



DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

OFFICE OF SCHOOL NUTRITION

"It Takes More Than Books for Children To Learn"

Testimony of Betti Wiggins
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To the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
July 23, 2014

Chairwoman Stabenow, Senator Cochran, Honorable Members of the Committee,

I am Betti Wiggins, the Executive Director of the Detroit Public Schools Office of School Nutrition. I am honored to be with you here today to address what I believe to be a topic of fundamental importance to all of us: the health and well being of America's children. As we all know, in school cafeteria lines, there are no D's and R's. There are only young Americans who we are all privileged to serve. I am grateful to Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Cochran for the deliberative and constructive tone of this committee's deliberations on this important issue.

The trials and tribulations of Detroit are well known. In a district with declining enrollment and multiple facilities closures in recent years, I have the great pleasure of supervising provision of high quality meals to approximately 50,000 valued and loved children. Most of our children eat breakfast and lunch with us, and many also eat supper within our facilities. Our work makes a critical positive difference in the their lives, their families and our community.

DPS was the first school district in the country to make breakfast universally available, supported by several studies that demonstrate a direct correlation between eating breakfast and improved academic performance. Our lunch programs provide free, fresh-cooked, hot foods to all students in all schools. Our menus include a healthy array of fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains, lean proteins, 100% fruit juices and low-fat milk. We also offer free healthy suppers for numerous at-risk students through our after-school programs.

In Detroit, we have warmly welcomed the higher nutritional standards of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The legislation and resulting regulations has prompted us to institute changes that are making a positive difference in the lives of our children and our employees. The improved nutrition standards provide a framework that supports several

other provisions of the legislation, including additional training opportunities for school nutrition staff and new equipment purchasing assistance.

It is the improved nutrition standards that have allowed us to introduce new equipment in our kitchens. Produce washers, salad bars, vegetable steamers, warming stations and convection ovens are the new norm. Deep fat fryers are obsolete. The nutrition standards are a force for positive change in Detroit, a force that we see as a necessity for improving the life long health and well being of our children.

In addition to new equipment, our food distribution partners are finding the products we need to provide our children the quality food they need and deserve. We have seen food manufacturers become determined to meet our improved nutrition standards. Food companies of all sizes are developing innovations designed to help us meet the new regulatory requirements.

Since the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 was enacted, large manufacturers like Tyson Foods have gone above and beyond to the meet those requirements, while continuing to develop new products that surpass federal sodium reduction requirements. Ten years ago Tyson nutritionists and chefs completely removed trans fat from all their school lunch products, and have since created items with whole-grain breading, lean beef, and a variety of grilled products. For many years, Tyson Foods has been dedicated to supplying school district's across the country with somewhat healthier products that kids will actually eat. All of this change is enabling us to more effectively serve the nutritional needs of all our children.

While approximately 87% of our children in Detroit are eligible for free school meals, I have discovered through my career that hunger and malnutrition is not confined to children from low-income families. In fact, food insecurity is as common among children from the end of the cul-de-sac as it is among those from urban street corners. The Community Eligibility Provision, or CEP option, allows high-poverty schools like those in our district to provide breakfast and lunch to all students free of charge, increasing efficiency and reducing hunger.

The program also delivers benefits to our program through reduced administrative burdens resulting from elimination of paper applications. The increased meal participation rates allow me to capture economies of scale, while the savings generated by elimination of paper applications covers the cost of providing meals to children who might otherwise pay, improving the overall financial stability of our programs. As you are likely aware, approximately 4000 schools in 11 states are now participating in CEP. The work of you and your committee, Chairwoman Stabenow, is making a critical positive difference in the lives of tens of thousands of Detroit children each and every day.

Each of you knows far better than us that USDA funding is all about improving the economic conditions of rural America. One of my greatest joys and another direct benefit of improved nutrition standards has been increasing our purchase of Michigan grown farm products. As the Vice Chair of the Local Food Association, the nation's only trade

association for buyers and sellers of sustainably produced local food products, I am particularly motivated to do my part to increase the market share of local farmers.

Farm to School is a term that encompasses three key actions:

- Sourcing locally produced fresh food for schools and preschools
- Helping children to make direct connections to how food is produced through school gardens
- Enhancing classroom education opportunities related to food and agriculture, health and nutrition

Today, over 40,000 schools representing 23.5 million children nationwide are engaged in some kind of Farm to School program, producing approximately \$235 million of expenditures on locally produced food, maximizing local economic impact and stimulating rural economies.

Our Farm to School program has produced partnerships with regional farmers that are generating healthy returns for them and for our children. We are feeding fresh Michigan asparagus to inner city teenagers, and they like it. We are increasing our children's exposure to fresh foods, planting the seeds for lifelong habits that will produce improved health and quality of life. I believe our efforts also lead to increased participation rates in school meals, leading to better attendance and improved academic, health and behavioral outcomes.

In addition to fresh vegetables and fruits from nearby farms, our Farm to School program in Detroit delivers additional benefits, including educational opportunities in the cafeteria, classroom visits by participating farmers, and school garden opportunities. In 2012, DPS and several community partners initiated an effort to create gardens at schools throughout the district, expanding teachers' access to real-life laboratories to teach students about healthy eating, nutrition, and concepts around growing food while increasing our schools' access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Each site features raised beds constructed by students, compost bins, and walkways, thereby creating a Farm to School Learning Center, increasing students' scientific understanding of sustainability. We now have 71 school-based gardens, a 2.5-acre school farm and have reestablished the nationally known Catherine Ferguson Farm. We are also currently engaged in the development of the Kettering Project, which is the repurposing of a closed thirty-acre high school site.

It is my position that Farm to school is a long-term strategy that enables children to develop a deeper, sustained relationship with healthy food. Farm to School is an important strategy for ushering healthy food change into schools, allowing kids to gain familiarity with what are often new foods so they integrate them into their lifelong healthy eating habits.

In conclusion, Madam Chairwoman, our recent shared progress toward improving school meals programs represents a solid value proposition for the nation. As leaders responsible for the well being of children, whether we are parents, in Congress, school nutrition officers, in food business or at USDA, we must steal our focus away from *the process of change* to instead *emphasize the progress* enabled by the new policies.

Institutional change is always difficult, and often seems near impossible. It always takes time and includes short-term discomfort. The investments prompted by improved school nutrition standards have and will continue to generate invaluable returns. Any short-term pains pale in comparison to the benefits from reform that is both highly desirable and attainable. Change worth making takes time. Nine out of ten school districts across the country are already in compliance with the new standards. We are making it work and work well in Detroit. I am fully confident that all other districts will do the same.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you Chairwoman Stabenow. As a Michigan resident, I want to say how proud and grateful we are for your leadership on this issue.