

## **RFKM Supporters' Testimonies to the MCPS Board of Education June 3, 2014**

### **Karen Devitt Testimony**



Good Morning. My name is Karen Devitt and I am the Co-Director of Real Food for Kids – Montgomery. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify here this morning.

My topic today is sugar. Parents are alarmed by the high levels of sugar offered to their children in MCPS. In our analysis of over 200 products, we identified more than 40 items with added sugar, including all yogurts and flavored milk. The total sugars available in a single meal greatly exceed the American Heart Association's recommendations.

A child in MCPS can have a chocolate milk and a cinnamon roll for breakfast (free in the classroom in 72 schools) and will have exceeded the AHA recommendation for added sugar - for the entire day. This is the equivalent of handing a child a chocolate bar for breakfast. Most parents are unaware of this, as sugar is not listed on the DFNS website.

For lunch, our student has her second chocolate milk of the day, yogurt, and pancakes. Total added sugar for breakfast and lunch combined: 11.5 tsps. (46 g), almost 4 times the AHA's recommended daily limit for children ages 4-8. And she hasn't even sampled the cookies, ice cream, Rice Krispie Treats, and Welch's Fruit Snacks.

This excessive amount of sugar offered to our kids every day defies common sense nutrition and is just wrong.

We ask that a thorough analysis of all foods with added sugars be undertaken, and that meals be looked at in the aggregate. We also ask for a gram-based maximum of added sugars per meal, and a maximum limit of total sugar on individual foods and beverages.

The high rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease across America are largely the health consequences of poor nutrition and over-consumption of sugar. We need to get serious about the obesity epidemic, and that includes setting higher standards for the sugar content of food in MCPS – standards that exceed those currently in place\*.

We appreciate your consideration of these recommendations.

\*School Food guidelines follow the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Nutrition Standards for Food in Schools, which allow no more than 35% of calories from total sugars per portion as packaged. Exceptions to the standard are fruits and vegetables (either whole or 100% juice), milk and yogurt. The American Heart Association recommends that children ages 4-8 consume no more

than 3 tsps. (12 g) of added sugar per day. For pre-teens and teens, the recommendation is 5-8 tsps. (20-32 g).

### **Nick Gregory Testimony**

After high school, I had been declared officially overweight by my doctor. Through considering the reasons behind my consistent weight gain, it suddenly became clear the food I had been subjected to at school was largely responsible. Because I was confined to eating school breakfast and lunch almost every day for roughly 16 years within MCPS, eating my schools' meals and beverages became a daily routine. The complacency I endured, inevitable because I had no alternatives to eating school food, blinded me from the unhealthiness of what my elementary school served throughout the day. Breakfast items at Woodlin elementary school included sugary pancakes, syrup, and overly sweetened chocolate milk, and lunch consisted of greasy pizza most days out of the week. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I had gained so much weight that my final class photo displayed a child clearly in need of nutritional assistance.

My alarming weight expanded at Sligo middle school, due to the existence of an a la carte line, which served fries and a type of pizza similar to the one provided at Woodlin. I ate pizza and fries nearly every day from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and topped the meal off with Gatorade, a drink supplied in every corner of the cafeteria. The total amount of sugar I digested in middle school is therefore unimaginable, for not only did I consume food and drink packed with sugar, fat, and calories, nearly no nutritious vegetables were served to balance out my meals. Buying pizza and fries every day may seem like an unwise decision, but as a mere kid in middle school, I made bad choices in the lunch room because no one stopped me from doing so, nor even attempted to guide me in the right direction. Most significantly, the amount of sugar I digested at lunchtime caused me to crash by the time class had resumed, stalling my ability to pay attention, stay awake, and learn material effectively.

When I transitioned to Albert Einstein high school, the quality of food remained poor since completing Sligo. Foods packed with sugar, carbs, fat, and calories were served by four large vendors, including an a la carte line, the most popular source of food in the cafeteria. At the end of my senior year, I realized I'd been ingesting two packages of fries and a soda nearly every day for 3 years, because milk and orange juice did not entice me as a teenager, making me constantly resort to vending machines. While I was technically no longer a kid, the habitual selection of sugary food and drink was not deemed a bad decision in my eyes, rather a necessity due to a lack of alternatives. Thankfully and eventually, I recognized my weight problem and addressed it through hard work and determination, but not everyone is capable of addressing unhealthy lifestyles, particularly young adults used to eating imbalanced meals since their childhoods. Change must come to MCPS, and it must come now.

### **Laura MacCleery Testimony**

Good morning, my name is Laura MacCleery and I am Chief Regulatory Affairs Attorney for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a non-profit that advocates for more healthful food. I am also a Montgomery County resident and parent. My three-year-old daughter will attend Takoma Park Elementary School in the fall of 2015.

A recent analysis by Real Food for Kids Montgomery of the foods served in Montgomery County schools showed that suspect food additives, including artificial dyes, trans fat, monosodium glutamate (MSG) and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) (which is listed in the official government Report on Carcinogens), were in at least 49 foods, excluding vending machine offerings. In response to concerns about additives, their approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is often cited. Yet oversight by FDA is grossly inadequate, and scientists and other governments are concerned about the safety of these additives.

Take food dyes. I applaud recent decisions by the County to stop serving strawberry milk and sorbets with dyes. But a stunning 25 products served in Montgomery County schools contain artificial colors, including in surprising foods like hamburgers with carrots and pancakes. Processed foods use dyes to imitate the presence of real fruits and vegetables so that foods appear healthier than they are. This kind of food fakery has no place in schools, which should be teaching children to recognize a rainbow of real nutrients. We agree as well that the total sugars served to children are a serious health threat, and impact their ability to learn.

Concerning additives, you should know that food dyes are harmful. We first petitioned FDA to ban dyes in foods in 2008, citing studies that show that commonly used dyes are neurotoxic and negatively impact behavior and attention in children. Other studies link these dyes to cancer. Red 3 has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals, and Yellow 5 and 6 can be contaminated with carcinogens.

Due to the compelling evidence on the harm dyes do to children's behavior, the European Union requires warning labels on foods containing artificial dyes. Many companies are now using natural substitutes in their European products but use cheaper synthetic dyes in the identical foods sold here in the U.S. Yet change here is feasible: major chains like Trade Joe's and Whole Foods also bar the use of artificial dyes in all of the foods they sell, and other school districts around the country have already banned, or are in the process of banning, dyes and other harmful additives.

We cannot and should not wait for federal action. FDA has failed to ban dyes or even put warning labels on them despite the strong and growing evidence of harm over the past two decades, and its own admission that some children are susceptible to behavioral problems after eating foods with dyes. The problem is larger than dyes, of course. FDA is underfunded, often under siege from food companies, and has many competing priorities.

While FDA dithers, children in our schools struggle to identify healthful foods and are exposed to needless risks to both their ability to thrive and to the threat of cancer. Nearby Fairfax County Public Schools has recently reduced exposure to a short list of harmful ingredients by 91% through improved sourcing. The Montgomery County School Board should eliminate artificial dyes and other harmful additives in the foods it serves to children. My daughter and all the other kids whose health is in your hands deserve no less.

## **Lindsey Parsons Testimony**

Hi, I'm Lindsey Parsons, Co-Director of Real Food for Kids – Montgomery, an organization with over 2000 members and supporters. I'm here to deliver a petition, which represents the top ten concerns of our membership. Of the 2000 signatures, almost all citizens of Montgomery County, 809 are parents of children in MCPS from 153 different schools, 203 MCPS students, 43 physicians, 14 dietitians, health coaches and nutrition researchers. To summarize our requests, we are asking that the food served to our children in MCPS be real, unprocessed, freshly prepared in your central facility with some onsite prep where you have school kitchens, free of dangerous chemicals, with limited sugar, include unlimited fruits and vegetables (AKA salad and fruit bars), and free and freely accessible water with a means to drink it. And we'd like any item sold in any MCPS lunchroom listed on the main communication tool about school food - the lunch menus; anything short of this is not complete transparency.

When an average of only 51% of elementary school and 32% of secondary school students eat school lunch, with a FARMS rate of 34%, it's clear that the food served in MCPS is neither appealing to parents nor to children. It's no wonder – because processed, reheated food is unappealing.

What we are asking for has already been done in other places around the country, districts smaller and larger than ours, operating under the same budget constraints based on federal reimbursement rates. What it takes is creativity, energy and modeling best practices from elsewhere.

We know that plate waste is a big concern and we would like to work with MCPS on proven ways to make sure that kids are eating the healthy food they take. But to do so, we need to be part of the discussion, ideally with a voting seat on a wellness committee, as the largest group of stakeholders outside of the school system itself and the PTA.

The leaders and members of Real Food For Kids - Montgomery are more than willing and ready to collaborate with MCPS on changes to the school food. But to collaborate, the administration of MCPS needs to give up its defensive position of trying to prove that it's already doing a great job. We need the school system to honestly admit that other districts are leading in this area, and the willingness to sit down with us as co-stakeholders to figure out how MCPS can move forward to be not only first academically but a leader in providing the healthiest food that will put kids in their best state of mind for learning.

## **Patrick Egan Testimony**

School lunch has a pattern, and my daughter who is in first-grade recognizes it: a garden salad or bone-in chicken will be served on the Thursday of each week that has five school days. These are the only meals my wife and I consider healthy enough for our daughter to eat; the only meals that MCPS offers that are not junk food.

Since the quality of MCPS food fails us four-days-out-of-five, my wife or I must prepare a lunch and send it to school. The foods we send are simple but wholesome. We do not use processed meats in a sandwich, nor sugar-addled spreads. When we send a side of fresh salad, olive oil and balsamic is as fancy as dressings go. We sometimes cook in the morning and send hot food in a

Thermos; the style of cooking is stir-fry, and always uses fresh vegetables and real meat cooked from scratch. Depending on the season, vegetables sometimes come straight from our small backyard garden: eggplant, cucumber, string beans, chives, bell peppers, tomatoes, Asian leaf all grow well. For a drink we pack a flask of filtered tap water; no juice, no sweetened-milk. And the lunchbox we send has no "a la carte" options---there is never a bag of chips or candy hiding at the bottom of it.

An important lesson for a child growing up is learning to make the right choice. At present, MCPS lunch only offers a healthy choice on four days out of five. In order for us to let our daughter eat school lunch more often, we ask that MCPS to give her the option of making the right choice every day, by offering simple, wholesome, real food.

### **Ashia Mann Testimony**

Good morning. My name is Ashia Mann and this is: a day in the life of my daughter on the lunch line. It begins at home.

One day a year, I allow her to buy school lunch. On this day, I read the menu in advance, and was thrilled that it included a drumstick of chicken, two vegetables and fruit. My daughter was elated that this was her big day. She reports that school lunch is awesome because it's like going to the fair.



It's like a fair.

My daughter has to wait in line for 10 of her 30 minutes for lunch. She is told to grab a milk. She is allergic and the employee allows my daughter to take a juice because she has a doctor's note.

But we don't allow juice. Our pediatrician calls it empty sugar.

She asks for water instead and is denied. She would have to pay extra for water. She returns to the table and raises her hand dutifully, so that she may get water at the fountain. When she is allowed to go, her lunchtime is nearly over.

She reports to me later that day that she ate the chicken but the orange she was given had brown spots and mushy spots. She didn't eat it. She ate a few baby carrots but she wasn't served the celery either. So lunch was a drumstick and a few baby carrots and a sip of water.

Better than the fair. I guess.

She runs off to the playground thirsty from her 10 minutes of lunch and I am left wondering what happens everyday for the kids whose families cannot afford the cost or the time to send their children with fresh, well-balanced lunches each day, like I can.

My elementary school is a wonderful place. When I ask the cafeteria manager about the water issue, she tells me her hands are tied. She has to charge for water. She can only give my kid juice. No cups. That is not their policy.

And another evening rolls in and I am at the kitchen counter, performing one of the domestic jobs I hate. Slicing carrots, peeling a Clementine and spooning leftover chicken and rice into her thermos for tomorrow. Tons of tiny containers and it won't be hot when she gets to eat it.

My peers and I talk about this a lot. We all hate packing lunch. And we all agree that if the food served at school looked more like what is served at home (meat and rice and vegetable, fresh tacos, sushi, empanadas, stir fry...) that we would be thrilled to buy hot school lunch all the time.

Would it cost more at first? Likely it would. But once it caught on that the food was good, great even? The teachers, the staff would buy lunch, the administrators would sit down and eat a salad and grilled chicken with our kids at lunchtime. It would build community. And our money would feed the system- feed the children who have no choice to but to eat school lunch. The positive feedback loop would be tremendous.

When I worked in San Francisco schools, the adults bought the lunch off the line. They were happy to because it looked like what they were eating at home. I challenge you, the board of education to spend a week eating lunch, and breakfast too, perhaps, alongside our children. And then let us know how it feels to eat at the fair every day.

And while you are at it, skip the chocolate milk, and use your 10 minutes to take that sip of water from the fountain because that's all some of our kids will get this week at school.

### **Caron Gremont Testimony**



I'm Caron Gremont, a parent of two children and resident of the County, and Founder of First Bites, a local non-profit that works with area preschools to get children excited about eating fruit and vegetables. In the last year, I have worked with more than 300 preschoolers, their teachers and families – I have watched as picky eaters transform and enthusiastically munch on carrots. I have watched as children, who fear green food, guzzle down spinach smoothies. Not only is it possible for children to eat healthy food, it is possible for children to *love* to eat healthy food.

One of the schools we are working with is CentroNia in Washington DC. We are working directly with their two- and three-year olds, creating a strong foundation that will carry them into elementary school and prepare them for a

lifetime of healthy eating habits.

I'm there almost every week, and I've had the honor of eating lunch at CentroNia with their elementary school children. For \$3 a meal (compared to \$4/meal in MCPS), these children are eating fresh, oftentimes local, high quality real food every single day. There is no pizza, no hot dogs, no nuggets on the menu. They aren't junking up the food to make it "kid friendly." They are serving good, tasty, real food. And I've seen the kids eat it up. And enjoy it. It is possible to feed kids healthy food. And it is possible for kids to enjoy healthy food.

Of course, you can't just put a giant piece of broccoli in front of a child and expect that child to dig in. We must provide food education to teachers and students, at every age, so they are actually eating the great food that they are being served. It is time for the County to demonstrate leadership and a commitment to the health of our youngest residents. It is time for the County to make healthy eating a priority for its students.

### **Aura Triana Testimony**

Good nutrition is a gift I have always wanted to give my daughter. Very early, I started teaching her to really love her body and nourish it, so she could be healthy for the rest of her life.

As a parent, I expected the schools to help me teach my child to make good choices, in this and other areas. I figured, there is so much science out there about what a kid should eat to be healthy and learn well, our government will make sure to translate all that great science into the best meals. After all, they have all the evidence about childhood obesity and the chronic illnesses related to a poor diet! However, I feel like I have been on my own when it comes to nutrition.



My daughter is in middle school. She has always taken lunch from home. In elementary, because she did not find the food appetizing and the food did not meet our family's idea of good nutrition: real food instead of processed products, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, water instead of sugary drinks, low sugar and fat content and freshly made, appetizing meals that don't look like fast food.

Then she got to middle school, where, she was told, she and her friends would have more choices. And they did: they soon found out that if they did not like the meals, they could actually fill their plate with a cookie, a pretzel, a gummy snack, some chips, a sugary drink and ice cream!! Imagine the nutrition content of that plate? For many of her classmates, that is lunch every day. Others just bring food from home, but even those top up their lunch with plenty of sugary snacks.

So she decided to continue taking her lunch from home. We were talking last night and she was wondering why the school system is undermining its own menus by offering secondary school students the option to eat just snacks... Could the reason be that the snacks bring in more money? she asked. What should I tell her?

Given all this, one has to wonder: even if MCPS meals were the most nutritious, and my friends

here have already shown there is a lot of room for improvement, the way things are, kids are enticed to toss them and go for high-sugar treats, instead!

My daughter remembers often the cafeteria at school where she has had many summer camps. Meals are prepared in the school kitchen, there is a big salad bar, food is appetizing and balanced and there is only one snack offering per day. Every single student ate lunch there every day, and they raved about the salad bar.

How many parents of secondary school students are aware that their kids can eat only snacks for lunch? How many of them know the added nutrition content of the snacks in their kid's lunch plate? We need to have all that information easily available at each school. But we want more than that: we want to be partners with our elected officials at the Board and MCPS staff in the wonderful job of feeding our children well and helping them learn how to make good choices when it comes to food.