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Testimony of

Sandra Farber Bandier

University System of the District of Columbia

on the

“Healthy Schools Act of 2009”

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11:00AM

Room 500

John A. Wilson Building

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

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Chairman Gray, Councilmember Cheh, and members of the Committee, I am Sandra Farber Bandier, Environment and Natural Resources Extension Agent and Coordinator of the Master Gardener Program for the University System of the District of Columbia. I am testifying today on the University System's existing expertise in the development and management of urban garden programs, and to recommend areas where the University System can provide technical assistance and advisory services for the School Gardens Program, as outlined in the Healthy Schools Act of 2009.

The University System of the District of Columbia is ideally situated to provide its current expertise to the School Gardens Program. As the only urban land-grant university system in the nation, we sit at the intersection of urban agricultural research and urban outreach. These functions are currently carried out by Community Outreach and Extension Services, which includes the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service, and will be further developed with the opening of the new College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences, or CAUSES, this August.

There are at least two areas the University System is involved in that are applicable to the proposed School Gardens Program.

First, through its successful Master Gardener Program, the University System exposes adults to the principles of horticulture to increase awareness and education opportunities through the study of sustainable agriculture. The overall objective of the Master Gardener Program is to train District of Columbia residents to become resources in their own communities for gardening expertise.

There are currently 158 Master Gardeners and 37 Master Gardener trainees spread across all eight wards of the city. In addition to their educational requirements, each Master Gardener candidate completes 50 or more hours of work on community-based projects, including many schools. This spring, Master Gardener candidates will be working on projects at seven D.C. schools, as well as other beautification projects located at parks and recreation sites, nursing homes, daycare facilities, and other community facilities.

The second area that is applicable to the School Gardens Program is soil testing. The contamination of D.C. soils with arsenic and lead has been widely publicized and may be inappropriate for growing edible crops without soil remediation or implementing the raised-bed technique. For this reason, our team at the Cooperative Extension Service recommends that all community and school gardens have their soil tested every three years.

The University System has partnered with the Department of the Environment to install a 2,000 square foot EPA-certified lab for routine soil and plant analysis, as well as measurement of other environmental parameters such as pesticide residues. This lab is expected to be fully operational by 2011; until then, samples are being tested in Richmond, Virginia, at \$60 apiece.

Given these two areas of expertise, there are several ways that the University System can collaborate with its District of Columbia partners to ensure the School Gardens Program is a success.

First, the University System could provide training for school garden coordinators prior to each school year. This curriculum would be based on the existing international Master Gardener curriculum, but condensed into a weeklong program and taught in smaller cohorts.

This basic, but necessary, training would ensure that all school-based coordinators in the Program had a baseline of expertise in maintaining a school garden.

Second, using best practice models from other jurisdictions that have utilized their respective extension services to implement similar school gardens programs, such as the University of Maine and Cornell University, the University System could partner with elementary and secondary schools to provide curriculum advisory and coordination services.

Third, by tapping into the extensive network of D.C.'s certified Master Gardeners, each school that constructed a garden could be matched with a local Master Gardener to provide continued assistance. This assistance could range anywhere from involvement with student activities, to afterhours maintenance and advice.

Fourth, upon completion of the EPA-certified lab for routine and soil and plant analysis, the University System could act as the School Gardens Program's one-stop-shop for all required soil testing. By combining this technical assistance with its gardening expertise, the University System could provide interpretation of results and make recommendations on how to remediate problems or improve soil quality.

In conclusion, participation as a partner in the proposed School Gardens Program can provide the University System with another way to fulfill its land-grant mission of community outreach and technical assistance. We thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing. As the land-grant University for the District of Columbia, we stand ready to serve and look forward to collaborating with DCPS on this very relevant and meaningful initiative.

I would gladly respond to any questions you may have.