

**Testimony of Andrea Northup
Coordinator, DC Farm to School Network**

**Joint Hearing on Bill 18-564, the “Healthy Schools Act of 2009”
March 26th, 2010**

My name is Andrea Northup, and I coordinate the DC Farm to School Network - a broad-based coalition working to get more healthy, local foods into Washington, DC schools, and to reconnect schoolchildren with where their food comes from. I work closely with many of the people this bill will directly impact - teachers, principals, food service directors, food producers, parents and students. I am here to voice the D.C. Farm to School Network’s support for Farm to School in the Healthy Schools Act.

I am not the first to highlight some of the problems this bill is trying to address - Washington, DC has the *third highest* child poverty rate and the *ninth highest* percentage of overweight and obese children in the nation. A stunning 81% of D.C. children are reportedly NOT getting their recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. And we all know that getting kids to eat healthy is not just as easy as serving healthy foods on their plate.

Farm to school programs address these issues by connecting schools with local farms in order to serve healthy foods in school meals and educate kids about where food comes from. The bottom line is that when local foods are served in school cafeterias, and kids feel a connection to them, they eat more servings of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables! It’s been proven in cafeterias nationwide.

Why do kids eat more healthy foods when they’re a part of a farm to school program? Local foods taste delicious because they are picked at the peak of their flavor and nutrient content. Have you tasted a fresh, juicy, tomato picked in September? Compare that to it’s artificially-ripened and well-traveled white mealy counterpart served in February. When kids feel a connection with their food - be it by growing food in a school garden, visiting a farm, or cooking with a chef - they are more likely to appreciate and eat that food.

Since farm to school programs increase fruit and vegetable consumption, they reduce the risk of child childhood obesity and other diet-related diseases, and promote optimal physical health, growth, and intellectual development, energy levels and mental alertness. Local foods are typically grown with fewer harmful chemicals and hormones. Farm to school programs reduce the miles that school food travels, thus reducing pollution and carbon footprints while at the same time supporting our vibrant local food economy.

A new study out this month shows that in many cases, farm to school programs can make smart financial sense for school food service operations once they are in place. Schools serve a higher quality product that kids are excited to eat, and thus see increased satisfaction and participation rates that draw down more federal reimbursements. Plus, seasonal foods can be cheaper, when farmers have a surplus of certain foods that are priced to move. These programs benefit everyone - kids, food services, the environment and the community.

Schools across the country are finding creative ways to incorporate healthy, local, sustainable foods into school meals - in fact, over 2,000 school districts in 43 states have farm to school programs. Large, urban school districts are no exception - some of the most progressive include Chicago, Denver, New York and St. Paul. And right next door, Baltimore City Public Schools serve all-Maryland grown fresh fruits and vegetables year round - and they've seen their produce consumption rates jump and meal participation rates increase.

But Washington, DC is lagging behind the rest of the country. Let's take a look at why this is so, and how the Healthy Schools Act can help.

First, farm to school is not necessarily on the radar of schools and food service providers. They have systems in place to buy foods from large wholesalers and retailers from all over the country, and their curricula revolves solely around standardized testing scores. We strongly feel that City Council must put pressure on schools and food service providers to buy healthy, local, sustainable foods whenever costs are within reasonable variation of conventional food costs.

There are a wide variety of foods available in the mid-Atlantic region from early spring to late winter - apples, broccoli, carrots, beans, sweet corn, melon, onions, squash, peas, potatoes, pears, peaches - the list goes on! In season, these foods cost the same if not less than similar foods from around the country - and they're fresher and taste better. We need to get schools and vendors to develop purchasing systems that take advantage of the local food economy around us, and the encouragement won't cost a dime.

But encouragement is not enough - schools and food service providers NEED financial incentives to serve healthy, local foods and get kids excited about where their food comes from. The most recent data we have on the actual cost of school food is from the 2005/2006 school year, which is that schools spend on average \$1.09 per meal on food. That number comes from subtracting all of the overhead costs (labor, supplies, utensils, lights in the cafeteria, etc.) from the federal school meal reimbursement (*\$2.70 for a "free" meal for which over 70% of D.C. students qualify*). Food and labor costs have gone up since then. That's not much wiggle room.

Serving local, sustainably grown foods in school meals can be more expensive than conventional foods if there is not a system in place to purchase, process, store and distribute those foods. I've talked with MANY school food service providers about this issue. They agree that the best possible incentive would be for schools to **submit receipts each month** for the purchase of unprocessed, healthy, local foods used in school meals - perhaps from a list of qualifying foods like Connecticut. Each month the Office of the State Superintendent of Education would give schools a 10% rebate on those purchases along with their monthly reimbursements. This way the incentive would be tied directly to local food purchasing, and it wouldn't be too much of an administrative burden.

If 100% of schools participated and purchased 10% local products in the 2010/2011 school year (an *incredibly* high estimate) - the incentive would cost around \$30,000. That is a SMALL price to pay to incentivize healthy, local foods that kids will actually eat.

In order to really kick-start farm to school programs in the District, the Council should make good on its offer to provide a central production kitchen for public and public charter schools. Cities across the country have developed similar facilities that provide jobs, stimulate economies, and take advantage of scale while providing schools with a central receiving, storage, processing and transportation “node” for healthy, local foods.

Critical to this entire process is that the Healthy Schools Act require schools and food service providers to disclose where the food they serve comes from and how it is grown. Forcing schools to do this will get them to think about where their food comes from, whereas right now many haven't a clue. Without this baseline reporting, we can't hold schools accountable and can't expect them to change.

And none of this will be possible unless government agencies are required to collaborate with schools, community organizations and the private sector to promote farm to school programs happen in the **cafeteria**, and connect them with **classroom** education and **community** efforts. We call for a mandatory Farm to School promotional week each year and regular education and promotion of the farm to school program to students and staff - this is CRUCIAL. We have the support from the bottom up - we just need it from the top down.

Most kids (especially those at risk of hunger) get their main meals each day at school, but school meals do more than just deliver the nutrients kids need to thrive and learn. They form eating habits that persist later in life, and spread to families and communities. If current obesity trends continue, **we will spend about \$933 per adult in the District of Columbia on obesity related health care in 2018**, or about \$341 million total. We can't afford not to tackle the issue of obesity. As the First Lady has so eloquently pointed out, it starts with what we feed our children in schools.

The DC Farm to School Network represent hundreds of partners, many of whom either submitted testimony or testified today, who care about the health of the District's schoolchildren, our community, the environment and our local food economy. I have had the pleasure of working with teachers, students, food service providers, farmers, processors, private and non-profit sector leaders, chefs, educators and urban gardeners. We see the value in farm to school programs for D.C. kids, our environment, and our community. We promise to do everything we possibly can to make farm to school happen here in the nation's capital, and we hope the Council will, too.

My numbers for estimated cost of healthy, local food 10% rebate:

Total meals served 2009 - all schools on NSLP (USDA)	7,462,764 meals
Average daily participation rate 2009 - all schools on NSLP (USDA)	44,579 students
Cost of fruits/veggies per meal (average of about 20 D.C. schools)	\$0.50
Percentage Local (estimate)	10%
10% Subsidy	\$37,313.82

D.C. child obesity rate

Childhood Obesity Action Network. State Obesity Profiles, 2009. Data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health. www.nschdata.org

Low-income children in D.C.

National Center for Children in Poverty - <http://www.nccp.org> - State data were calculated from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (the March supplement) of the Current Population Survey from 2007, 2008, and 2009. Children under 18 are defined as low-income if the family income is less than twice the federal poverty threshold.

Cost of school meals

School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study - II by USDA's Food and Nutrition Services - April 2008, www.fns.usda.gov/ORA/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/MealCostStudy.pdf

Farm to School

Joshi A, Azuma AM. Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations, 2009 available online at departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/publications/BF%20full%20report.pdf

"Farm-to-School Programs: Perspectives of School Food Service Professionals" by Betty T. Izumi, PhD, MPH, RD; Katherine Alaimo, PhD; Michael W. Hamm, PhD. It appears in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, Volume 42, Issue 2, (March/April 2010).