

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member Fitzgerald, and Members of the House Education and Labor Committee:

I had the pleasure of testifying before this same committee 12 years ago, then chaired by Representative George Miller. I am back here again today to express my support for investing, strengthening, expanding and improving the school meals and child nutrition programs, and to urge you and your fellow Representatives to do everything in your power to find the funds and the political will to enact legislation that will continue to feed children, especially children from low-income families, in preschool, school-based and out of school time settings. As millions of children and families recover from the health, educational, and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has never been a more important time to make significant investments in the child nutrition programs.

I'm continue to wear a few different hats at this hearing today as I did 12 years ago: First off, there is my public one; as host and judge of a popular television program, I find myself in the slightly surreal position of being able to comment on issues of importance to me to a public willing to listen. I continue to use this to the advantage of the millions of American children who rely on school, preschool, after-school and summer feeding programs for adequate nutrition, who don't have lobbyists with deep pockets at their disposal advocating on their behalf.

I'm also before you as a chef. Once upon a time my job wasn't public at all – we stayed in the kitchen cooking, and then early the next morning we trolled the farmer's stalls and fish markets to choose the day's food. Nobody gave a hoot what we had to say, just what we sent out on the plate. Today that's changed a bit, and chefs are frequently called upon to cook at fundraisers for food pantries and food-based charities to help meet the needs of those who struggle with hunger. As a group, we chefs have never been more active and never raised more money than we do now, and yet studies show that people continue to be hungry or food insecure in this country today. It's frustrating, and has spurred me to ask...*why?*

I'm here, too, as a business owner. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, my first thought was of my restaurants and employees. It then immediately jumped to the almost 30 million children who rely on public school to receive breakfast and lunch everyday. Where were they going to eat now that schools were shut down? Here in New York, many school cooks began preparing meals for anyone in the community who needed them, as part of the city's push to ramp up food distribution for vulnerable New Yorkers. Continued access to school meals will be critical as students recover from the educational and health impacts of the pandemic and as schools work to overcome the learning disruption created by the pandemic-driven school closures. I am equally encouraged that Chairwoman Bonamici is planning to reintroduce her Access to Healthy Foods for Young Children Act that allows for additional meals for children who are in extended day care for long hours, as so many are, or spending time in after-school settings.

I'm here before you as a father to 27 year-old Dante and 11 year old Luka and 10 year old Mateo. While Dante has grown to love healthy and nutritious meals, it wasn't always that way. People often assume that my kids have refined dining palettes, but my kids, like kids everywhere, are more than happy to slurp down junk food and empty calories – pizza, sodas, candy and deep-fried anything. But the fact that they would eat this whenever doesn't give me permission to shrug my shoulders and say, 'well, that's what they want!' It's my job as a parent to make sure they have a variety of real, nutritious foods served to them at every meal so that they grow into robust, healthy kids capable of meeting their full potential in life. And yet, I hear people say, "we'd like to improve school lunch, but all the kids want to eat are pizzas and burgers. If we give them good food they won't eat it" Come on, people! We're the adults. It's up to us to do better. My kids would also happily live in front of the Xbox and never take another shower as long as they live. Not gonna happen. When I give them healthy, delicious food they eat it, with gusto. On a past *Top Chef* episode, we challenged our contestants to prepare healthy, nutritious lunch for schoolchildren here in D.C. that was also delicious. What do you know? The kids ate it, happily, and they asked for seconds and thirds.

I'm also here before you as the son of a "lunch lady." My mother, Beverly Colicchio, worked for decades as a cafeteria supervisor in Elizabeth, NJ, where I was born. Elizabeth is not a wealthy town, and at the High School where she worked, almost 70% of the students qualified for free or reduced price breakfast and lunch. My mother told us that often the meals she served those kids was the only food they got all day. It was upsetting to her that the budgetary constraints imposed by low federal reimbursements meant that the schools couldn't afford much in the way of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and high quality proteins. The cheapest food, contracted out to the lowest bidder, was usually what was on the menu, and the kids who ate it didn't have the option of refusing. On a diet that may have met nutritional guidelines without being truly healthy and whole, we expect our kids to learn, behave, socialize appropriately, and develop into healthy teens and adults, and we are quick to label and punish them when they don't. Without regular exposure to real food – made from whole ingredients in a variety of textures, shapes, and colors – these children never develop a preference for healthy food, and thus perpetuate the cycle of poor nutrition that can lead to a lifetime of costly and debilitating health problems like obesity and diabetes, not to mention their lost potential as active, healthy citizens.

Let's fund school lunches and breakfasts at a spending level that significantly raises the quality and variety of what schools can afford. Let's make sure all kids are eligible for school lunch and breakfast free of charge and are not shamed or stigmatized because of it. Let's fund healthy snacks and meals in day care centers and after school programs. Let's expand access by finally enacting the Summer Meals Act, H.R. 783, allowing afterschool and summer programs to seamlessly provide meals to kids year 'round and broadening area eligibility requirements for

summer feeding programs. This would provide nutritious meals while also supporting desperately needed programming for kids – especially after the learning loss during COVID, and the need for kids to play and socialize with each other. The pandemic EBT program was a life line for families who could not access school breakfast and lunch while schools were shuttered. I am heartened by the Administration’s desire to make the “Summer EBT” program permanent and hope this committee will support the legislation, H.R. 3519, The Stop Child Hunger Act of 2021 that would provide families with an EBT card *whenever schools are shuttered*. We also need to expand direct certification and the community eligibility provision (CEP) to eliminate redundant paperwork for families and schools.

There can be no better investment – no better stimulus to our economy – than feeding this nation’s children healthily and well. If we give the kids in this country delicious and nutritious food, we will instill in them a lifetime preference for healthy eating that will translate into vast savings in health care costs down the line. Providing the building blocks for millions of kids to grow and develop as they should, will mean a population of robust and productive adults, and a more competitive America. Malnourished kids aren’t capable of vision and ideas, and without that we are relegating this great nation to a future of mediocrity and poor health. I think we can do better, and I urge you today to invest in these programs and ensure that every child has access to nutritious meals where ever they learn, play and thrive.

Thank you.