

Testimony of

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Representing Parents for Better D.C. School Food

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Before the Council of the District of Columbia: Committee On Government Operations And The Environment, Mary M. Cheh, Chairperson, and the Committee Of The Whole, Vincent C. Gray, Chairman

Regarding agenda item:

“Healthy Schools Act of 2009,” Bill 18-0564

Friday, March 26, 2010, 11:00 a.m.

Room 500, John A. Wilson Building

Hello. My name is Tara Flakker. I am here representing a relatively new organization, Parents for Better D.C. School Food, which arises out of the parents committee of the D.C. Farm to School Network, where I have been volunteering for the last year.

For too long, parents in the District of Columbia have been relatively silent on the issue of the food being served in our public schools. But in the face of an epidemic of childhood obesity, it is time for parents to mobilize and join the struggle not only to make school food better, but to make lunch a teachable moment in which children can learn healthy eating habits that will last them into adulthood.

To that end, Parents for Better D.C. School Food is committed to reaching out to every PTA and other parents organization in the city to raise awareness about the need for a more healthful diet and to support efforts by school officials and local lawmakers to impliment the necessary changes in our school cafeterias. So far, we have 34 members of our Google group, 67 “fans” of our Facebook page, and a blog where we post news about D.C. school food every day, including stunning--though not always entirely appetizing—photographs of school meals.

Therefore, we heartily support the “Healthy Schools Act” and its call for an integrated approach toward child wellness and a sustainable environment. Specifically, we support measures that would incorporate local farm products in school meals to make them more appetizing and nutritious. We support a sustainable, local agriculture. We support increased levels of exercise for all children. We support school gardens and local food initiatives that teach children where their food comes from. We believe that children who are engaged in the ways of growing and preparing foods are more willing to try healthful foods and embrace a healthier lifestyle.

We recognize that this legislation proposes to undo decades of policies that have short-changed school cafeterias and child wellness. That is no small task. But we are ready to do whatever it might take win this battle for our own kids and for the next generation.

My work with the D.C. Farm to School Network and now Parents for Better D.C. School Food is informed by my personal experience. I am the mother of two children attending public school on Capitol Hill. I am also a social worker and spent more than 10 years working with children and families before deciding to stay at home full-time with my family. I am also the granddaughter of a small dairy farmer in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania. I know the importance of providing opportunities for local farmers. And because I have small children in school, I want to see them fed well. As a former social worker, I want all children to be fed well.

What do I mean by “well fed?” First and foremost, that means replacing the steady diet of highly processed foods currently practiced by D.C. schools with whole and minimally processed ingredients, hopefully grown by our own local farmers. It is a sad irony that the foods we know are healthiest—fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains—are also the foods kids like least. It will take a great deal of work—parents, teachers and administrators working together—to turn this around. But programs that involve local farmers, visits to farms, food demonstrations and classes, as proposed in the “Healthy Schools Act” are part of the solution. School gardens and things like after-school cooking classes centered on school gardens also are an invaluable tool for teaching children to appreciate where food comes from and a healthier way of eating. We cannot expect kids to learn these lesson from television, or from eating out of the corner convenience store.

In addition, school gardens can be a tremendous community asset and pull teachers, parents and local residents together. I live across the street from Watkins Elementary School, which has a wonderful school garden program already in place. The garden easily integrates science, art, reading and virtually every other aspect of learning in some form. It also serves to beautify the neighborhood.

I'd also like to speak for a moment specifically about what happens in school cafeterias. Unfortunately, most parents are unaware of the food being served at school except what they might hear second-hand from their children. Therefore, it is imperative that you adopt measures for more transparency in school food service, such as posting the ingredients in school meals in a place where all of us can see them. We are particularly concerned about the appalling level of sugar content of school meals. In addition to the sugar served at breakfast and lunch, treats and candy are routinely given as rewards. My son has come home from school with a bag of cookies he received as a reward more times than I can count. Treats are great. But when they are provided at school, this limits my ability as a parent to offer the occasional treat, such as a piece of daddy's leftover carrot cake. It is high time we limit the amount of sugar served at school.

We know that there already are many people who care about these issues. Teachers are ready and willing to teach about food where they can. Our school (name?) found the money to host its first parent meeting with real food made by a parent and local fresh food brought in for salads, appetizers and dessert. Everyone who attended was amazed and delighted. Parents and children alike asked where we got the apples and pears and salad food because they had never tasted anything so good.

"Those Asian pears are like a party in your mouth" one parent remarked. And so the education begins.

Many children in D.C. eat two meals a day at school all year long, including summer programs. I and other Parents for Better D.C. School Food believe we owe it to our children to feed them properly, just as we ask them to do their best at learning. We should be nourishing the body, the mind and the spirit through food, education and physical activity. These concepts are all addressed in the "Healthy School Act." With this bill, we can begin honoring our children by giving them what they need to be healthy adults.

