

Testimony of

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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**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Ed Bruske. Let me briefly tell you who I am.

I am the parent of a 10-year-old student at H.D. Cooke Elementary School. I am a food writer, former Washington Post reporter and author of The Slow Cook blog, where my observations after spending a week behind the food lines as an observer at H.D. Cooke recently appeared as a six-part series titled, Tales from D.C. School Kitchen. I am also a certified master gardener and co-founder of D.C. Urban Gardeners. I grow much of the food our family eats in the kitchen garden that used to be our front lawn in Columbia Heights NW. I am an avid home composter and lecturer on the subject of composting. I built a 1,600-square-foot edible garden at the charter school my daughter formerly attended, and worked with the children there in food gardening and cooking activities. I teach weekly cooking and “food appreciation” classes in the after-school program at Georgetown Day School. I sit on the advisory board of the year-old D.C. Farm to School Network. Recently I helped organize an advocacy group called Parents for Better D.C. School Food.

Perhaps you now understand why I think Councilmember Cheh had me in mind when she drafted the “Healthy Schools Act.”

You won't be surprised to hear that I heartily endorse most of what is contained in this legislation. This bill represents a landmark effort to bring student health and well-being into proper alignment with the health and well-being of our community, our environment, and even with the fate of our planet. This integrated approach to children's health and environmental sustainability is long overdue and cannot be delayed. At long last, we need to start sending children the right messages about healthful eating, as well as responsible environmental stewardship. Schools can and should take the lead. It won't be easy.

For several decades now, corporate food interests as well as their allies in Congress and the federal government have been conducting what you might call a giant dietary experiment on the American people. It is a diet composed of cheap, industrially-processed foods designed not for people's health but for maximum profits. This is a diet cheap on the front end, but ruinously expensive in terms of healthcare costs on the back end. It is loaded with unhealthful fats, salt, refined grains and sugar at levels previously unknown in the entire 2 million years of human evolution. And the results have become glaringly obvious: A generation of children inordinately overweight or obese, suffering unprecedented levels of metabolic disorders such as insulin resistance and diabetes, a generation that is on track to be the first with a life span shorter than its parents.

I wanted to spend time in the kitchen at my daughter's school because I had heard that the food provider for D.C. Public Schools, Chartwells, had ditched pre-packaged warm-up meals made in a factory and sealed in plastic in favor of something it called "fresh cooked." Imagine my surprise when I saw what "fresh cooked" actually meant: some of the worst our industrialized food system has to offer--extruded meats mixed with soy protein and doused with chemicals, highly processed foods that do not occur in nature, cooked in factories hundreds of miles away and shipped frozen to District of Columbia where they can be easily reheated and served to children.

The food I witnessed represents the culmination of unfortunate trends that have been converging in school cafeterias for decades, a perfect storm, if you will, of private industry intervention, cheap, unskilled labor, and underfunded government policies run amok. A classic example: flavorless scrambled eggs made not on a stove, but in a factory 1,100 miles away in Minnesota with no less than 10 industrial ingredients: soybean oil, xanthan gum, artificial butter flavor, lipolized butter oil, medium chain triglycerides. The pre-cooked eggs, looking something like a pale yellow version of cottage cheese, arrive frozen, then are simply warmed in a steamer before being tossed with shredded, processed cheese. Amazingly, the egg salad served at H.D. Cooked is made with pre-boiled eggs, already diced and frozen.

Are these really the lessons we want to teach our kids about food? Do we really think that feeding this kind of food to children day after day has no effect on their health or academic performance? In fact, we are perilously close to losing our collective memory of what constitutes real, wholesome food.

The “Healthy Schools” bill you have before you addresses many of the issues of poor quality school food with a vision of school gardening and locally grown farm products. Having used just such an approach with children in the past, I know it works. I know how eagerly kids will plant and harvest vegetables, fight for a turn to wash lettuce and spin it dry, jump at a chance to handle a vegetable peeler or a box grater. Children will eagerly eat their vegetables and all sorts of healthful foods if given a chance to learn about them in a personal way. Education about healthful foods is key to getting kids to eat more healthfully.

But something even worse than all the processed, pre-cooked foods in D.C. school meals leapt out at me during my week at H.D. Cooke, and that’s all the sugar. Children are routinely doused with sugar, at breakfast and at lunch. Since the 1970s, we in the U.S. have been waging a war against fat. More than 30 years later, we are fatter than ever. It turns out that while we were barring fat at the front door, sugar was pouring in through the back door. Federal

regulations in the subsidized meal program set a limit—30 percent of calories—for the fat school food can contain. But there is no such limit on sugar. Similarly, the “Healthy Schools Act” has a hole in it big enough to drive a high-fructose corn syrup tanker through: No limit on sugar.

What food providers cannot serve as fat, they serve as sugar to meet minimum calorie requirements. Thus, our kids are being stuffed with nutritionally worthless sugar on a daily basis. It’s not just the Pop Tarts and Giant Goldfish Grahams and Apple Jacks cereal and Crunchmania Cinnamon Bun cookies being served in public school cafeterias. We’re also talking about concentrated fruit juices with the same sugar content as Coca-Cola, and flavored milks that rival Mountain Dew.

One morning recently I stopped by H.D. Cooke and saw kids eating a breakfast of those Kellogg’s Crunchmania cookies, grape juice and chocolate- or strawberry-flavored milk. In fact, some kids were dipping the sugar-glazed cookies in their cartons of chocolate milk. I made a calculation and found that in that single, highly processed breakfast, kids were consuming 13 teaspoons of sugar. And that’s before their school day had even begun. Is it any wonder teachers complain of kids being out of control after they eat?

Some authorities, such as Ann Cooper, the “renegade lunch lady” known for introducing freshly cooked food in the schools of Berkeley, California, and now Boulder, Colorado, recognize that sugar is not just a problem of empty calories. Sugar and refined carbohydrates trigger insulin, a powerful hormone that is also responsible for fat storage in the body. More and more medical researchers are recognizing that it’s not just the number of calories we consume, but the type of calories that can determine our health. Too many refined grains, starchy potatoes, sugar and other cheap carbohydrates may be great for cash-strapped school budgets and food industry profits, but they are not good for kids’ health.

The good news is, you don’t have to wait for D.C. Public Schools to access locally grown farm products to make a dramatic difference in the quality of school food. You can make a huge difference by simply limiting the amount of sugar being served. It is high time that nutrition standards place a limit on the amount of sugar in school meals, just as they do on fat. Ann Cooper and other school food authorities have eliminated flavored milk from their menus. You can do the same, or at least limit flavored milk to one day a week. You can replace sugary fruit juices with whole fruits, which not only contain less sugar, but also deliver fiber and valuable micro-nutrients.

Beyond that, we should have no illusions that simply upgrading nutritional requirements in school food will solve the problem. Processed foods can be loaded with nutrients and still come out of the kitchen unpalatable. Food service in D.C. Public Schools currently is a money-driven program. It needs to be a food-driven program. For positive changes to truly succeed, schools and kitchen staff need to be trained, properly equipped and committed to the idea of serving fresh, whole food to children on a daily basis.

Kids are too young to make informed choices about the foods they eat. As adults—as administrators, teachers, legislators, parents—we need to step up and make decisions about what is best for our children. The “Healthy Schools Act” is an excellent place to start.