

Testimony in support of Healthy Schools Act of 2009
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by
Mary Beth Tinker
2939 Van Ness St., #220
Washington DC 20008
mtinke@sbcglobal.net
202-534-7921

I am pleased to speak in favor of the Healthy Schools Act of 2009. Thank you, Councilwoman Cheh for your leadership in bringing this Bill before the Council. As a Ward 3 resident, I am grateful that you represent us so well.

For 25 years, I have worked as a pediatric nurse, currently at Prince George's Hospital. Like others here today, I deal up-close with the effects of policies, made by adults, that damage children and their health.

One of these has been our nation's school lunch program, which benefits corporate interests by dumping high fructose corn syrup, sugar and fatty junk foods on our children. Coupled with a cruel reduction in physical education, the effect on children has been catastrophic. I will leave it to others to describe the sorrow of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and so many other problems that children now face as a result.

But the health of young people involves more than school lunches or physical education. Amazingly, we have arranged our society in such a way that one third of the children in our capital live in poverty, many of them homeless, or abused, or otherwise denied the basic means to grow and thrive. On a daily basis, young people pay the price for policies put into place without their input, and their interests have not been well represented.

And so, children's health is part of a larger, international issue of children's rights. To solve their problems, young people themselves must speak up, and it is heartening to see them doing that here today. They are part of a growing youth movement across Washington DC, the country and throughout the world. So many students have become active, like those I met in Chicago who have taken on their school lunch program, or students here in DC at Hardy middle school who have mobilized to keep their principal. Teens in Oakland told me how they testified against area polluters, accusing them of increasing asthma rates.

Recently, elementary students in Maryland were featured in the Washington Post after rallying to stop styrofoam use in their school's lunch program. Others from Fairfax were pictured protesting the elimination of their band program, with their empty clarinet cases in hand, saying, "without our band class, we can't play the music in our hearts." Several days ago, I met a fourth grader at a screening at American University of a movie about the Baltimore school lunch program. She raised her hand to ask the large audience, "Why does all our food at lunch come wrapped in plastic?" She later cited statistics about the abysmal physical education reductions in her school and around the country.

These young people, like those testifying today, are taking action to make democracy real. We should encourage them by involving them not only in testifying in favor of the Healthy Schools Act, but in its implementation and oversight. I propose that there be a committee of students in each school to do this. Let's encourage our district's children to be an active voice for their own health and their own future. In the end, it will be better for us all.