

Call to Action

*Lindsey Parsons, Co-Director, Real Food for Kids - Montgomery
School Food Forum, Nov. 2, 2013*

We've heard a lot of information today from some great speakers and hopefully advanced the conversation about what food is healthy for our kids, how to help our kids understand where food comes from, how to help them to make better choices, what we as parents want from our school system and how we can accomplish it. Thank you to all the speakers, our sponsors, the forum planning committee and my wonderful partners in this forum, Gordon Clark and Karen Devitt, and everyone who took a chunk of a beautiful fall day to be here with us.

I hear from a lot of parents who just can't understand why the MCPS menu is so dominated by pizza, chicken nuggets and burgers. As the 11th wealthiest county in the country, frankly, we're expecting more. And the kids on Free and Reduced Meals deserve more. We know kids like pizza, chicken nuggets and burgers. They also like chips, candy and soda. Kids like junk food. That's right - kids like junk food. But we know it's bad for them. So why are we facilitating their addiction to junk food? The perception of children as customers can lead to an abdication of adult authority. The education component of school should not stop at the lunch room door. What is the point of giving nutrition education in each grade if kids' daily stop in the lunch room or at the vending machines exposes them to products for sale that clearly are not good for them? It is a mixed message. Not to mention that if the food they're eating while in school is full of chemicals known to decrease attention or exacerbate the effects of ADHD, they will not be performing well. This situation is to no one's advantage. And we've heard from Tony's presentation that there are other ways to make up budget deficits than by selling unhealthy a la carte items. Yes, it will take some shifting of the current paradigm, there will be setup costs, but ultimately, MCPS could be thriving financially by selling healthier food to kids while simultaneously creating jobs here in Montgomery County.

A couple of months ago I met an RFKM member at an event we were participating in. She was pretty young, although out of high school and didn't have any children, so I asked why she was interested in our organization. Then I heard her story: as the daughter of immigrants from Senegal, she came to the U.S. and started attending Montgomery Blair High School as a senior. Because she qualified for free and reduced meals, she ate both breakfast and lunch at school daily. She also bought items from the school vending machines. Her parents assumed that if the government was providing the food, it must be good for her. When she saw our display of flavored milks and a la carte items from the cafeteria, she recognized the rice krispie bars and strawberry milk she used to eat, and remembered the french toast smothered with syrup that's still on the breakfast and sometimes lunch menus. After one year in high school here, she had gained a significant amount of weight, had hypertension and was pre-diabetic. Her doctor told her to immediately stop eating the school food. She's a member

of RFKM now because she recognizes how dangerous the school food can be to kids' health if they're making the wrong choices. Let's stop offering wrong choices. She is who we are fighting for. We're fighting for the kids on free and reduced meals who eat 2 and sometimes 3 meals a day in school. That's a majority of their daily calories. That's the food that's fueling their brain all day. These are the kids we're fighting for.

While my activism on the topic of healthy school food started way back in high school with a letter to the editor of **my** high school paper about the school food, what really got me riled up after arriving in Montgomery County was when I asked the Principal at my son's school about eliminating the chocolate and strawberry milk. I was told that the parents were already asked in a poll whether they wanted to get rid of the strawberry milk, and since so many were indifferent or wanted to keep it, they kept it. It was only later that the absurdity of this approach struck me. Do we poll parents to determine whether they think algebra is useful to kids? Then why should parent's preferences dominate what happens in the lunch room when we are well aware of the fact that the poor eating habits of this generation and the surplus of sugar in children's diets has led the CDC to predict that 30 to 40 percent of today's kids will develop diabetes in their lifetimes if we don't reverse the trend? We should be making decision on the basis of the best available scientific consensus.

The parents I speak with don't quite understand how things could still be where they are in MCPS. And I think I understand why, after working on this for the last year. First, the people running our schools are busy and they have a lot of issues to deal with; many that feel a lot more pressing than this one.

And second, because change rarely happens because one person at the top initiates it. Frankly, that one person at the top can't take the political risk to single-handedly make changes. Nor can those 8 members of the Board of Education. They have to know that the grass roots are behind them. They have to believe we have their backs. So what is our job now? First, to make sure that this issue makes it to the top of the priority list for the Board of Education and the Superintendent. And second, to make sure that they understand that if they take the political and financial risk of making changes, that the parents of Montgomery County will be behind them.

So what we need from you is this: visit RFKM's and MVG's websites, sign up for our email updates, like our Facebook pages, open our e-mails, if we ask you to sign a petition, sign it and pass it on to all your friends. If we ask you to make a phone call, make the phone call. Show up at a Board of Education meeting. If they make a positive change, thank them. Ask your PTA delegates to support healthier food. Volunteer with RFKM and MVG. Represent RFKM to your school, and invite MVG and Master Gardeners to come in and speak to teachers and kids. Talk to your principals about school gardens, salad tables, healthier parties and fundraisers, and eliminating unhealthy vending and a la carte options. Everyone can contribute in some way to

moving this dialogue forward until we see the change that we want. I'm counting on you. Our kids are counting on you.

Thank you so much for being here.