

Tom Colicchio
Written Testimony

House Committee on Education and Labor
Full Committee Hearing:
“H.R. 5504, *Improving Nutrition For America’s Children Act*”
July 1, 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Education and Labor Committee:

I am here today to express my support for the Improving Nutrition for America’s Children Act sponsored by Chairman Miller, and to urge you and your fellow Representatives to do everything in your power to find the funds to push this crucial piece of legislation through.

I’m wearing a few different hats at this hearing today: 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’ve decided 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 more people are hungry or food insecure in this country today than at any other time in history. It's frustrating, and has spurred me to ask...*why?*

I'm here, too, as a business owner. At my restaurants, I have dozens of employees working long hours, often more than one shift. I understand how urgently many of them need to know that their kids are receiving healthy nutrition at the schools and day care centers where they spend a big part of each day. It is hard enough to make a living in today's economy; no working parent should also worry whether their child has had enough to eat. I am encouraged that Chairman Miller's bill allows for additional meals for children who are in day care longer than 8 hours, as so many are, or spending time in after-school settings. In addition, Chairman Miller's bill makes important strides to ensure that low-income kids don't go hungry during the summer months when school is out.

I'm here before you as a father to 17 year-old Dante and 11 month-old Luka. 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 recent *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. Schools today are forced to supplement their meager budgets with vending machines that supply empty calories from soft drinks, and junk food. I ask you: how many of you here today would be content to let the bulk of your children's daily calories come from soda, chips, or branded fast food? And yet, we are sitting by and allowing that to happen for families who are struggling and relying on us to do better. As thinking adults, as fellow parents, this is an egregious abdication of our responsibility towards kids, and if it is at all within our means to fix it – and I believe it is – than I urge you now to make it right.

Let's fund school lunches and breakfasts at a spending level that significantly raises the quality and variety of what schools can afford, and get rid of the junk food in vending machines once and for all. Let's fund healthy snacks and meals in day care centers and after school programs. Let's expand access by broadening area eligibility requirements for summer feeding programs, and expanding direct certification 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 get behind Chairman Miller's bill and make it happen.

Thank you.