



D.C. Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger in the nation's capital

Written Testimony of

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Healthy Schools Act of 2009 Hearing

Council of the District of Columbia

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**Council Chambers
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
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Thank you for this exciting opportunity to submit written comments, in lieu of testifying, regarding the Healthy Schools Act, that if passed, would shine a national spotlight on the District's efforts to improve the health, nutrition, and physical activity of our students and reduce the alarming rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity.

I am Alex Ashbrook, Director of D.C Hunger Solutions. D.C. Hunger Solutions applauds the Act's provisions to improve the nutrition and appeal of school meals and to create city-wide wellness standards that will ensure our children get the food, exercise, and information they need to thrive. We applaud the co-sponsors of the Act, Councilmember Cheh and Council Chairman Gray for their leadership and resolve to improve the lives of our children.

Many will be testifying on how the Act will improve school meals and competitive foods, which D.C. Hunger Solutions supports, but my job here today is to tout the Act's provisions that focus on access to school meals. With the District's growing childhood hunger, fueled by a record December unemployment rate of 12.1 percent and underscored by a recent report by the Food Research and Action Center that finds a shocking 40 percent of all households with children in the District experiencing food hardship—the highest rate – of any state, this Act's provisions that ensure access to school meals must be supported. Simply put: if we do not remove the obstacles that prevent children from eating school meals, any nutrition improvements will be for naught—obstacles like schools serving breakfast before the school day actually begins; children feeling a stigma that school meals are just for poor kids; or children needing to pay a co-payment for breakfast and lunch that their families cannot afford.

Fortunately, this Act does address the importance of access to school meals and therefore should garner national attention as a smart, cost-effective intervention to help reduce hunger, promote health, and support low-income families. Increasing participation in school meals not only reduces childhood hunger, but also improves children’s diets.¹ Research indicates that school meal participants are less likely to consume “competitive foods” at school, less likely to have nutrient inadequacies, and more likely to consume fruit, vegetables, and milk at breakfast and lunch.² Indeed, subsidized meals at school are beneficial for children’s weight status and may be the most effective tool to use in combating obesity in poor children.³

The following three provisions of the Act – found at Title II—School Nutrition – are of paramount importance to ensuring student access:

- 1) **Sec. 203(a): Public schools and public charter schools shall offer free universal breakfast to all students:** In a city where more than 70 percent of children attending District public and charter schools qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, school breakfast is critical to reducing the impact of food insecurity and hunger. Breakfast helps children learn, improves attendance, and reduces behavior problems and tardiness. Children who eat breakfast at school – closer to test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home. Eating breakfast at school results in fewer visits to the school nurse, improves children’s diets, and helps build healthy habits. And, children who start the day with breakfast are less likely to be obese.

Free breakfast will support families living on very tight budgets who cannot afford to provide good breakfasts at home every day nor the money to buy them at school. Regardless of income, school breakfast is beneficial: families today live busy lives that often make it difficult to sit down long enough in the morning to eat a nutritious breakfast and sometimes children are not physically capable of eating breakfast at home when they first wake up.

This Act will help ensure that all schools offer breakfast and that students feel comfortable accessing it by making it free. When breakfast is not free for all, there is a perception among students that only poor students will eat it. Recognizing the importance of breakfast and the impact of this stigma in discouraging students from accessing breakfast, in October of 2005, D.C. Public Schools began serving breakfast free to all students. This Act would require that charter schools follow-suit. By adopting universal free breakfast, this Act would safeguard children’s access to the most important meal of the day and highlight to other cities and states that the District recognizes access to school breakfast should not just be guaranteed on testing days.

¹See FRAC Issue Brief, “How Improving Federal Nutrition Program Access and Quality Work Together to Reduce Hunger and Promote Healthy Eating” at: http://www.frac.org/pdf/CNR01_qualityandaccess.pdf.

² *Id.* at p. 2

³ Kimbro & Rigby, 2010.

(Attachment A: FRAC's School Breakfast in America's Big Cities (December 2009))

- 2) **Sec. 203 (b): Public elementary schools with a free and reduced-price meal rate that exceeds 40 percent shall offer breakfast in the classroom each day. Public middle and high schools with a free and reduced-price meal rate that exceeds 40% shall offer alternative serving models, such as breakfast in the classroom, grab and go carts, or other innovative models each day to increase breakfast participation:** Making breakfast free for all students is a critical step in helping children access this meal. But to truly make breakfast accessible, schools need to offer breakfast at a time when all students can actually eat the meal. Most schools in the District offer breakfast before the start of the official school day.

The problems of the standard breakfast model in assuring access are evident from the District's breakfast participation rates. During the 2008-2009 school year, 15,876 low-income children in Washington, D.C. participated in the national School Breakfast Program (47 low-income children breakfast for every 100 that received lunch) according to the Food Research and Action Center's [School Breakfast Scorecard](http://www.frac.org/pdf/breakfast09.pdf) (at: <http://www.frac.org/pdf/breakfast09.pdf>).

If participation in D.C. rose to 70 low-income children eating federally-funded school breakfast for every 100 low-income children eating lunch, more than 7,700 additional low-income children would start the day with a healthy breakfast and the state would gain an additional \$1.78 million in federal funding. Based on initial data for school year 2009-2010, more children this school year more are participating in school breakfast but even so too many children are not accessing this meal. A host of reasons—long commutes, bus schedules, a desire to play on the playground before school starts, cafeterias that cannot safely accommodate the entire student body-- conspires to prevent children from accessing breakfast when it is served before the official school day begins and children must get to school 30 minutes earlier than the start of the school day to eat.

By implementing innovative breakfast serving models—like serving breakfast in the classroom, using grab and go carts, or keeping the cafeteria open -- that have proven highly successful in other jurisdictions, District schools could readily connect more children to the most important meal of the day. By adopting breakfast in the classroom at all elementary schools in Newark, New Jersey, the school district now leads the nation in with 95.7 percent of low-income children participating in breakfast. According to the Food and Nutrition Service Director of the Newark District Schools, this District-wide breakfast in the classroom program breaks-even using its federal funding.

(Attachment B: Case Studies Universal Breakfast in the Classroom.)

- 3) **Sec. 203(c): Public schools and public charter schools shall not charge students who qualify for reduced-price meals (i.e., the elimination of the reduced-price co-pay):** Children residing in households with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level must pay a co-payment for school meals. ⁴ D.C. Public Schools charge 20 cents and charter schools charge up to 40 cents. To put this in context, this means that a family with two children that grosses between \$23,800 and \$33,900 must pay \$180 to \$360 over the course of a school year to pay for school lunch. This may not seem like a lot but for low-income families, struggling with fixed costs for food, rent, utilities, transportation, and child care, where every penny counts, these dollars add up and may not be available consistently over the course of the year. And when schools begin to charge interests on student accounts or deny the regular school meal – instead substituting a cheese sandwich – to children’s whose account maintains a balance, this co-payment can constitute a real hardship.

These three access provisions of the Act will help struggling families get the nutrition their children need to fuel their bodies so they can stay healthy and focus on their learning.

A question on every one’s mind is: *“How will we pay for this Act?”* I encourage a reframing of the question that asks, “How can we not afford to address the alarming increases in overweight children and Type 2 Diabetes that are putting our children at risk of dying younger than their parents? How can we not do everything possible to connect children to school meals when 40 percent of all households with children are experiencing food hardship?”

The good news is that the costs of adopting the three access provisions will be minimal because of the following principles:

⁴ The following charts show the maximum monthly household income student’s families can receive to qualify for free or reduced-price meals in the 2009-2010 school year.

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for Free Meals (130% of Poverty)
1	\$1,174
2	\$1,579
3	\$1,984
4	\$2,289
5	\$2,794
6	\$3,200
7	\$3,605
8	\$4,010

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for Reduced Price Meals (185% of Poverty)
1	\$1,670
2	\$2,247
3	\$2,823
4	\$3,400
5	\$3,976
6	\$4,553
7	\$5,130
8	\$5,706

- 1) **The National School Lunch Program provides a steady stream of federal funding for school meals through a three-tiered reimbursement system dependent on whether a child qualifies for free, reduced-price or paid meals.** This money is entitlement funding so there is no cap on the number of students who can participate in school meals.

The following chart provides an overview of the federal meal funding available to schools based on whether a student qualifies for free, reduced-price, or paid meals.

Type of Reimbursement Rate	School Breakfast	School Lunch
Free	\$1.46 (\$1.74)	\$2.68 (\$2.70)
Reduced-Price	\$1.16 (\$1.44)	\$2.28 (\$2.30)
Paid	\$0.26 (\$0.26)	\$0.25 (\$0.27)

The rates in the chart above are for school year 2009-2010. The numbers in the parenthesis are the rates that schools receive if they have a high-need level. Schools that have a 60 percent or higher F/RP participation for lunch and a 40 percent or higher F/RP participation in breakfast receive the higher rate. The National School Lunch Program reimbursement rates are adjusted annually. For a listing of rates, visit:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/naps/NAPs.htm>

- 2) **Since more than 70 percent of the approximate 70,000 students attending D.C. Public and Charter Schools qualify for free or reduced-price meals, schools can benefit financially by increasing participation since most gains in participation will capture the higher federal reimbursements from children who qualify for free and reduced-price meals.** Even if expanded participation draws in more paid children, the costs of providing these meals will be mitigated by the increases in participation among low-income children — the more children that participate, the more reimbursements schools will draw down. Schools can also benefit from economies of scale in terms of the costs of producing each additional school meal.
- 3) **Free and reduced-price students are actually subsidizing the costs of meals for paid students in most D.C. schools, so one available option to help defray the small costs of eliminating the reduced-priced co-pay is to charge paid students slightly more.** In school year 2008-2009, city-wide approximately 6,300 children qualified for reduced-price meals at DCPS and charter schools.

The following chart illustrates how the school lunch reimbursement structure at DCPS does not recoup as much for students who pay full price compared with students who eat free or pay the reduced-price co-pay.

Type of Reimbursement Rate	TOTAL money received by DCPS for School Lunch (federal reimbursements + student co-payments)	Federal Reimbursement for School Lunch DCPS	Cost paid by students at DCPS
Free	\$2.70	\$2.70	0
Reduced-Price	\$2.50	\$2.30	20 cents
Paid	\$1.52 elementary \$1.77 secondary	\$0.27	1.25 elementary \$1.50 secondary

For school year 2009-2010, approximately 2,768 students at DCPS qualified for reduced-price meals. Assuming that these children ate school lunch 180 days last year and paid a co-pay of 20 cents (the DCPS co-pay), the school system would have recouped about \$99,648 for these lunches plus the federal reimbursement for reduced-price meals of \$1.15 million (2,768 x 180 x \$2.30). If DCPS were to charge its 13,032 paying students just 5 cents more for school lunch, the schools would bring-in \$117,288— more than enough to off-set the costs of eliminating the reduced-price co-pay. By raising the price 5 cents for students who qualify for paid meals, DCPS would be charging elementary \$1.30 for lunch and high school students \$1.55 for lunch, well below the paid rates of Prince George’s County (Elementary Lunch: \$2.00; Secondary Lunch: \$2.25). Eliminating the co-payment of 20 cents would have a big impact on low-income families – both by increasing their children’s access to school meals and by reducing their monthly budgets—whereas increasing the paid price by 5 cents for DCPS students would not be felt by higher-income families.

Note: This calculation is just for DCPS. Because charter schools charge a range of fees for reduced-price and paid students who eat lunch, individualized data from each charter school would need to be analyzed to determine how much paid student meals would have to increase to eliminate the reduced-price co-pay. Even so, the basic principle applies.

- 4) **D.C. Public Schools have already adopted important policies to improve access** – including free universal breakfast and serving lunch for free to all students at 77 schools through Provision 2—so there would be no costs for DCPS associated with the Act’s requirement to offer free universal breakfast. Eliminating the reduced-price co-pay would only impact a few hundred students at the approximate 50 DCPS schools that have not already eliminated it. This Act is key to institutionalizing these policies and spurring charter schools to follow suit.
- 5) **The upcoming Congressional reauthorization of the child nutrition programs may include more funding for access to school meals** as well as cost saving measures related to the administration of school meals.

As the Director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, I applaud the Act's provisions to enhance the food quality offered at schools that align with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Healthier US Schools Challenge Program. These meal improvements will help draw in more students. In conclusion, we must ensure that all children have ready access to school meals without subjecting them to stigma that school meals are just for poor children, without serving breakfast before the school day actually begins, and by improving the quality and appeal of meals to safeguard our children's health.

Respectfully submitted,

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