



Halal Meals in San Diego Schools: How Youth are Leading the Movement in School Wellness

According to the most recent census data, Islam is the fastest growing religion in San Diego, CA. In the city's diverse City Heights neighborhood, local leaders are collaborating to address the health issues that impact them most, including food security for Muslim students through increased cultural competency of school meal programs. A collaboration between the University of California San Diego's [Center for Community Health](#) and their [Youth Advisory Council](#), [Mid-City Community Advocacy Network's](#)

[Food Justice Momentum Team](#), and the [United Women of East Africa](#) formed with the unified goal of bringing Halal meal options into local schools, that would allow Muslim students to partake in provided meals that meet their dietary guidelines.

CA4Health had the privilege to hear from **Faduma Haji**, a member of UC San Diego's Youth Advisory Council and leader in this movement:

Q: What was the process of getting Halal meals introduced to your local schools?

A: We first pin-pointed the problem: that there was an absence of beneficial school food choices in specific communities. Then, there were locations where it needed to be addressed, which were low-income neighborhoods and schools with high immigrant rates. It was also important to work with schools where many of the students had religious restrictions on their diet.

The most important part of the process was creating a solution, and that came in the form of halal chicken. We offered this option because many students' cultural and religious beliefs made mainstream school lunch much less accessible.*

Q: What was the experience like for the student body and members of the youth council?

A: It was important to us as youth to make this type of change in the school food system. We had gone through the school system and understood the difficulty of eating well at school. The halal food campaign's significance was that we were changing something that had affected our own experiences in the California educational system.

Q: What were the highlights of your experience in the process?

A: The most memorable point in the halal food campaign journey was speaking to the school board on the proposal for halal food. It was a wonderful opportunity to exercise our voice and formally express our ideas.

Q: What do youth bring to processes like these that is unique? Why is it important for youth to be engaged in changemaking?

A: It is vital for youth to have a say in these change making processes. It is because of this experience and many I've had with the UCSD Youth Advisory Council that I feel responsible, passionate, and excited about creating a better community. This experience has shown me the beautiful world of vocal activism. It's given me aspirations of a world without inequality in health. These instances have shaped me into the idealistic individual I am today.

Q: Anything else you would like to share?

A: I would like to take a moment to thank and acknowledge all the wonderful partners who made this change possible: Food Justice Momentum Team, United Women of East Africa Support Team, Somali Bantu of San Diego, UC San Diego's Center for Community Health, San Diego Hunger Coalition, San Diego Unified School District Food and Nutrition Services and San Diego Unified School District School Board.

After a successful trial period and sustained discussions with San Diego Unified School District the Halal meal program has been approved for the current 2016-2017 school year. Leaders like Faduma continue to meet with legislators and partners in an effort to expand the program to other local schools. Find out more [HERE](#).

*Halal is Arabic for "permissible" and when applied to foods refers to their preparation in a manner that adheres to Islamic dietary principles