

3680 38th Street NW Apartment B242
Washington, DC 20016
January 19, 2010

Ms. Mary M. Che
Council Member, Ward 3
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW Suite 108
Washington, DC 20004

RE: Healthy Schools Act of 2009

Dear Ms. Che:

This letter supports Section 507. School gardens program. I offer comments and suggestions to improve it in terms of avoiding toxicity to school children and enhancing the probability for successful outcomes given the tight space constraints that our schools face.

Section 507 (b) -- This section should include another key government component – the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) at the University of the District of Columbia. The CES is a key educator of youth and adults on urban gardening through a variety of programs such as:

- *Junior Master Gardening Groups* (Grades 3-5), that “grow good kids by igniting a passion for learning, success and service through a unique gardening education”. Five hundred and sixty-two (562) DC youth are currently enrolled in the Junior Master Gardener Program.
- *4-H Groups* (Grades 3-12), that “empowers youth to reach their full potential, working and learning in partnership with caring adults.”
- *Master Gardeners* (Adults), which is a two-part educational effort, in which avid gardeners are provided many hours of intense home horticulture training, and in return they “payback” by volunteering their time in a variety of community-based projects. Currently, UDC Master Gardeners volunteer at nine school-based programs including the Capitol Hill Cluster Schools, M.V. Leckie Elementary School, and Bancroft Elementary School as well as youth gardens at park and recreation sites throughout the city and the U.S. National Arboretum and Oak Hill Youth Detention Center.

The CES staff would be an invaluable asset to the State Superintendent, ensure that the wheel was not re-invented but adapted to create a successful program for the city, and expedite its implementation.

Section 507 (e) -- This section should be amended or an additional section added to:

- Have CES establish city-wide testing protocols and garden design guidance that provide adequate information on how to take soil samples and what tests are required for gardens to be used as sources of food or for educational purposes. The reason is that the

city's soils have been disturbed over hundreds of years and every site is unique in some way. Currently, the CES recommends that homeowners, schools and new community gardens have their soils analyzed for nutrients required for successful plant health, and for two heavy metals (arsenic and lead) often found in the urban soils and harmful to humans. CES also arranged a DC Residents Testing Package at A&L Eastern Labs in Richmond to analyze soil samples for pH, nutrients, organic matter, arsenic and lead for \$60.00.

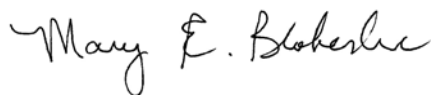
- There are, however, other chemicals that may be found in soils such as asbestos from construction debris and petro-chemicals in asphalt. Soil testing for these chemicals is quite expensive. Therefore, sound scientific guidance on how to assess the potential for these and maybe other harmful chemicals in the soil is very important. Guidance is also required on how to develop the most cost-effective and science-based approaches for creating garden areas if heavy metals and other harmful chemicals may be in the soil. The legislation should direct CES to develop this guidance.

General Comment –I have experienced the completion for play (exercise), faculty parking, and gardening space first hand as a five-plus year volunteer as a UDC Master Gardener in support of school gardening. Many schools do not have enough space for all three activities. How to allocate school-yard space is not currently addressed in the proposed legislation, although it is a key ingredient in creating a successful gardening program.

My experience in addressing environmental issues at the federal and state level indicates that land use decisions are best addressed by members of the community through a formal and open process. The legislation should include a section that directs the school community (defined to include faculty, administrators, parents, those who provide gardening support, neighbors, and others) to create a master plan for “grounds use” so that everyone has a chance to have their say in how the space is used and will then be a partner in implementing the decision. The legislation should also direct the school superintendent to define the elements of an open public process for doing so.

Thank you for initiating this legislation. If you would like to contact me, my phone is 202-488-3967 and e-mail is blakbock@verizon.net.

Sincerely,



Mary Blakeslee

cc: William Hare
Sandy Farber