

Where is the healthy food?
Grace Griffin, Marian Middle School 7th Grader



I have had a long time to understand the connection between the food deserts of my community and the school lunch programs within it. My journey started around the time I began public school in the second grade. I was appalled that something advertised as balanced and healthy could be so unappetizing.

I thought and realized, "Is this concerning the fact that my community (one that is predominately black) doesn't have a full-service grocery store? Is there not a need for nutrition in black bodies as there is for white ones?" There certainly is, which led me to my work of further understanding the relationship between food deserts, impoverished communities, and the school systems within them.

Food deserts are geographical areas that don't have access to affordable, healthy, food options. This is especially true for black and marginalized communities like mine. It isn't always the case that those living in food deserts don't have lots of calories.

In fact, liquor stores, convenience stores, and fast-food restaurants are oversaturated in these areas, selling highly processed foods with high quantities of sugar, oil, salt, and artificial chemicals, as well as factory-farmed meat and dairy. There are lots of sodas and snacks, pastries and white bread, cookies, and crackers, as well as alcohol and cigarette items.

But no healthy food.

Food has a big impact on the learning abilities of students in school. According to the National Library of Medicine (NLM), "All nutrients are important for brain growth and function, but certain ones have particularly significant effects during early development. Key nutrients for brain development are defined as those for which deficiency that is concurrent with sensitive or critical periods early in life results in long-term dysfunction."

There are different government-funded programs--including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, "food stamps"), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program--that assist low-income families in getting the food they need. While community-based food pantries and soup kitchens are essential, they cannot always supply all of the nutritious food women and children require, let alone as much or as frequently as required.

It's no secret that some areas are better funded because of systemic racism, but I'm going to take a deeper look and see the effect on my community. When you have all these sources of overly processed food and not enough vegetables from the time you're school age until your young adult years (if you are fortunate to go to college), you end up with black

communities having higher rates of fatal illnesses that come from malnutrition, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. The National Institute of Health (NIH) states, "Differences between blacks and whites in neighborhood, psychosocial, socioeconomic, and behavioral factors were also linked with diabetes...."

To conclude, my community has a lot to overcome when it comes to learning about how to feed and support themselves, including better funding in my community and other black ones such as mine. It helps to spread the word. However, action also needs to take place, and I'm prepared to help be a leading practitioner for the cause.

Biography

My name is Grace Griffin, and I'm a part of the AFSC Youth council.

I'm 12 years old and I live in East St. Louis, IL. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. When I was 6 years old, my family and I moved to Illinois where I currently live. During my life, I have changed between many schools and have had many different experiences. Whether I've been the only black kid in the school or in a black school. Before Covid-19 my brother and I went to a Montessori school. I currently attend Marian Middle School. My favorite food is my mother's red curry chicken. My favorite parts are the combination of acidity, sautéed onions, all to pair with a tender and seasoned chicken. Some of my favorite activities are cooking, gardening, and playing video games.

What inspired me to do this work is not only the want and need to make a change in the communities of black people, but to change the lives of the people within them, to bring more awareness to issues in our community that are overlooked. The people that have inspired me to do this work are Anna Julia Cooper, writer of a *Voice From the South*, where she describes the importance of black women's voices for social change. Activist and writer, Ida B. Wells for her courageous work against lynching during the 1890s. Lastly my mother, the activist I've known since birth, who studies every day the quality of life that my people have and have had.

Lots of love, Grace.