

**Child Nutrition Written Testimony of Alice Sheehan**  
**8th Grade Student, Baltimore City Public Schools**  
**Before the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**  
**October 8, 2009**

Hello, My name is Alice Sheehan and I am the spokesperson for my school's lunch committee. Thank you for inviting us here today. I am delighted that I have the chance to speak up and help improve the food in our school systems. I have been working to solve this problem for over 3 years. Even before I came into the picture, other students began to bring attention to the abysmal quality of Baltimore City's pre-plated, school lunches. Together we have worked to get rid of the overcooked, tasteless, and just plain disgusting food in our schools. Coming here and telling you about our experience in Baltimore means that we are on our way to guaranteeing nutritious and delicious breakfasts and lunches for all American children.

Our story started with the endless grumbling about lunches at school. Tired of the complaints and ready for action, our student council and others together took samples of our prepackaged lunch down to the Baltimore City School Board to demonstrate what it would be like to eat this every day. If that is what they feed us, we said, they should have to eat it too. The Board turned up its nose: no thanks! But the deed was done: we had started acting and not just complaining.

A year later, Mr. French, my Social Studies teacher, suggested starting a lunch committee that included Justus Grier, Zachary Carter, a few others, and myself. The committee had two goals. First, we worked out a Cafeteria Plan of Action and a Cafeteria Bill of Rights. We wrote out point by point what we needed for tasty and healthy lunches. The Bill of Rights included:

- \*The right to nutritious and delicious food for breakfast and lunch

- \*The right to fresh fruit and fresh vegetables each day

- \*The right to choose-more than one main selection each day

- \*The right to give feedback and have input on the quality and selections made and have our input be given serious consideration

The Plan of Action was to put a kitchen and cooking staff in each Baltimore City School, end pre-plated lunches, to immediately begin surveying students on how they feel about their cafeteria meals and for the school system use this information in future planning and purchasing

Second, we decided that we had to know more, not just about our school, but ALL the schools. So we prepared an experiment, and we invited the *Baltimore Sun* to observe. We made an expedition to sample lunches. In the end, we had three: one from our school, which had only pre-plated and packaged food; one from the Hamilton public school, which had its own kitchen; and one from a Baltimore county school, whose food came from outside the city district altogether. The difference was clear: our food was by far the worst. And no surprise that the County's food was the best: their school system is wealthier than the Baltimore City's Public Schools. People with more money are getting

better, tastier food, and the unfairness of this made us mad. The *Sun* caught on fast: they took pictures and wrote them up for the next week's news.

With our results in hand, and the press on the case, we went downtown to confront the (now former) director of food and nutrition at the schools. She was hopping mad about the article. Even so, she told us that her hands were tied and that the city was bound by its contracts. Plus, the food you eat, she said, is both nutritious AND delicious.

We disagreed. And we weren't going to take no for an answer.

So we went to the top, to Dr. Andres Alonso, the Superintendent of the Baltimore City Public Schools. And we gave him our Cafeteria Bill of Rights, and told him of our expectations for a better and healthier school lunch system. He was sympathetic with our cause, and admitted how much he disliked the pre-packaged food at his own cafeteria. He said he would do something about it. And he did. The NEW director of food and nutrition Dr. Geraci has been working hard to improve our lunches ever since.

But we think there is still work to be done. First, we need healthy food that kids actually will eat! If adults won't eat it, then why should kids? Everybody deserves to have fresh, tasty and yummy food. If possible, why not make it local food? Why buy apples from Washington State when you can get them right here in Maryland at a cheaper price? We should think about our meals not as nutritional packages, but as food that people like and want to eat, with fresh ingredients and tasting like it should.

Second, our experiment showed that, at the present, school districts with the most underserved kids get the worst food. This is unfair. The same kids who already are struggling to eat good meals at home, are getting inferior meals at school. ALL kids need to eat well, if they live in Baltimore City or in Baltimore County. The city of Baltimore may always be poorer than the county, but the city could spend its money better, on healthier and tastier foods, rather than on expensive prepackaged junk.

Third, waste. Right now, if you go to our cafeteria, you find in the trash can, at least half of the lunches are uneaten and thrown away. What is eaten, is the fresh fruit, the sweets, and the bread. Not a good lunch. Nor a good use of the school's money! If people get free or reduced-cost lunch and just throw it away, it is just like throwing money right down the drain. Lunch is more often an experiment—how hard are those mashed potatoes? Did the meatloaf just move? None of this helps kids at all. The point is, that we need to serve healthy food that kids will eat. Why not ask kids to help plan the menus? Why not design lunches with kids, so that they eat their food every day?

I am a kid who does not buy lunch all that often, and I am lucky to have another option. But most kids can't bring their lunch, or if they do it is either small or not very good for them. On days when I do buy lunch and eat it all (not very common!) I am usually still hungry afterwards. In my experience, then, school lunches are neither delicious nor nutritious, and not even very filling. We can do better. And we should. And with the help of the Congress, we will. Thank you for listening to me on behalf of the children of the United States.