

Written Testimony

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Subcommittee Hearing: Ending Child Hunger: Priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization

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Good Afternoon Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Fitzgerald, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Ending Child Hunger: Priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization. I am Crystal Cooper, Executive Director of Nutrition Support Services at Chicago Public Schools. I have had the honor of working with some of the best nutrition professionals in Chicago for more than seven years. The lunchroom staff at CPS serves over 60 million meals to more than 300,000 students annually.

CPS is a 100% Community Eligibility Provision district, receiving the maximum free reimbursement rate for all meals. CPS participates in all child nutrition programs that are available, such as the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. We are committed to serving our students the freshest and healthiest meals during the school day and during after school and Saturday activities. During the pandemic, we have been grateful for the waivers received, specifically the non-congregate feeding waiver, and the waiver allowing districts to run the Summer Food Service Program. We have served more than 45 million meals with these waivers and have started meal deliveries to homes of students and families that are most impacted by COVID-19 and could not get to a food distribution site.

We are a founding member of the Urban School Food Alliance, which comprises 15 school districts that collaborate to share best practices, develop procurement standards, and advocate for the health and wellness of students. We gain valuable insights from each other and help each other when we face challenges. Through monthly membership calls, we share recipes; ideas about farm-to-school programs; and best practices regarding procurement, meal distribution, meal kits, summer feeding, and food trucks to ensure we are all providing healthy and nutritious meals to students.

At Chicago Public Schools, we ensure all menu items meet the Target 2 standards for sodium reduction, and that all grains are 100% whole grain rich, meaning that they are composed of 50% or more whole grains. We did not and do not intend to use the waivers for flexibility on these standards. We have maintained our commitment to serving fresh local food from the Midwest, including frozen-local produce once per week, and local no-antibiotic chicken twice per month. We are targeting removing ingredients of concern from food, which include added sugars and items that students cannot pronounce. We believe that educating students about food and food choices is key to the success of child nutrition programs. If menu items are not favorable with students, we work with local chefs to

develop new recipes and hold student focus groups and menu tastings to determine which items to replace. We also challenge our supply chain and vendors to produce healthy menu items that will appeal to students.

Students attend school five days a week and some on Saturdays. It is my responsibility to remove the hunger barrier and make sure students receive the nutrition they need to function at their best and focus on academics. As an African American, a former student in Chicago Public Schools, and a recipient of the school breakfast and lunch program, I see my role as being an advocate for my younger self. This means ensuring students do not grow up believing it is normal to have high blood pressure or diabetes, or to suffer from obesity. As a school nutrition professional, if I can introduce the students to items that are colorful, fresh, crunchy, and flavorful, and have them as repeat customers, I am going to fight for that daily. This also means ensuring students are not denied a healthy school breakfast or lunch due to stigma or financial concerns. It means maintaining a high bar for nutrition standards.

As a committee, you can have a profound impact on these efforts. I urge you to reject the idea of rolling back nutrition standards that help improve students' health and shape their life-long preferences. At CPS, we have had no problem with finding menu items and recipes that our students enjoy. I also urge you to support healthy school meals for all to ensure every student has access to free, nutritious meals, and to promote policies that allow nutrition professionals to focus on the best interests of their students rather than on processing paperwork, determining which students are eligible for meal assistance, and collecting debt.

The impact of high nutrition standards and healthy school meals for all will be minimized if our students are not guaranteed sufficient time to eat their food, which is currently the case in many of our schools. Our principals are often put in the position of squeezing 20-minute lunch periods into the elementary school day, leaving students maybe 10 minutes to eat their meals after accounting for the time they wait in line for their food. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that students get at least 20 minutes to eat lunch, and I urge the committee to consider policies that support allowing students' sufficient time to eat their food.

Lastly, just as you did in 2020, I would like the committee to consider our request for additional revenue to replace lost revenue for this school year. Overseeing the nutrition program in a large district like Chicago Public Schools does not come without its financial challenges. My department ended our 2020 fiscal year with a 28 million dollar deficit, and we are projecting a 20 million dollar deficit for the 2021 fiscal year. Because we served fewer meals during the pandemic, our revenue decreased, while our overhead costs stayed the same. We need increased funding to pay our highly-skilled staff, who have been serving meals nonstop since March of 2020.

I would like to end by thanking you for this time to advocate for all students in Chicago Public Schools, and for the dedicated staff who show up daily to ensure these children receive balanced, nutritious meals under our care.

Thank You