

**Testimony to the Committee on Education  
For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the District of Columbia Public Schools**

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Good morning Councilmember Grosso and other members of the council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Jessica Anderson and I am a Program Coordinator at the Young Women's Project (YWP), a multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can shape DC policies and institutions.

I help run a program called PHASE (Peer Health and Sexuality Education) a youth-adult partnership that works to improve youth health outcomes by expanding comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring access to community and school based reproductive health care, and engaging teen women and men as peer educators and decision makers on reproductive health issues. Through this program, YWP has trained and managed more than 200 youth educators who work in partnership with DC Public Schools and the Department of Health (DOH) to improve sexual health outcomes for DC youth through peer education, condom distribution, and by expanding sexual health education. We started with six schools last year, expanded to 12 this year, and have employed 93 youth educators during the past year—thanks to you! Last year these youth distributed 13,000 condoms and conducted 4,000 educational interventions. So far this year, they distributed 14,000 condoms, and conducted 6,000 education sessions. These youth also trained 150 health teachers, collected data from more than 500 youth on health, violence, education, and other issues, cultivated more than 200 relationships with administrators and teachers in DC public and charter schools, provided youth outreach for school-based STI-HIV testing, made significant contributions to the DC Health Education Standards, and presented more than 40 testimonies to five Council Committees. Because of the six great principals who have made comprehensive sexual education a priority, I have been able to spend a lot of time in DCPS cafeterias, classrooms, and hallways observing and encouraging our youth as they distribute condoms and deliver presentations to their peers.

In the February oversight hearing for DCPS I testified about the need for improved school lunch quality and low student participation and proposed a youth-adult working committee as a mechanism for collaboration and increased efficacy within the Office of Food and Nutrition Services. Since then, I met with Robert Jaber, the DCPS Director of Food and Nutrition Services (OFNS) about creating a more inclusive and effective

Food Ambassador Program. I would like to thank Director Jaber for his responsiveness to our testimony and his dedication to the DCPS Office of Food and Nutrition Services. I am now here to request six-thousand dollars for a pilot food ambassador program that integrates DCPS students from 5 High Schools into the food and nutrition service work and sustainably addresses the challenges I raised in my previous testimony. This money would fund stipends for the participating youth and designated school staff who will manage and implement the program in Coolidge Senior High, Anacostia, Ballou, HD Woodson and Duke Ellington High Schools.

YWP recommends that the current Food Ambassador program widen the responsibilities of both the youth ambassador and the designated school staff member so that they are able to conduct peer surveys and data collection, outreach, special event promotion, and provide informed youth representation for the Office of Food and Nutrition Services. Each committee would be composed of one designated adult staff member within the school, and 5-7 youth ambassadors who would serve under the general oversight of the Office of Food and Nutrition Services. Their collective responsiveness will not only improve food delivery but increase student food satisfaction and performance as it relates to research that has connected hunger with increased absence, tardiness and disciplinary problems. In addition to providing performance feedback, the committee would provide the support necessary for OFNS to carryout school-based initiatives. The work of the committee would be guided by the following objectives:

1. Provide feedback regarding school food and increase youth voice in menu selection and options
2. Increase student satisfaction with school food
3. Increase youth involvement in major decisions that influence the student school food experience
4. Enhance the lunchroom experience with engaging activities that increase youth knowledge of nutritious meals and preparation (using established partners)
5. Increase youth participation in school food programs
6. Decrease school food waste
7. Increase nutritional intake

In this pilot year, this committee would serve both an advisory and support function. They would ensure that the youth voice is heard as the primary and most significant consumer of school food including breakfast, lunch, snack and supper. They will also ensure that efforts made to improve school food are implemented as proposed and monitored over time for quality and effectiveness. This oversight allows for OFNS to

operate with added efficiency as the committee addresses the collective feedback from students, administrators, and food service workers and empowers OFNS leadership to work towards improved outcomes.

In addition, this committee would be responsible for engaging community and school partners that can improve the lunchroom eating and learning experience. The committee would coordinate these groups to include lunch and breakfast time interventions that OFNS may not have the capacity to implement. The committee would be empowered to make tangible changes and implement worthwhile initiatives. In California, Fremont's Youth Wellness Advisory Board, proposed and advocated for "Grab-N-Go" breakfast and improvements to the school salad bar which has increased participation in the program and brought in more funding.<sup>1</sup> These youth are supervised by a Health Educator from their School-based health clinic and have proven how projects like these engage students, incorporate youth input into adult decision-making, and add diversity to the lunch experience. Coordinating established community partners to do cooking demonstrations, tastings, activities and other educational interventions adds dimension to the lunchroom and extends the reach of Food and Nutrition Services.

In order for this committee to be successful, those adult supports within schools should be motivated and we suggest that they be provided with a small stipend in the selected pilot schools. 1 staff in the 5 pilot schools mentioned above, will be assigned to manage this committee. These adult supports will report to an assigned administrator who they will update and report to for initiatives. Using the DCPS Sexual Health Liaison model that pays school representatives twice annually, we propose that these individuals receive \$500 that will be given in two installments of \$250. In addition, we believe that youth should be rewarded for their work and active youth should receive \$100 stipends after a year of qualifying participation. In sum, this initiative in 5 schools with 5-7 ambassadors per school would cost between \$5,000-\$6,000 dollars depending on the number of ambassadors hired at each school. If this program were extended to 15 high schools with enrollment over 250 students, the total cost would be \$15,000-\$18,000. This stipend will support the added staff time they will commit to ambassador meetings, events and projects and will strengthen both accountability and incentivize meaningful outcomes. These schools will serve as a model

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/youth-in-action/ousd-youth-wellness-champions/school-food/>

for a food ambassador program that is purposed with leveraging the youth voice to make pointed and timely changes in food delivery, lunchroom engagement, FNS promotion and food service satisfaction.

A number of studies point at the significant and immediate effect of diet on behavior, concentration and cognitive ability; as well as on the immune system, and therefore the ability to attend school.<sup>2</sup> If implemented effectively, this committee would be one of its kind and model how a youth-adult partnership can shape a dynamic food service program that responds proactively to food and nutrition needs. Lisa Ruda, the Deputy Chancellor for Operations within DCPS mentioned that “food ambassadors were absolutely positively critical” and we are hopeful that this program will grow in future years to include more schools and make a meaningful impact towards increased satisfaction, participation and eligibility for federal subsidies. We are asking for committee support for this youth-adult working committee as we attempt to address the school lunch participation and acceptance challenges in the schools with the most need.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.

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<sup>2</sup> Belot, M. & James, J. (2010). Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes. Retrieved from: [http://www.iza.org/conference\\_files/SUMS2010/james\\_j6105.pdf](http://www.iza.org/conference_files/SUMS2010/james_j6105.pdf)