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Real Food For Kids Event Honors Student Chefs With Awards and Expert Panel Connects Issues of School Food and Student Health. Local and Federal Officials Speak in Support of Positive Change in School Food

October 23, 2012---On the eve of National Food Day, Real Food For Kids kicked off the celebration with a hugely successful event, "Feeding Academic Success," which brought together students and experts around the issue of school food. At Principal Jay Pearson's invitation, the cafeteria of Marshall High School was transformed Tuesday evening into a venue for Fairfax County culinary students to showcase their craft as they competed in a Culinary Challenge sponsored by Real Food For Kids. Four teams (Falls Church, Marshall, Mount Vernon and Chantilly High Schools) arrived prepared to present, share and discuss their creations. Each team had created a themed salad bar, all of which met current USDA guidelines for school lunch. The teams thoughtfully approached the project as was evidenced by the impressive meals on display. All entries were balanced in nutrients, high in vegetable variety, and designed to appeal to fellow FCPS students.

The evening's panel, comprised of distinguished experts, judged the entries and was impressed with both the students and their wares. In turn, the students were impressed and proud to learn who the judges were. Ann Cooper, "the Renegade Lunch Lady", a celebrated chef and author, flew in from Colorado. Other panelists were: Chef Nora Pouillon, of Restaurant Nora, a pioneer of serving organic food; Dr. Natalie Sikka, a pediatric gastroenterologist; Katherine Bishop, from the Center for Science in the Public Interest, with a special interest in school food policy; and Edward Kwitowski, Chef and Director of School Food Services for DC Central Kitchen. The panelists awarded the Five Star Award to the team from Chantilly High School, made up of three senior girls: Nikki Caballero, Valerie Claunch and Kyung Lee, all of whom plan to become professional chefs.

A second set of honored guests judged the same salad bars for the Taster's Choice Award. David Esquith, Director of the Department of Education's Safe and Healthy Students Office, was among them. Esquith said he was delighted to be a part of the evening and, speaking on behalf of the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, and First Lady Michelle Obama, expressed admiration of the work Real Food For Kids is doing. Other guests, including Delegates Mark Keam, Barbara Comstock and Kaye Kory from the Virginia House of Representatives and several members of the FCPS School Board, sampled each of the salad bars and ultimately named the team from Marshall High School as the winner. Marshall's winning team: Jack Donahue, Noah Follin, Justin Kim and David Mock. The four young men were spirited and entertained the crowd by referring to the competition as the "2012 Salad Bar Smackdown" with their

winning chef's salad in one "corner" and pizza in the other. The mention of pizza was a wink---and a groan--- at Congress' recent declaration of pizza as a vegetable.

Fairfax County School Board member, Ryan McElveen: "I'm always impressed by the large crowd, including both local and federal officials that come out to celebrate Food Day in Fairfax County. This year, it was especially exciting to see students engage in a culinary challenge and present innovative ideas for improving salad bars in our schools. As this event proved, we can always learn great things from our students when we make the effort to engage them."

After the awards ceremony, the panelists made presentations in their fields of expertise. Keynote speaker Ann Cooper was "on fire", as one State Delegate was heard saying. With her compelling style, Cooper addressed the need to transform school food and just what needs to be done. She highlighted the barriers to success. "Everyone says, 'Feed our kids better.' But what are we actually willing to do?" asked Cooper. Having successfully changed the school food in two school districts out west and working with other school districts around the country, she is a well-known expert in the field.

Next up was INOVA Hospital's own, Dr. Natalie Sikka. Dr. Sikka discussed the rising rate of obesity among children, the subsequent illnesses and patterns of comorbidity among this population of children. Nora Pouillon spoke about why wholesome, organic food matters. "My father told me that health is the most important thing you can have. Protect your health. No amount of money can get it back." Katherine Bishop of CSPI spoke about the merits of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act and the need to enforce it. While there has been some push back from high school students on the new improved lunch guidelines, Bishop told the crowd the good news: "Elementary students have had no issues with the increase in fruits and vegetables. Getting to the younger students now will establish a new, healthier norm." Ed Kwitowski shared how DC Central Kitchen procures local food and makes a point of involving the students they serve. When asked what the biggest obstacle was in his work serving DC schoolchildren he said, "It's the adults! The kids are very receptive to new food and new ideas."

The evening ended with questions for the panelists from the audience. Perhaps the most poignant was from a young girl: "I am an elementary school student and president of my school. I promised to improve our school food and that's why I got elected. What steps can I take to make this happen?" Pat Hynes, a supportive FCPS School Board Member, took the question. "Real Food For Kids is probably the answer. As Ryan [McElveen, fellow school board member] has said, 'Take a page out of RFFK's playbook on how to advocate successfully for change.' Join forces with them!"