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For the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming
Food for Thought: Sustainability from Counter to Compost
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Ten years ago, a small group of teachers, an enlightened principal and a visionary cook named Alice Waters started a project on an asphalt parking lot at a public middle school in Berkeley, CA. Alice lived nearby and imagined transforming the broken lot into a beautiful space where children could learn about the connections between food, health and the environment.

A decade later, the Edible Schoolyard, now a program of the Chez Panisse Foundation, is a thriving national model. Every week students at King Middle School participate for 90 minutes in either a kitchen or garden class as part of the academic curriculum. Our program uses food as a vehicle for a very rich and powerful experience. Students learn about volume and proportionality by measuring and making a ten-grain cereal in the kitchen. They learn about history by harvesting ancient grains like amaranth in the garden. They learn how to work in groups and take responsibility as they cook in teams and set the table for each other. And most importantly, they have the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussions about a complex set of issues that will affect their future.

Recently, I was at the Edible Schoolyard when a group of 7th graders preparing a bed found an old shoe in the soil. One of them asked: What would happen if we threw the shoe in the compost pile? Would it decompose the way the vegetable scraps and paper does? How long would it take? I listened as each student argued what they thought would happen and why. At the Edible Schoolyard, our food system and the environment are inextricably linked.

Our vision is to create this kind of learning experience *and* a nourishing and delicious lunch that all students would eat as part of the regular school day. Two and half years ago, we started to make significant changes to the meal program in Berkeley to begin to influence what students eat for lunch. We gave the school district a grant to hire a chef who began to change the food in all 16 schools in Berkeley.

We had five criteria for the food: local, seasonal, sustainable, nourishing, and of course, delicious. The average meal travels 1500 miles before it gets to your plate. We wanted to change what students ate *and* where it came from—we also knew that local seasonal foods would just taste better. We envisioned ripe juicy tomatoes in the summer and sweet tangerines in the winter luring children into the cafeteria and to the salad bars.

After two and half years of working to reinvent the Berkeley lunch program, we are proud to report that:

- The Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) is now 100 percent transfat and high fructose corn syrup free.
- The central kitchen serving over 5000 meals a day now uses all fresh whole produce, as opposed to frozen, pre-cut vegetables.

- All 16 schools have a salad bar featuring seasonal fruits and vegetables. About 30 percent of our produce is organic and most of it is regionally purchased.
- All 16 schools have Universal Breakfast, offered at no-cost to all students regardless of household income.
- 12 out of 16 schools use a buffet service for meals, reducing the need for prepackaged, plastic-wrapped disposable trays.
- Organic milk from Humboldt County is being served at lunch in all schools and waste reducing “milk dispensers” are used.
- BUSD began purchasing produce directly from local farms, including Full Belly and River Dog organic farms.
- All kitchens are composting and recycling.

Obstacles to Providing Fresh Food

I want to remind the Committee that the Chez Panisse Foundation does not pay for any of the food costs and the food is not 100 percent organic or all locally purchased—yet . We have supported the district by providing a chef and the resources needed for new menus, new recipes, new purveyors, a new accounting system, an evaluation and an education program for staff, students and educators.

We face obstacles every day to improving school lunch. Infrastructure and facilities: The central kitchen that serves over 5000 meals a day does not even have a stove or a walk in refrigerator. Most of the kitchens are antiquated and local bond money paid to upgrade them slightly. Human resource development: Many of the men and women who prepare the meals had never even held a knife before we started our work; they only unwrapped frozen processed foods. When we started baking raw chicken, they had to learn how to handle raw food. School districts have to hire people who can and want to cook. Procurement and distribution: One of the biggest challenges is creating the distribution systems and policies to promote buying locally and seasonally. Most school districts are not set up to deal directly with farmers who sell whole products and the farmers often cannot deliver to multiple sites. One of our vendors allows us to buy from local farmers but we try to buy directly from the farmers whenever possible. We know that by developing a relationship with them we can be certain of the quality of the food.

Buying and eating locally is a very simple concept that could have a huge impact on the environment if big public systems like schools districts, cities, parks and hospitals and private businesses all began to do it. Imagine the way that we could stimulate local economies and reduce food miles by simply choosing to eat what is in season and buying locally from sustainable farms?

The recent recall of 143 million pounds of beef produced by the Westland Hallmark Meat Company should be a lesson to us. Thirty seven million pounds of beef were distributed to school lunch programs! Earlier recalls about tainted spinach should also be a warning to us. If we care about the health of the planet and future generations, we need to care where our food comes from and how that food is grown or raised. The Founder of my organization, Alice Waters, says it best:

“I believe there is something very wrong with the way most people in our culture relate to food, and this is something that seems to me to be absolutely central to the future of environmentalism. Even the environmental visionaries who seem to be seeing the trees awfully well, even some of these brilliant revolutionaries keep missing the forest. And the forest is, that learning to make the right choices about food is the single most important key to environmental awareness—for ourselves, and especially for our children.”

How do we create change?

Is it possible to create the kind of edible education we offer at the Edible Schoolyard and make the kinds of changes we've made to the school lunch program in other cities? Yes, but it takes leadership. We need leaders at all levels of government and in the schools who understand why buying local is important and can advocate for policies and pilot programs to catalyze changes in public institutions.

In addition, school districts need incentives to buy locally and increased funding to support purchasing real food — apples instead of canned fruit cocktail; chicken instead of nuggets; food that is delicious and ripe; food that will lure children in with pleasure. We've learned after a decade of working with children: if they grow it, and cook it, they eat. We don't have to teach them about nutrition—I've seen children devour plates of simply cooked chard. We don't have to tell them why we don't use chemicals in the garden. They taste and know the difference.

Finally, buying locally will require new funding. Sadly, the federal government reimbursement for school lunch is \$2.49 per student; the state allocation in California is 21 cents; the commodity foods program brings in about another 18 cents for a total of \$2.88. (The commodity program is the same program that brought so many school districts the recently recalled beef.) When payroll and overhead are factored in, there is only about 80 cents left for food costs. What kind of lunch can you buy for less than a dollar? We are trying to buy locally, sustainably and transform an entire food system on very little money. It can't be done at scale without increased resources and more creative policies/incentives.

Most districts have to make a profit on their school lunch program and do not receive additional reimbursements from their district's general fund (which we fortunately do in Berkeley). But budget cuts in education each year in California threaten the changes we've worked so hard to make. A fresh fruits and vegetables program was recently scrapped in the California legislature.

We believe that state and federal governments must come up with increased funding and better policies to support purchasing real—local, seasonal and sustainable foods. I realize that budgets are tight and we are facing difficult economic times throughout our country, but we can pay now or pay later. We send a message to our children when we say we don't care what we feed them. I know that changing the regulations is not the purview of this Committee but it is an important issue that all legislators should understand.

I am so honored to be testifying before this Committee. It means that government—our leaders—are connecting the dots between our food system and the environment, between our children's health and the future of our economy. What we feed our children matters. The

national school lunch program serves 31 million children a day. We have a choice about what to feed them. I close with a quote from Alice Waters:

“If you choose to eat mass-produced, fast food you are supporting a network of supply and demand that is destroying local communities and traditional ways of life all over the world—a system that replaces self-sufficiency with dependence. And you are supporting a method of agriculture that is ecologically unsound—that depletes the soil and leaves harmful chemical residues in our food. But if you decide to eat fresh food in season—and only in season—that is locally grown by farmers who take care of the earth, then you are contributing to the health and stability of local agriculture and local communities.”

Thank you for connecting your efforts to create energy independence and stop global warming with our efforts to make a very simple meal more delicious and locally grown for all children.