

**Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook, Director
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**At the Hearing on the “The Implementation of the
Healthy Schools Act, D.C. Law 18-209”**

**Before the Committee on Government Operations
and the Environment of District of Columbia**

December 9, 2010

D.C. Hunger Solutions congratulates the D.C Council, especially Council Chairman Gray and Councilmember Cheh, for fully restoring funding for the Healthy Schools Act. Hailed as a school wellness model for the nation, the Healthy Schools Act sets high standards for school nutrition, access to school meals, physical and health education, and more. Since its implementation began in late August 2010, we have already begun to see important changes that are improving children’s health and nutrition.

Two of the Act’s provisions—providing free breakfast for all students and incorporating breakfast into the school day—are already connecting thousands more District children to school breakfast. This is welcome news to all families, especially those families struggling with poverty, hunger, and unemployment.

Thanks to the implementation of the Healthy Schools Act, an additional 5,900 children ate school breakfast each day in September 2010 compared with September 2009 – an increase of 29 percent.

Type of Meal	September 2009 Average Daily Participation	September 2010 Average Daily Participation	Increase
Breakfast Average Daily Participation	20,500	26,400	29% ¹

While this data is impressive, it is important to note that participation in breakfast should grow even more in the upcoming months as more schools faithfully implement the breakfast components of the Act, now that funding is secure. (In August 2010 many schools had not begun offering breakfast for free or through innovative service models. Schools did not receive

¹ Data provided by Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Wellness and Nutrition Services, on December 2010.

written confirmation from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) until the beginning of October that Healthy Schools Act funding was secure and thus, were hesitant to begin implementation without funding assurances.)

In the D.C. Public Schools that are implementing breakfast in the classroom, 74 percent of all students are benefitting from school breakfast. Last year, only 49 percent of students at these schools ate school breakfast. These increases not only benefit children's health and academic performance, but also mean that hundreds of thousands of additional federal dollars are flowing into the District to feed children and in some cases, create new jobs.

D.C. Hunger Solutions has been working to support D.C. public and public charter schools and OSSE in implementing the key anti-hunger and nutrition components of the Act by:

- Launching the Healthy Schools Act website—at: www.dchealthyschools.org— with support from other groups,
- Creating and disseminating outreach materials on breakfast including a “A Guide for D.C. Public Charter Schools to Comply with the Healthy Schools Act Breakfast Requirements,”
- Partnering with the D.C. Farm to School Network on the development of a Healthy Schools Act brochure that overviews the nutrition components of the Act and available funding, and
- Visiting 10 DCPS and 4 public charter schools this fall to observe breakfast and speak with principals, teachers, students, custodians, and parents.

Based on our visits, reactions to Breakfast in the Classroom are overwhelmingly positive.

Note: The comments and observations below come from D.C. Hunger Solutions' own visits to schools and conversations with principals, teachers, students, parents, and other members of the school communities. Visits to the DCPS schools were conducted together with DCPS Food and Nutrition Services staff.

Most principals have been strongly supportive of Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) – even though several have confessed that they were initially skeptical. Comments and observations from principals have included:

- Families are hungry. More families are without jobs and need help now more than ever. Breakfast in the classroom is helping feed children and teach them about nutrition. Adding fresh fruits to breakfast is helping children have healthier diets. (Burrville, Miner)
- Breakfast provides a calmer, better learning environment. Behavior problems have gone way down, and BIC provides more opportunities for positive behavior, so students are earning more rewards for good behavior. (Miner)
- Some schools have established groups of student volunteers (often called the Breakfast Bunch or something similar) who deliver meals to the classrooms each morning. Typically, to become Breakfast Bunch volunteers, students must complete an application. Those who are accepted are rewarded with a special t-shirt or smock to wear, and the

students complete a “contract” accepting the responsibility and the honor of this leadership role. Student volunteers helping deliver breakfast “are learning about serving other people and responsibility.” (Amidon, Aiton, River Terrace, others)

- Breakfast in the classroom is leading to increased attendance, and allowing more children to eat breakfast. (Amidon)
- I am a convert to breakfast in the classroom. At first I was skeptical about whether it could work at our school. But then I visited Garfield Elementary, a school with three times as many students as ours and lots of stairs, met with the principal and saw Garfield’s model in action. From that point on, I was sold on the importance of breakfast in the classroom. We are now implementing it without any problems. (River Terrace.)

Many teachers and school counselors champion Breakfast in the Classroom as well. They have told us:

- Breakfast in the Classroom is a “whole child approach.” (Smothers)
- BIC can be used as a learning experience for the students, or a chance to share instruction that doesn’t otherwise fit into the day. (Houston, Miner)
- Breakfast can create a calm “family” environment in the classroom. For example, one classroom we visited uses breakfast time as “community time” for morning announcements, and buddy reading. Students in this class, which used to be the most disruptive in the school, now are calm, know the routine and have made a big turn-around. (Miner)
- Breakfast allows time for children to settle down, get focused, and prepare for the day. This change has improved behavior as well. (Miner)
- More children are participating in breakfast, which means there is less waste. A counselor also reported that meals are better and healthier this year. At first the students’ didn’t like the new foods, but have gotten used to them and like the meals. Part of the secret is modeling healthy eating: the counselor shared that once his students saw him try broccoli and like it, they tried it, too – and liked it! (Burroughs, Aiton, Miner)
- Teachers are aware of the need for the program – many children would not eat at home. And children who come to school hungry “can’t do anything.” (Burroughs, Arts & Technology, Miner, Aiton)
- Holding breakfast in the classroom is easy and runs smoothly when students know the routine. (Francis-Stevens)
- There has been a reduction of incidents in the cafeteria. When all students were in the cafeteria for breakfast, the environment was noisy and chaotic, and there even were fights between older and young students. (Aiton)

Students are saying:

- Breakfast in the Classroom is better than in the cafeteria – there are no lines, no hassle, and it’s a quieter environment to eat. (Houston, Miner, Neval Thomas)
- They like the food and the variety of food. (Miner)
- They like a particular classroom’s program: after finishing breakfast, they can read silently at their desks. In this classroom, students who are not eating breakfast read the whole time. (Miner)

Even parents are excited about Breakfast in the Classroom:

- A PTA president is the breakfast volunteer who delivers the breakfast to each classroom. She will do whatever it takes to make the school a better place and will support programs at the school that are good for the children. As a result, she likes BIC. (Smothers)
- “Thank you for the Healthy Schools Act. It has already shown our students that eating healthy can be fun and taste good. It has improved attendance and student participation in class. Our students enjoy eating together in class with their teachers, and they enjoy the fresh fruit and vegetables in class as well.” (Browne EC)

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Next I will share a few photos of Breakfast in the Classroom programs. (Hard copies of the photos, with captions, are attached to my testimony.)

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Finally, although many Breakfast in the Classroom programs are running very smoothly – and driving important increases in breakfast participation –as with any new program, especially a program that is being implemented across the city in multiple schools with multiple stakeholders, there are areas for improvement. D.C. Hunger Solutions looks forward to continuing to work with OSSE and D.C. Public Schools, as well with the D.C. Council and the new Mayor, to help the programs succeed.

Specifically, we recommend the following next steps in implementation of the school breakfast requirements of the Healthy Schools Act:

- OSSE, DCPS, and charter school leaders should provide additional training on managing Breakfast in the Classroom and other alternative breakfast service models for principals, teachers, and food service staff.
 - Training should focus on managing the logistics of BIC programs, but also should stress the many benefits of increasing breakfast participation. Buy-in and excitement among principals and food service personnel are essential to successful BIC programs.
 - Teachers need more training as well, for example, on how to count participation accurately. OSSE and DCPS should provide principals with resources for training teachers. Teachers, too, must buy into BIC and have the opportunity to take pride in the benefits they are providing their students.
 - Schools also need equipment (such as insulated bags and extra trash cans) for carrying out Breakfast in the Classroom and other alternative service models successfully. DCPS is monitoring schools to assess their needs; OSSE and charter school leaders should do the same for charter schools.
- OSSE should issue for DCPS and charter schools regulations on implementing Breakfast in the Classroom and other alternative service models. For instance, schools need a consistent definition of “breakfast in the classroom” and consistent guidelines on how the program should operate (it is important, though, to allow some flexibility so that schools can fit the program into their individual routines just so schools can meet breakfast participation goals). Additionally, we recognize that there are several cases where schools have achieved exceptionally high school breakfast participation rates even

without BIC or another alternative model; we are working with OSSE to determine the participation threshold at which those schools could be exempt from BIC requirements.

- OSSE (in partnership with DCPS and charter school leaders) should carry out a thorough evaluation of the nutrition components of the Healthy Schools Act. Some important areas that will inform the future of the Healthy Schools Act include: long-term food security, nutrition, and health outcomes.
- Last, the District should better promote the Healthy Schools Act and its enormous potential to improve children's long-term health, including: providing consistent information to parents, principals and teachers; and getting parents and other community members engaged in helping implement it.

Finally, D.C. Hunger Solutions looks forward to supporting the success of the breakfast program and the other anti-hunger provisions of the Act by:

- Managing the Healthy Schools website (www.dchealthyschools.org) and sharing best practices;
- Visiting more schools to observe the breakfast program;
- Creating outreach materials for schools to better inform families of the importance of breakfast and healthy eating; and
- Hosting a training workshop in February, in partnership with the D.C. Farm to School Network and OSSE.

Thank you again for your support of our children's nutrition, health, and well-being.

Respectfully submitted,

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