

**TESTIMONY FOR BILL 18-564,
THE HEALTHY SCHOOLS ACT OF 2009
Presented by Douglas Van Zoeren, MD
On Behalf of Kaiser Permanente Mid-Atlantic States
Friday, March 26, 2010**

Members of the City Council, thank you for the opportunity to comment on this vital and comprehensive Bill to improve the health and well being of the children of the District of Columbia. My name is Doug Van Zoeren. I am the lead physician at the Kaiser Permanente District Medical Centers. I have practiced medicine in Washington DC since 1984 and at the Kaiser Permanente North Capitol Medical Center since 1989.

As a total health organization, Kaiser Permanente is dedicated to helping people to live well and thrive. We provide comprehensive and preventive health care to nearly 500,000 residents in our medical facilities, and through our Community Benefit programs, we invest millions of dollars to build healthy communities, reduce obesity and chronic disease, and eliminate health disparities.

Improving health outcomes among children is a goal that Kaiser Permanente fervently supports. I commend Council Member Mary Cheh and Council Chair Vincent Gray, for seeking to raise the bar for health in DC public schools.

In the District of Columbia, 35 percent of children ages 10-17 are considered obese or overweight, higher than our neighboring jurisdictions and higher than the national average. We know this dramatic increase in obesity over the past two decades is directly related to a decrease in healthful eating and physical activity – in neighborhoods and in schools. As physicians, we also know that obese youth are likely to become obese adults, and more likely to suffer from poor health and increased early mortality.

In my years of practice my colleagues and I have witnessed a marked increase in chronic conditions that were once unusual in children and young adults – and in particular, the rates of high blood pressure and Type 2 Diabetes.

These trends could be reduced by assuring that children have better access to nutritious meals and physical activity during the school day. In fact, for many children, schools represent the only opportunity to eat a healthy meal or to have meaningful exercise. This also makes the school system a healthy example to children – teaching them habits that incorporate exercise and healthy eating into their lifestyles.

A goal of moderate-to-vigorous daily physical activity for children would have a positive impact not only on health, but also on academic achievement. Children who are physically active are more attentive. Physical activity also improves cardiovascular fitness, and decreases risks for obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma. Maintaining fitness and an appropriate body weight through regular exercise

and healthy eating habits in childhood is far more effective than attempting to reverse obesity once it is established in adults.

Kaiser Permanente supports the idea of community and schoolyard gardens as a means of educating children about fresh foods and supplying cafeterias. For this reason, Kaiser supports more than half a dozen gardens and urban farms in the Metro area, including an exemplary school-farm partnership between Baltimore City Schools and the nearby Great Kids Farm.

Partnerships such as these across the country have shown great potential to change behaviors.

Many of the recommendations in the DC Healthy Schools Act are evidence-based – and are supported by First Lady Michele Obama’s childhood obesity plan and the Partnership, in which Kaiser Permanente is a founding member, representing healthcare. I encourage you to consider the recommendations in this Bill, and to commit to helping every child in the District to thrive physically, emotionally and academically.

Thank you for your time.