

STATEMENT
OF
TERESA NECE
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Chairman Harkin and Members of the Committee, I am Teresa Nece, Food and Nutrition Director, Des Moines Public Schools, Des Moines, Iowa. I am pleased to be here today representing my school district, other Iowa schools as well as all schools across the nation. The health and well being of America's children is very important to our future. Mr. Chairman, you and each committee member are to be commended for spending your time working on behalf of our nation's children. My comments today will be from the school food service director perspective, focused on the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program currently operating in 14 states and on 3 Indian Tribal Organizations, representing 375 schools. As a point of reference, on average children eat less than half of the daily amount of fruits and vegetables recommended by the 2005 US Dietary Guidelines.

Des Moines has been fortunate to have had 4 of our 59 schools participate in the fruit and vegetable program at some time during the past five years. This program is very popular among our students, parents, teachers and food service staff. The benefits of the program include increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables by students, an improved school food environment and a positive impact on the family. Harding Middle School and King Elementary School have been participants for the past five years with approximately 900 students reaping the benefits of this program daily. The fruit and vegetable program in these schools has become an integral part of the school day and has enhanced the school environment.

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program has been very successful in participating schools across the nation because the fruits and vegetables are available free to all students. I feel this is a very important aspect of the program design. In addition school staff members have the opportunity to participate as role models. One of the original reasons for offering fresh fruits and vegetables to students throughout the school was to demonstrate that when fresh fruits and vegetables are made readily available, students would increase their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and decrease consumption of candy, chips and other similar less healthy snacks. I believe that this theory has been demonstrated by each of the participating schools across the nation. This program has truly changed the way our students look at food and has broadened students' food experiences with additional fresh fruits and vegetables. The customer is savvy as a result of the access to different fresh fruits and vegetables. It takes the whole school community to change food habits.

Our students have definitely enjoyed the experience of not only eating familiar items such as carrots, apples, and oranges, but also trying new fresh fruits and vegetables. Even some of our teachers have experienced tasting fruits and vegetables for the first time. Some of the new favorites are fresh pears, fresh berries, jicama, fresh pineapple and the large variety of apples now available. Donna Christenson, principal at Harding Middle School in Des Moines,

indicated the program has created a unique school dining experience by bringing the fruits and vegetables to the classroom.

One of our first learning experiences in a middle school was offering fresh Bartlett pears as a choice in the classrooms. We discovered that these 6th, 7th and 8th grade students thought fresh pears were white, soft, and sliced. Many of the students had never seen or tasted a whole fresh pear. Classroom teachers discovered that they had many teachable moments with the fresh fruits and vegetables; they embraced the program and encouraged their students to try the new foods each day. What more could we ask of our teachers.

We have noted improved eating habits of students as well as a healthier school environment in our buildings. The focus in the schools has been healthier choices offered throughout the day. Comments from the students, teachers, principals and food service staff tell the true value of this program. One of the greatest benefits of the program has been the creation of a school community focused on healthy foods offered throughout the day - before school, during school and after school. This environmental change has taken work on the part of all staff and students. In our schools we have offered the fresh fruits and vegetables to students in their classrooms, in the school office, in the nurse's office as well as at a kiosk type station in the school cafeteria. Teachers have noted that eating patterns of students in participating schools have changed. Students are very willing to try new fruits and vegetables each day. The students enjoy eating the apple or pineapple during silent reading time, while listening to teacher instructions or while doing math problems. Many of the new fruits and vegetables served as a part of this program are now incorporated into the school meal program offerings with greater acceptance.

The students even tell their younger brothers and sisters about the fruits and vegetables they will get to eat when they go to Harding Middle School next year. The parents have told us that their students look forward to the fresh fruits and vegetables at school and ask for fresh fruits and vegetables at home. We have had parents tell us about shopping at the grocery store and children requesting that the parent buy for the family the same type of fruit that they had at school that week.

The school office staff welcomes families, younger siblings as well as new students to the school daily. A basket of assorted fresh fruits and vegetables is always available in the office. What a marvelous experience for a parent or child to be offered a piece of fresh fruit while waiting in the school office or visiting a classroom. The parent now understands what the student will experience each day at school.

The teachers and principals in the schools have stated many times one of the unexpected benefits to the program is the opportunity for students and teachers to talk about something in the classroom other than just the academics. In Des Moines the piece of fruit has brought a neutral focal point for teaching life skills and has supported the development of a school family focused on success for all students.

Teachers have watched the learning behavior of their students change creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere that enhanced the learning experience. They identify that their students are more ready to learn with the availability of the fresh fruits and vegetables in the classroom.

The school nurses have identified fewer referrals from teachers because students do not feel well. Instead of saltine crackers in the nurses' office, they now have a basket of fresh fruits and vegetables available throughout the day. Today the students just come to the nurses' office to visit and have a snack. The nurse has the opportunity to assist with reinforcing good eating habits.

One of the goals of this program has been to offer a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables to students throughout the school day at no cost to the participant. When we first started this venture five years ago, I was amazed with how well our students, teachers and support staff accepted the program. Everyone seemed to embrace the value of the benefits of the program. Students showed responsibility with handling the fruits and vegetables in the classroom, teachers incorporated the food items into the learning environment and custodians handled the additional responsibilities of classroom waste within their normal daily activities. This program has been a very positive experience for our district. I have had requests for expansion of the program into other schools in our district because of the positive impact of the program. Our state child nutrition director receives numerous calls from other schools in Iowa requesting information on how to get involved in the program.

Ongoing studies confirm that a hungry child cannot learn effectively. A hungry child is distracted from learning and is more likely to experience discipline and health problems. This program impacted the lives of our students by creating an environment focused on developing good eating habits. This program has supported the role of the school meal programs and has enhanced the learning environment in the total school. I know that our Iowa experiences mirror experiences from across the nation.

Chairman Harkin and Members of the Committee, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program has demonstrated changed student food consumption practices. Children are eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Healthy fruits and vegetables are chosen more often by students, decreasing the consumption of less healthy snack foods. This program has assisted schools across the nation by providing schools the opportunity to enhance the learning environment. The investment in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program has reaped numerous benefits to children and schools.

In summary, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, the fruit and vegetable program has been remarkably successful, not just in fulfilling its stated purpose of increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, but also in helping to create something much bigger - namely, a culture of wellness and health promotion. I strongly believe in the value of this program and would like to see the program expanded. Additionally, I would like to see school meal programs enhanced with additional funding to support infrastructure needs to facilitate increased offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables as a part of the school breakfast and lunch programs.

I look forward to my continued work in impacting the lives of students and families each day in Des Moines. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you very much for your continuing support of child nutrition programs.

