

For Immediate Release
Real Food For Kids
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**FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL FOOD ADVOCACY GROUP, *REAL FOOD FOR KIDS*,
SAYS NEW USDA NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS DO NOT GO FAR ENOUGH**

WEDNESDAY, January 25, 2012...Today, students at Fairfax County's Parklawn Elementary School were treated to a special visit by First Lady Michelle Obama who visited the school to unveil new USDA nutritional requirements for school lunches. The First Lady was joined by celebrity chef Rachael Ray, who prepared a special meal.

The USDA changes, the first in 15 years to the federally-funded School Lunch Program, show some improvement over what the USDA has allowed to be served in schools: highly processed foods laden with sodium, additives and preservatives that studies have shown to be harmful to children's health.

"We are pleased to see positive changes to the USDA guidelines. The agency is headed in the right direction," says parent advocate for better school food, JoAnne Hammermaster. "Unfortunately, though, the guidelines do not go far enough. It is unlikely there will be additional changes for many years, so parents need to speak up to let their own school district know that they want to go further than these guidelines set forth by the USDA."

Hammermaster leads the Fairfax County-based non-profit advocacy group, Real Food For Kids (RFFK), whose mission is to improve the quality of meals served in Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) cafeterias. Ultimately, RFFK would like to see FCPS replace highly processed foods with freshly made, whole, real foods that will positively impact student wellness and academic achievement.

"We are fortunate here in Fairfax County that pizza is not considered a vegetable in its nutrient analysis," says Hammermaster, "But most of our cafeteria food is still highly processed and contains excessive artificial additives, preservatives, and dyes."

Hammermaster applauded Rachael Ray for participating in today's event, but would have liked to see the First Lady eat a typical FCPS cafeteria lunch. "It would have been very challenging for our cafeteria staff to make this great meal," says Hammermaster, "as our schools only have warming ovens."

Mary Porter, an Alexandria-based nutrition educator and counselor, added that the new USDA guidelines still allow schools to use additives such as *caramel color*, which contains two cancer-causing chemicals, and *calcium propionate*, a

preservative that studies have linked to irritability, restlessness, inattention and sleep disruption.

Timesunion.com quoted the First Lady today as saying, "As parents, we try to prepare decent meals, limit how much junk food our kids eat, and ensure they have a reasonably balanced diet. And when we're putting in all that effort the last thing we want is for our hard work to be undone each day in the school cafeteria."

Real Food For Kids could not agree more. "We have a unique opportunity to teach kids about balanced diets at school," notes Hammermaster. "But we can't teach them about great choices in the classroom, and then offer them a grilled cheese sandwich that is reheated in a plastic bag. To understand real food, kids have to have access to it."

Pat Hynes, school board member for the Hunter Mill District, also attended the event. She was very pleased with the event and added, "We have parent advocates in the community working hard to improve food for Fairfax County students above and beyond the food guidelines, and I think we should be able to have that conversation."

For the 25% of kids in Fairfax County who are on the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program, Hammermaster adds, "60 to 90 percent of their food may be coming from our cafeterias. We have an obligation to provide them with nutritious food."

Hammermaster readily admits that this won't be easy. "We know this is a huge endeavor and that it will take time. But just because something is hard, does not mean we shouldn't do it."