



The D.C. School Food Project
dcschoolfoodproject.org

Lisa Ruda, Chief of Staff
DC Public Schools

13 November 2013

Dear Ms. Ruda:

I personally appreciate your swift attention to the feedback I provided on the Food Services Director position – thank you. A community group of which I am a member—the DC School Food Project—also welcomes your engagement on this issue. We write here collectively to respond to your comments and continue our dialogue with DCPS on the topic of food services.

We are a group of parents, hunger advocates, health professionals, social scientists, educators and community members concerned with the quality and content of food provided to students in the District. The most important issue for our group is **transparency** in all processes related to school food in DC.

It is for this reason—transparency—that we urge the Chancellor to eliminate from consideration candidates who have previously worked directly for the District’s primary vendor, Chartwells. Put simply, this is a conflict of interest. Given years of food budget deficits incurred by this vendor, a damaging 2012 audit that implicates the vendor in multiple and costly breaches of contract, and consistent reports of declining quality in the meals this vendor has provided under the interim director, we presume the District would like to proceed in a way that indicates no inappropriate alliances with this vendor, its parent company, or its local partner, Thompson Hospitality. We are quite concerned that the vendor has chosen to place a Regional Director in charge of its DC contract who is being investigated for providing bribes to high-level public school officials while overseeing the vendor’s contract with Chicago Public Schools. Distancing DCPS from practices like this would seem the prudent course of action.

While the new terms of the vendor contract may prove to be more cost effective than prior terms, this information has not been made available for scrutiny. Your letter cites a \$3M reduction in food service contract costs from FY12, but it does not provide an accounting of the number of meals served in the two periods you compare. By some counts participation is down by more than one million meals since FY12, which certainly has the District moving in the wrong direction. As you know, nearly one-third of households with children in DC are unable to afford enough food, and the meals served to children in schools contribute significantly to these students’ health and ability to learn.

Meal participation should be going up, not down, and this goal cannot be accomplished with vendor staff reductions, efforts *not* to serve breakfast in the classroom, and declining food quality. While your letter indicates that the vast majority of principals are pleased with the quality of meals served at their schools, our own data collection efforts do not support that assessment. Members of our group have testified at public hearings that the main vendor has replaced antibiotic- and hormone-free chicken with highly processed Tyson chicken nuggets, for instance, and removed organic Stonyfield yogurt to make way for the Yoplait Trix brand, which contains hormones and preservatives. The food the primary vendor provides to the Afterschool Supper Program has been documented to be at times moldy, paltry and

unappetizing as well. In one typical supper, students are served a 4-ounce dinner roll and three slices of cucumber with a package of dressing. A Food Services Director who investigates and reports vendors' practices dutifully, who does not tolerate non-compliance, and who puts children's health and well-being first is absolutely essential.

The ability to assess the ongoing state of DCPS food services is vital, and full assessment cannot occur without community involvement. In 2011 the Office of Food and Nutrition Services opened itself up to a Family and Friends Advisory Committee which met monthly and received OFNS reports on participation, quality, special initiatives, and other issues. With your selection of a new Director, we request the opportunity to work together with DCPS to reanimate this Advisory Committee so that important matters—such as the hiring of a Director—will again be conducted in an open and transparent manner with community access and input.

The DC School Food Project, which grew out of the Family and Friends Advisory Committee, would be happy to meet with you prior to your selection of the next Food Services Director to provide our guidance and input on the position. If you can arrange a meeting for this week to avoid a lengthy delay in the hiring process, at least three members of our group would be able to sit down with you. Please contact me at 202-550-3337 or ivyleighken@gmail.com to coordinate such a meeting.

We appreciate the seriousness with which you have considered our concerns, and we look forward to working with you and the Office of Food and Nutrition Services to ensure the highest quality food for every one of the District's public school students.

Sincerely,

Ivy Ken, Member

Emily Gustafsson-Wright, Chair

The DC School Food Project