

Testimony – Healthy Schools Act – March 26, 2010

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you especially to Councilmembers Cheh and Grey, and their staffs, for working so hard on a bill that has the potential to positively impact so many children in the District of Columbia. As we all know, this bill is about so much more than food. When children receive quality nutrition, they will be better able to focus in class, which means that they will receive a better education, and their futures become much brighter.

I've had the pleasure of meeting with some of you and your staff already and it's nice to see you again. For those of you I haven't yet had the opportunity to meet, my name is Amber McDonald. I'm a DC resident and lawyer, a concerned citizen, and I've come to be passionate about this issue and this particular bill out of my own experiences with, and research about, food.

Just a few years ago, in my late twenties, I was 60 pounds heavier and taking medication to regulate my blood pressure, as well as suffering from a multitude of other various health problems, when I encountered some information that began to alert me to the fact that I was eating incorrectly. As a result of this information, I began to focus on eating whole fruits and vegetables, eventually adopting a vegetarian diet. I dropped the 60 pounds, my blood pressure became the medical ideal, my skin cleared up, my focus and even my work performance improved. The solution seems so obvious to me now, but I had simply never had the proper nutritional education.

My situation was not so different from that facing many Washingtonians, where 22% of the adult population is obese and we have one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the country. One in three children will develop diabetes, and half of all minority children will develop diabetes by their 18th birthday.

We all know that we're in a crisis situation in the District and across America. Certainly, that's why the First Lady has made childhood obesity her platform. And this bill can go a long way toward improving the nutrition of children in DC. However, I say to you based on my own experiences and based on substantial scientific and medical research, that this bill should be amended to include language encouraging schools to provide vegetarian meal options and to embrace the Meat Free Mondays program.

According to the American Dietetic Association, well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets are appropriate for all ages and drastically reduce the rates of obesity, diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure and heart disease. Moreover, the Mayo Clinic has determined that a vegetarian diet makes your body more responsive to insulin, which is a very good thing if you have diabetes. In fact, in a 2006 study, people with type-2 diabetes who increased their vegetable consumption were able to reduce their need for diabetes medications.

Of course, vegetarian meal options won't serve any purpose if the students don't choose them. Having spoken with various people affiliated with the DCPS foods program, I know that the current vegetarian options have not been very successful with students. This makes sense – when given a choice, students will always choose the foods with which they are most familiar and, as we know, these have traditionally been the least healthy foods.

This leads us to the importance of the Meat Free Mondays program. Meat Free Monday programs have been embraced in school districts all over the country, including Baltimore Public School Districts and, most recently, Oakland Unified School Districts in California. These schools have been able to implement these programs at no additional costs.

Meat Free Mondays allow us to challenge students to choose foods that they might not otherwise be exposed to and to discover that they actually enjoy these healthier options. Then, during the rest of the week, when they are presented with more choices, they will be more likely to choose options heavy in whole fruits and vegetables.

Moreover, a weekly reminder of healthy habits – like Meat Free Monday – further encourages health. A study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine that provided individuals with weekly health prompts found that 2/3 of participants responded with improvements in their overall health, eating habits and physical activity levels.

A Meat Free Monday program could also be utilized as an opportunity for students to teach their parents about healthy eating, and to pass along information about the availability of WIC, SNAP and Senior discounts at our local farmers' markets.

For the foregoing reasons, I propose that the bill is amended to include language, for example under a new Sec. 201(c), that "Public schools and public charter schools are strongly encouraged to provide at least one healthy and nutritious vegetarian or vegan option at each meal and to participate in Meat Free Mondays to provide a weekly reminder to students of the importance of healthy eating."

Thank you.