

“Federation Corner” column

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## **Real food for Montgomery County**

By Karen Devitt

What do Montgomery County parents want for their children? Access to free water in the cafeteria; fewer highly-processed meal choices; more salad bars; healthier a la carte and vending machine options; more transparency and accountability; utilization of our county’s Agricultural Reserve for fresh, local produce; less sugar; and more respect for the latest research on the dangers of chemical food additives.

Now that the school year is in full swing, we’d like to take this opportunity to introduce you to Real Food for Kids – Montgomery (RFKM), a grassroots parent and student advocacy group promoting healthier school food in MCPS. On October 1, RFKM celebrated its 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary. We have much to be proud of and much work ahead of us.

Efforts to improve MCPS food go back decades. Children, parents and school board members all come and go, but the staff at Food and Nutrition Services (DFNS) remains the same, committed to doing more of the same, with only small incremental changes and more whole wheat. “Everything we serve is healthy and meets USDA guidelines” does not answer the ongoing frustration parents feel when faced with the reality in the school cafeterias. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 resulted in some positive changes such as more fruits, vegetables and whole grains; and the passage of the Smart Snacks rules, in effect this past July, improved some of the vending and a la carte options. But overall, MCPS lags behind other school districts that have made better school food a priority.

We were pleased last year when MCPS agreed to eliminate strawberry-flavored milk. We were equally pleased when MCPS recently announced the elimination of certain chemical additives from school food. (A closer reading of this announcement revealed that this change will not take place any time soon, but only in future bids for contracts. And the most prevalent of all food dyes, Red Dye #40, is not slated for elimination.)

Last year we got DFNS to acknowledge on the elementary school menu that it sells snacks in the cafeteria at lunch time, and that parents can block their child’s account from purchasing these snacks. This year, the blurb on the menu doesn’t mention the bit about blocking your child’s account. The piece of paper that goes home with elementary school kids when their lunch account needs re-filling states that parents may block their child’s account from purchasing snacks. However, most parents are still completely in the dark about the existence or nature of these snacks; school lunch menus at all levels do not mention the a la carte items sold (chips, Doritos, pretzels, ice cream, cookies, gummy candies, etc.).

In response to our request that kids have access to free water in the cafeteria and something to drink it with, DFNS is now offering plastic bottles of water free to children who purchase lunch, a solution with a high environmental price, and which at least two School Board members voiced concern over at a June School Board meeting. Why remove the Styrofoam trays from the cafeteria only to offset that gain with a new source of landfill waste? Why not add reusable water bottles to every school’s supply list and provide paper cups in the cafeteria as a backup? One school that is being rebuilt has plans for a water

bottle filling station, also a good idea. With so many sugary drinks available (chocolate milk and juice are offered at every meal), we'd like to see more emphasis on plain water.

High levels of sugar are another concern to parents. Rather than take this seriously as we would hope, DFNS has stated – both in print and in public hearings – that it serves no items with added sugar. (Our research identified at least 40 items with added sugars.) The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics states in its position paper on sweeteners: “Added sugars ... have been linked to health concerns, including overweight and obesity, type 2 diabetes or prediabetes, inflammation, and cardiovascular disease.” The load of added sugar in a typical breakfast (free in the classroom in 75 schools) defies nutritional common sense: chocolate milk (2 tsps.), a cinnamon roll (3 tsps.), and a package of Craisins (5 tsps.). This is a whopping 10 tsps. of added sugar in this meal alone, more than three times the American Heart Association’s daily recommendation for children ages 4-8. When asked about the excessive sugar load per meal, DFNS has said it has no intention of addressing the issue. While some school districts have either limited or eliminated chocolate milk entirely, it is served at breakfast and lunch every day in MCPS. The ratio of chocolate milk to white is almost 5 to 1. Each 8 oz. serving of chocolate milk has over 2 tsps. of added high fructose corn syrup.

In summary, here is what we would like to see for the future:

- Nutritional common sense applied to what is served to the 154,000 children in MCPS - 17% of Maryland’s school kids - especially as regards to sugar.
- Reinstatement of the Wellness Committee, chaired by someone not tasked with implementing its recommendations.
- Changes to the school food environment reflected in the Wellness Policy.
- A more responsive, engaged and accountable School Board that takes its own Wellness Policy seriously.

This time last fall, RFKM and Montgomery Victory Gardens (MVG) co-sponsored the very successful “School Food Forum: Creating a Vision of Fresh, Real Food in Montgomery County Public Schools”. Since that time, we have been gratified to see community support for our efforts grow by leaps and bounds. With over 3,600 supporters, including parents in 186 of MCPS’ 202 schools, we feel the time is ripe for substantive improvements to the school food environment. We are privileged to count among our supporters many Montgomery County State Delegates and County Council members.

Regardless of the outcome of the School Board election this week, RFKM will continue to advocate for more improvements. We look forward to another productive year in our collective journey toward better school food in MCPS.