

Testimony of
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Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2009-2010 Budget
Office of the State Superintendent of Education
Committee of the Whole
Council of the District of Columbia
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Chairman Gray and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today about child nutrition programs in the District. My name is Kristin Roberts 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 and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

The federally-funded child nutrition programs – school breakfast and lunch, summer meals, afterschool snacks and suppers, and child care food -- administered by OSSE's Wellness and Nutrition Services Department are critical nutrition and economic supports for children and families. Today I have good news to report: thanks to the work of OSSE and its partners, participation in the school feeding programs has increased substantially over the last school year.

The reason for these commendable increases is that these nutrition programs, while critical for low-income children in good times, are *essential* in bad times. As entitlements, these programs are designed to respond to increases in need, and in the

District they are responding to the current economic recession. OSSE is doing a very good job of working with the schools to connect children – and their families – to the benefits of these programs.

The bad news, however, is that hunger is on the rise, and children are arriving at school and other programs hungry. According to a recent report out of the Food Research and Action Center, over the 2008-2009 period a shocking 40.6 percent of households with children said that they had difficulty affording enough food, compared to just 12.5 percent of households without children.

So, despite the good news that the nutrition programs are working well to meet children's needs, there are still gaps in access to the programs. That means there is more work to do to ensure that every child in the District has consistent access to adequate, healthy food – we can push the programs to serve more children and simultaneously work to improve program quality. Two programs in particular have room for growth: the School Breakfast Program and the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program.

The District most needs to invest in the School Breakfast Program. When children eat school breakfast, they are better able to focus, have higher test scores, have better health, and are at lower risk of obesity. Thus far in school year 2009-2010, only half of the low-income District students who ate school lunch every day also eat school breakfast.

If D.C. were able to establish breakfast programs that reached 70 of every 100 low-income children already eating free lunch, a goal which has been reached by a number of urban school districts, 6,000 more District low-income children would start the day with a healthy breakfast, and D.C. would gain an additional \$1.4 million in federal funding.

To reach that threshold, the District can:

- Aggressively promote school breakfast: Currently, breakfast is served free for all students at D.C. Public Schools, but still, some families don't know about the free meals. We also can work with charter schools to make sure they serve breakfast.
- Encourage schools to serve breakfast after the school day begins. Many District school children miss school breakfast because in most District schools it is served before the official start of the school day. To bring school breakfast to more children, the city can establish "breakfast in the classroom" programs and other innovative school breakfast models that have been proven effective in dramatically increasing breakfast participation.
- We encourage the Council to support the free breakfast for all and the breakfast access (e.g., supporting breakfast in the classroom, grab and go carts, and other alternative service models) provisions of the Healthy Schools Act – these represent a critical steps that will ensure access to school breakfast and reduce hunger. Adoption of these provisions would make the District a recognized national leader in connecting its children to the most important meal of the day.

The District also needs to invest in the Free Summer Meals Program – given the rising need, we need to be sure that children can access meals this coming summer when students lose access to school meals.

The District has had a stellar summer feeding program in recent years. In the last two years, though, average daily participation has been dropping a bit – which is troubling, considering the increased need. In 2007, the program served 29,036 children. But average daily participation dropped during the last two summers – to 26,198 in 2008 and to 25,174 in 2009.¹

Despite its past success, we can't assume the Free Summer Meals Program will continue to be successful without continued efforts to strengthen and promote it. We

¹ 2009 figure is an initial calculation by the Food Research and Action Center.

need to plan for sufficient summer meal sites throughout the city that can meet the growing need for free summer meals.

Several years ago, the city had funds to promote the program through a media campaign. In lieu of funding for advertising, we must find creative strategies to promote the program.

Fortunately, OSSE already is beginning outreach to get sites enrolled in the program. But this work is not OSSE's alone – community groups, advocates, schools, parks, and others can work together to identify and recruit schools and housing sites to participate and remain open in the summer to ensure that children have access to food near their homes.

Together we can make sure that all children in the District have access to nutritious meals every day, year-round.

Respectfully submitted,

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