

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Public Hearing on

**B22-313, the *Healthy Students Amendment Act of 2017*,
B22-456, the *Universal Free Lunch for All Amendment Act of 2017*, and
*The State of School Food Services***

**Testimony of
Carla Watson
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Before the
Committee on Education
Council of the District of Columbia
David Grosso, Chairperson

Thursday, November 16, 2017
Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004



Good morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee and staff. For the record, my name is Carla Watson, and I am the Chief Operating Officer for District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you today to discuss the state of school food services at DCPS, including our progress, our challenges, and our vision for the future of the program.

I would like to start off by thanking all of the community members who provided testimony today. We hear you and value your feedback. I would also like to thank Councilmember Grosso and the Committee on Education for hosting this public hearing. To all of you, please know that DCPS is committed to ensuring that all of our students have access to wholesome and delicious meals at a reasonable cost. We view this as an important part of our mission to ensure that students feel loved and prepared to positively thrive in school and society, and we commit this to every student, every school, every day.

Since 2008, food services for DCPS have been delivered through the District's contracts with school food service providers that prepare meals, in addition to managing purchasing, staffing, and all administrative and marketing functions. Since 2012, these contracts have featured a more predictable "firm-fixed-unit-price" and have included the higher nutrition standards of our local Healthy Schools Act. Our current food services contract was the culmination of two years of community engagement, including ward-based meetings and direct emails and surveys that contributed to the requirements for our new food service management contracts being aligned to our families' needs. This broad stakeholder feedback was embedded in our Request for Proposals (RFP). Specifically, the contract was designed to require annual satisfaction plans, requirements for staffing and training of staff, more stringent monitoring, penalties for non-compliance, and integration of community-based food organizations, gardening, and nutrition education. This comprehensive contract was thoroughly vetted and approved for implementation beginning in School Year 2016-2017. The term of the contract includes a base year and four option years. Our current contract is split between two vendors - SodexoMagic (which serves 99 of our schools) and DC Central Kitchen (which serves 12 schools). The schools are divided into clusters based on geographic locations.

We are grateful for the strong partnerships we have built with both of our food service vendors and for their commitment to ensuring DCPS students have access to wholesome and delicious meals every school day. Their operation of the food service program has also allowed us to focus on strengthening a number of key partnerships that have enhanced the quality and consistency of school meals, as well as nutrition education for students. I can share two examples:

- **FreshFarm FoodPrints** is a program that reaches over 3,500 DCPS students and integrates gardening, cooking, and nutrition education into the Common Core State Standards. Students participate in the entire garden-to-plate process, giving them the opportunity to try and appreciate new and healthy foods. Last year, we began replicating the FoodPrints recipes in our cafeterias to further strengthen the farm to cafeteria connection. We expect that students'

familiarity with ingredients that they have previously prepared will increase their consumption of and excitement for these foods.

- **Edible Schoolyard Intensive DC** is another partnership whose collaboration has led to great outcomes such as the "DCPS Eats!" brand, which is how we communicate our work with our community; strategy development for school gardens; and collaboration with DC Greens on initiatives like the Good Food Purchasing Policy (GFPP) and the School Food Advisory Board.

Our food service vendors have also developed a number of local, community-based partnerships to strengthen the impact of our food and nutrition service programs. One excellent example is the K Street Farm at Walker-Jones Education Campus, which is operated by our partners at **DC Greens**. DC Central Kitchen works with DC Greens to incorporate fresh ingredients from the garden into their recipes. They have also arranged for Walker-Jones students to tour the farm and learn about growing vegetables and herbs. We look forward to the expansion of this partnership at Kelly Miller Middle School, where a new farm is being plotted.

Just as our work with community partners has produced exciting outcomes, we can also highlight the results of Principal and Administrator Surveys sent to all schools in the spring and fall of 2017, which resulted in a satisfaction measure of 85 percent, the highest since the survey was first administered in 2011. Just as an example, leaders at Miner Elementary School shared these positive sentiments in the most recent survey, stating that "it [food service] is an overall wonderful experience for our students because of Sodexo and our cafeteria staff!"

In addition, our meal participation numbers are increasing. For lunch, our participation increased to 63.1 percent in School Year 2016-17, or almost 100,000 more meals than the prior year. This data tells us that we are reaching more students, that they like the food we are serving, and that the quality of our food services program continues to improve.

At the same time, we recognize that we have a few areas for improvement. We are working with both vendors to explore ways of ensuring meaningful participation in satisfaction surveys. In this first year under the current contract, the administration of our student satisfaction survey was not consistent across vendors, and at some schools, did not result in a participation rate that generated meaningful data. Both vendors expressed concerns with the requirement to administer the survey four times a year. We agree that the feedback gathered through these surveys can help to inform the service provided to schools and students and allow DCPS to better evaluate our food service vendors. However, we believe the frequency of administration may be unintentionally leading to decreased participation. To resolve this, we recommend that the frequency of the survey administration be reduced to twice a year; we anticipate that this would generate higher participation and improve the quality of the results for feedback to the vendors.

We are committed to continued engagement with our students and families, and in finding ways to enhance transparency and more direct communication between our food and nutrition services and the communities we serve. To that end, we are exploring ways to improve the School Food Advisory Board, a forum through which the public can provide feedback on the state of school food. We are also leveraging our partnerships and capitalizing on our social media platforms to promote this important work. These are all ways in which we expect to harness broad stakeholder feedback.

Councilmembers, our meals program is a critical component of our work to improve academic achievement for DCPS, and we know that our students, teachers, and staff depend on a successful food and nutrition service program to help students focus on their academic and personal pursuits. Over the last several years of these contracts, we have made great strides in improving the quality of our meal service programs. We have eliminated unhealthy items and increased the amount of high-quality ingredients in meals, including servings of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy options. We are accommodating the dietary restrictions of students, providing a variety of daily vegetarian meals and salad bars. And we have increased locally-sourced ingredients. Further, we have worked to increase students' direct exposure to the healthy sources of their meals (through innovative partnerships with local groups), while engaging them to incorporate their feedback in the implementation of the program. We outpace many jurisdictions in the country with these efforts. DCPS is proud of these accomplishments and excited to build on lessons learned as we align with the district's new Capital Commitment and realize continued improvements.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

