



Testimony of

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Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2008-2009 Budgets

D.C. Public Schools

Committee of the Whole

Council of the District of Columbia

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*An initiative of the Food Research and Action Center*

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Chairman Gray and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony here today. My name is Srinidhi Vijaykumar and I am a Nutrition Associate at D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to create a hunger-free community, thereby improving the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

I am here to testify on the importance of the District's school nutrition programs. For cash-strapped families trying to make ends meet – a problem getting worse by the day in this recession – the school meal programs ensure that children have a healthy breakfast, lunch, and often an afterschool snack. Access to these nutrition programs is critical for academic achievement. Decades of research show that healthy, well-nourished children are more prepared to learn, have stronger school performance, and exhibit better behavior.<sup>1</sup>

This past year has seen many positive changes in D.C. Public School Food and Nutrition Services. Chartwells/Thompson has been hired as the new food service management company, offering greater stability and national resources to food services. The collection of school meal applications has also been elevated as a priority issue. The level of free and reduced-price student eligibility, as set by the meal applications, is a key benchmark for federal education funding. Gyimah Chin and Jesus Aguirre in the Chancellor's Office are to be greatly credited for their work on this issue.

In the year ahead, there are three critical areas that DCPS Food and Nutrition Services can address:

The first is to increase access to the School Breakfast Program by offering breakfast in the classroom. Serving breakfast in the classroom makes breakfast convenient and accessible to all, eliminates the structural barriers that prevent children from getting to school 30 minutes early in order to eat, and improves academic achievement. In a study of the Maryland Meals for Achievement Program, for example, schools that promoted access to school breakfast through breakfast in the classroom saw a five-point

increase in the percentage of students who scored at or above the satisfactory level on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program index.

Three DCPS elementary schools have launched the program and seen dramatic increases in participation. J.C. Nalle, for example, has had participation rise from 50 to over 90 percent of the student body. Says Principal Kim Burke: “I used to always have kids asking me, ‘Is it lunch time yet? Is it lunch time yet?’ If you haven’t eaten anything by 9 or 9:30, you can’t think about reading or math. Breakfast really fuels the whole day. This new program, breakfast in the classroom, helps take the hunger variable out of the equation when you’re talking about student learning.”

The 26 DCPS elementary schools and educational centers that serve 90 percent or more students eligible for free and reduced price meals should be targeted to ensure that every child has access to a healthy morning meal.

A second critical priority to improve the infrastructure of the school meal programs is to ensure that data is shared, on a monthly basis, between DCPS and the Income Maintenance Administration. This enables all students in food stamp families to be automatically certified for free meals, alleviating the burden on struggling families to complete applications and ensuring that DCPS receive the full federal reimbursement. With more than 100,000 residents benefiting from food stamps and the numbers rising by the month, this data sharing is increasingly important.

Finally, DCPS should expand access to the DC Free Summer Meals Program, which the community depends upon on to provide meals for children when school is out. Last summer, 60 fewer schools provided meals to the community than the prior year, contributing to a large drop in participation.

Many promising developments have taken place in the past year and we look forward to partnering with DCPS Food and Nutrition Services, Chartwells/Thompson, and the Chancellor's Office to continue to improve school nutrition as a key strategy to promote academic achievement and wellness.

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<sup>i</sup> For a summary of the research, see "Breakfast for Learning." Food Research and Action Center, 2007.  
<http://www.frac.org/pdf/breakfastforlearning.PDF>