



Testimony of

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Oversight: The Department of Education's School Food Policies and Procedures

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Good afternoon. My name is Louise Feld and I am the Policy Associate for Education, Food, and Economic Security at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 67-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chair Jackson and Chair Mealy, as well as the members of the Committee on Education and the Committee on Contracts, for holding this hearing today on the Department of Education's School Food Policies and Procedures, because the food that New York City's more than 1 million school children consume each day has an enormous impact on each child's health, development and well-being.

CCC appreciates the commitment that Speaker Quinn, Council Member Jackson, Council Member Mealy, the entire City Council, and Mayor Bloomberg have made to improve New Yorkers' access to healthy and affordable food. Notably, we are thankful for the successful efforts to increase SNAP enrollment in New York City and the expansion of SNAP benefit use to New York City's farmers' markets. CCC is also grateful for two recent City Council laws that have begun to bring affordable and nutritious foods to low-income neighborhoods: 1) the Green Cart legislation, which creates city-issued permits for fresh fruit and vegetable vendors to locate their carts in low-income communities; and 2) Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH), which encourages the development of supermarkets in food deserts. Further, CCC applauds the City Council's commitment to ensuring federal passage of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (otherwise known as the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act or CNR). Finally, CCC wholeheartedly supports FoodWorks, Speaker Quinn's groundbreaking and

comprehensive plan to implement a more sustainable approach to every piece of our City's food system, including school meals.

CCC also appreciates the work the Department of Education's SchoolFood has begun in order to expand children's access to healthy meals, and encourage greater school meal participation rates. SchoolFood's efforts to update its wellness policies and its menus, so that school meals contain nutritious foods that lack trans fats and high levels of sodium, are commendable.¹ SchoolFood has also made notable investments to update kitchen and cafeteria infrastructures, and has participated in innovative collaborative projects such as Garden to Café, which promotes school gardens and connections between schools and local food sources.

Unfortunately, despite these accomplishments, childhood hunger and obesity remain serious obstacles to child well-being in New York City, and much work remains to be done to increase the food security of New York City's poor and working poor families, and their children. In recent years, a sobering number of New York City's families have faced increased "food insecurity," meaning that they lacked consistent access to healthy and affordable foods. Data in CCC's bi-annual book, *Keeping Track*, show that 26.6% of New York City children, and 1.5 million New Yorkers overall, received food stamp benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2009—a 21% increase in the number of SNAP participants from the previous year. In 2010, many

¹ A 2008 audit by the State Comptroller commended SchoolFood because school menus met federal nutritional guidelines. See DiNapoli, T.P. (June 2009). *New York City Department of Education: School Nutrition Report 2008-N-15*. Retrieved from <http://www.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093009/08n15.pdf>; see also Belmaker, G. (2010, Dec. 20). School Food Programs Aim to Counter Obesity Epidemic. *Epoch Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/47743/>; and New York City Department of Education. (Feb. 2010). *New York City Department of Education's School Food Services Nominated for "Restaurants & Institutions" Magazine's Ivy Award*. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2009-2010/ivyaward021910.htm>.

struggling families were forced to make difficult economic choices in order to “get by financially,” which, according to the Food Bank for New York City’s annual opinion poll, resulted in at least thirty percent of New York City households with children reducing both their food intake and the quality of food that they purchased.² Moreover, many New York City households simply could not afford nearly enough food, as reports from both the Food Bank and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger showed a substantial increase in the number of New York City families with children who sought assistance from food pantries and soup kitchens in both 2009 and 2010.³

Food insecurity is taking both a short- and long-term toll on the overall well-being of New York City’s children. In the immediate, a lack of access to nutritious food has contributed to the alarming obesity rates among New York City students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 18% of whom are overweight and 21% of whom are obese.⁴ Poor nutrition impacts children’s academic outcomes, as it not only effects cognitive and psychosocial development and a child’s ability to focus in class, but can also lead to illnesses, which increase school absences.⁵ Further, a poor diet can have lifelong health consequences, such as increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

² Food Bank for New York City (2010). *NYC Hunger Experience 2010: Less Food On the Table*. Retrieved from <http://www.foodbanknyc.org/go/news/less-food-on-the-table-food-bank-for-new-york-city-releases-2010-nyc-hunger-experience-report>.

³ In “NYC Hunger Experience 2009: A Year in Recession,” the Food Bank for New York City reported that during 2009, about 2/3 of New York City soup kitchens and food pantries saw an increase in the number of families with children who accessed emergency food. Similarly, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger’s November 2010 report, entitled “Hungry New Yorkers Barely Hang On: 2010 Annual Hunger Survey Report,” stated that soup kitchens and food pantries in all five boroughs reported a “great” increase in the number of families with children who “used their services.”

⁴ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. (June 2009). Childhood Obesity is a Serious Concern in New York City. *NYC Vital Signs*.

⁵ Sell, K., Zlotnik, S., Noonan, K., and Rubin, D. (Nov. 2010). The Recession and Food Security. *The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being*.

The New York City Department of Education and its Office of SchoolFood can help address this drastic food insecurity and the resulting health consequences so many of New York City's children face. Our City's schools serve 860,000 meals a day to over a million students, four-fifths of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals.⁶ Yet despite this need, many children who meet the eligibility criteria do not participate in the School Meals program.⁷ These statistics underscore the critical position that the Department of Education occupies, from which it can provide a great number of our City's children with both increased access to nutritious foods and the education they need to make informed and healthy food choices. Moreover, the recent passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which eases the free- and reduced-price lunch certification process for children and low-income communities, provides for better school meal nutrition, and makes children in foster care categorically eligible for free school meals, presents significant opportunities for New York City to advance and implement positive changes to our City's school food programs.

⁶ Kwan, A., Mancinelli, K., Freudberg, N. (Aug. 2010). *Recipes for Health: Improving School Food in New York City*. Hunter College Healthy Public Policies Projects and City Harvest, 2010; New York City Council, Christine C. Quinn, Speaker. (Nov. 2010). *Food Works: A Vision to Improve NYC's Food System*.

⁷ According to the Hunter College Healthy Public Policies Projects and City Harvest, in New York City schools only 38% of high school students, 70% of middle school students, and 84% of elementary school students participate in the school lunch program, and even fewer eat breakfast at school. See Kwan, A., et al.

Listen to the Voices of Youth Regarding School Food Reform

CCC's youth program, YouthAction NYC, brings together socio-economically diverse high school students from all five boroughs to inform them about New York City government and policies, and then provides them with skills for advocacy and civic engagement. Youth enter the YouthAction NYC program after completing the YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC), which is a ten-week training designed to give students the tools they need to become youth advocates.

This past fall, the 25 participants in the YCLC focused on school food reform as they learned how to develop a fact-based advocacy campaign. Their background research included: reviews of federal, state, and local school food policy and procedure; analysis of reports and articles on the subject; surveys of New York City school children and parents about their perceptions of school food; visits to sites; and interviews with a host of stakeholders. Stephen O'Brien, Director of Food and Food Support at the Department of Education's Office of SchoolFood gave the youth a comprehensive look into its daily operations, and explained the creative solutions SchoolFood is implementing to make school meals more nutritious and accessible. The youth also visited the Food Bank for New York City, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where they learned about the City's efforts with regard to school children and nutrition. In addition, the youth interviewed Council Member Robert Jackson, staff from Public Advocate Bill de Blasio's office, and Nancy Romer, General Coordinator of the Brooklyn Food Coalition.

The youth came up with many creative solutions to the issues that concerned them most about New York City's school food. Specifically, they recommended that participation

in the School Breakfast Program could be increased through expansion of the Breakfast in the Classroom program, which would both reduce the stigma associated with eating free food and provide meals to some students who are unable to get to school earlier in the morning. They also recommended that schools partner with community gardens, or build their own gardens, in order to teach students healthy habits through experiential learning, and to provide more fresh produce for the cafeteria. The youth recognized the financial challenges of improving schools' cooking facilities, but advocated for the installment of water jets and cooking kitchens whenever possible.

The youth also called for the Department of Education to hold schools accountable for establishing and maintaining School Wellness Councils, which federal and city governments both mandate. School Wellness Councils are responsible for influencing the healthfulness of school culture by promoting initiatives such as nutrition education, space and time for physical activity, and improvements to the food available inside the school building. The fall 2010 YCLC participants strongly believed that there are creative and affordable solutions to improve school food on the community level, and that there should be incentives and support for these endeavors.

In addition to the recommendations that the young people in CCC's YouthAction program made, CCC also supports the following proposals to increase access to nutritious food in schools:

Protect and Expand Universal School Meals

In many of our public schools, an eligible child may receive a free meal only after his or her parent fills out an application, which then needs to be properly collected and verified.

Some parents have difficulty understanding the necessary application forms, or may not even submit an application for fear that their children will be stigmatized for being “poor.” Alternatively, children who attend schools that offer the Universal School Meals program are automatically provided free lunch, and therefore can more easily access food. Unfortunately, in August 2010 the Department of Education released a list of 136 schools in which the Universal School Meals program was going to be eliminated, and stated more schools were to be cut from the program. Rather than remove Universal School Meals from schools, CCC strongly urges the City to expand the program, as it serves as a vital and consistent source of food to school children.

Increase the Availability of Breakfast in the Classroom Programs

CCC also recommends that the City increase the availability of Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) programs, which currently exist in at least one classroom in over 200 New York City schools, but are only implemented school-wide in 21 schools.⁸ Eating breakfast in the classroom eliminates the stigma a child may feel when receiving a free school meal and results in a demonstrated increase in the number of children who actually eat breakfast. Studies have also shown that students who regularly eat breakfast in their classrooms have better attendance and behavior, as well as improved cognitive functioning and academic achievement on standardized tests.⁹ BIC increases low-income children’s consistent access to food, and ultimately has a positive impact on their overall physical well-being and school performance.

⁸ Ortiz, B. (Jan. 2011). "Why Breakfast in the Classroom Should be in Every Classroom." Presented at the conference "What Must New York Do Now to Prevent Obesity? A Symposium of Good Ideas from the Field," New York Academy of Medicine, New York.

⁹ Id.; see also Turque, B. (2009, Nov. 16). Meal program aims to keep kids hungry for learning *Washington Post*; Callaci, D. Breakfast in the Classroom a Hit. Retrievable at <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/breakfast-classroom-hit/>.

Think Creatively about Improving Access to Fresh Produce and Integrating Nutrition Education into Different Subject Matters

Each day presents a host of opportunities to educate New York City school children about nutrition and food production. Teachers can incorporate information about healthy eating into their lessons. For example, a math lesson about measurements can involve discussion of food and drink portion sizes, and science classes can explore food science, nutrition, and agriculture.¹⁰ Schools can also seize opportunities to plant and nurture their own gardens, or invest in mobile edible walls, in order to teach students about agriculture, and to grow produce in individual schools or classrooms, which can then be incorporated into school meals and snacks.

In addition, the Department of Education should encourage schools to participate in the annual “Farm to You Fest.” Every October, the Farm to School Program, a State Department of Agriculture and Markets-funded and Cornell University-managed program, launches a week-long celebration of local food and agriculture in schools across the state. During this event, “Farm to You Fest” partners provide schools with educational materials about, and technical assistance for, support of local agriculture and healthy eating habits in schools. More should be done to engage a greater number of New York City schools in this celebration, so that they can increase their connections to New York-based farmers, and, ultimately, increase the presence of fresh produce in the meals and snacks offered on school grounds.

¹⁰ An example of the inclusion of nutrition education in daily lessons was also discussed in a 2009 NY1 report about PS 72 in Harlem. The children were taught about nutrition, and then taken on a trip to a local farmers’ market, where they used Health Bucks to purchase produce. The report is accessible at <http://www.ny1.com/content/107848/students-receive-lesson-in--green--eating>.

Finally, on a broader level, the Department of Education should pay greater attention to establishing and enhancing links between schools and the larger food community. Opportunities to connect schools to Community Supported Agriculture programs, Farmers' Markets, and Green Carts, will improve access to fresh produce at the community level and better enable children to put lessons about good nutrition and healthy eating into practice at home.

In sum, the Department of Education is currently presented with an opportunity to impact the lives of the many New York City children whose families struggle with food insecurity and access to healthy and affordable foods. In addition to increasing the number of free breakfasts and free and reduced-price lunches that students want to and actually do eat everyday, the Department of Education can explore innovative ways to teach lessons about nutrition and healthy eating that will yield long-term results for our City's children.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.