting my alarm extra early, or how to communicate with other people. I learned how and when to code-switch, network, and I even expanded my vocabulary! Most importantly, I learned that when you are working on a hard problem with a team, you have to stay positive, and give off a positive energy. There were times in the campaign where it looked like we were not going to succeed, and we had to stay positive with one another to keep our motivation levels high. I'm taking that with me wherever I go!

Although we did not think of our work on the #SaveSYEP campaign as a formal internship, it was one. We working working to save an internship program for youth citywide, but we ended up having our own internship experiences that taught us about ourselves and the world, and gave us real skills. We were modeling the types of benefits that we wanted other students to get. We came out of this experience more convinced than ever that internships and work-based learning must be part of every student's education. Traditional classroom work alone cannot teach the skills that we need to find our voices, figure out who we are, learn about the world outside of schools, and gain the skills to succeed in that real world.



*We are confident that our lifting of our own voices restored 35,000 slots to SYEP, meaning that we directly helped tens of thousands of teenagers like us learn skills, earn money, and stay connected during the most*

*difficult summer in their lifetimes. It was not easy, this campaign challenged us and pushed us to the limit of our skills and mental fortitude. But it also showed us a lot about the world. Why do young people of color have to compete with*

*one another to win a lottery for a chance to build their resumes, support their families, and discover their future paths, when most white students get those opportunities already? How is that fair?*

## ***Our Recommendations for SYEP 2021 and beyond***

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### ***1 | SYEP for every student that wants it, with an expansion to at least 100K slots!***

We demand that the Summer Youth Employment Program be made completely universal. Any high school student that wants to better themselves, their families, and increase their skills so they can help New York City grow should be given the chance to do so. SYEP should continue its transition into a school-based model, where the community-based organizations

that administer the program partner with schools to ensure that summer jobs are connected to the interests that students develop and explore during the academic year. SYEP should not only be restored to its 2019 level of 75,000 slots, but expanded to 100,000, in its eventual transition to a universal program, available to all high school students.

### ***2 | Youth need to be a part of youth policy in NYC!***

We cannot continue to live in a society where adults make decisions for young people without consulting us. We understand that policymaking is hard. We understand that there are tradeoffs. But we do not understand that you can cancel, change, or even create youth

programs without young people involved. And by involved, we don't meet allowing us to sit in on an occasional meeting, so you can say we were "consulted." **Youth voice is not a box you check off.** Young people need to be at the table for every important decision related to youth program funding and policy.

# What can you do to help?

## Students

**Make your voices heard!**

- 1** Join **Teens Take Charge** and/or become a **HERE to HERE Student Ambassador**.
- 2** Learn who your City Council member is and call their office, asking them to fully fund SYEP in the Summer of 2021, and not to accept any cuts to the program. And keep calling them to make sure they are sticking to their commitment!
- 3** Push your high school or college to offer more paid internships or connect to SYEP.

## Educators

**Integrate school and work in your classroom!**

- 1** Encourage your students to apply for SYEP.
- 2** Urge your school to utilize internships and other work-based learning experiences as part of its instructional model. Learn about the **CDOS**, and how your school might utilize it to provide rigorous work-based learning, instead of a fifth Regents exam.

## Policymakers & Public Officials

**Recognize that hands-on, work-based learning experiences are not an alternative to academics, but a driver of informed student choice and improved student outcomes!**

- 1** Fully fund SYEP for every high school student seeking a summer job.
- 2** Recognize that work and learning are two sides of a coin, and that students need real-world experiences to connect their academic work to their hopes and dreams for themselves. Read **One Step Closer** and **Work is College Prep**.
- 3** Support schools and students to better integrate work experiences and academic activities, through accreditation of work, and support for school-connected work experiences, such as internships, apprenticeships, career exploration, and more.