Testimony of Laura MacCleery
Regarding Additives in School Foods
Meeting of the Montgomery County School Board
June 3, 2014

Good morning, my name is Laura MacCleery and I am Chief Regulatory Affairs Attorney for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a non-profit that advocates for more healthful food. I am also a Montgomery County resident and parent. My three-year-old daughter will attend Takoma Park Elementary School in the fall of 2015.

A recent analysis by Real Food for Kids Montgomery of the foods served in Montgomery County schools showed that suspect food additives, including artificial dyes, trans fat, monosodium glutamate (MSG) and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) (which is listed in the official government Report on Carcinogens), were in at least 49 foods, excluding vending machine offerings. In response to concerns about additives, their approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is often cited. Yet oversight by FDA is grossly inadequate, and scientists and other governments are concerned about the safety of these additives.

Take food dyes. I applaud recent decisions by the County to stop serving strawberry milk and sorbets with dyes. But a stunning 25 products served in Montgomery County schools contain artificial colors, including in surprising foods like hamburgers with carrots and pancakes. Processed foods use dyes to imitate the presence of real fruits and vegetables so that foods appear healthier than they are. This kind of food fakery has no place in schools, which should be teaching children to recognize a rainbow of real nutrients. We agree as well that the total sugars served to children are a serious health threat, and impact their ability to learn.

Concerning additives, you should know that food dyes are harmful. We first petitioned FDA to ban dyes in foods in 2008, citing studies that show that commonly used dyes are neurotoxic and negatively impact behavior and attention in children. Other studies link these dyes to cancer. Red 3 has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals, and Yellow 5 and 6 can be contaminated with carcinogens.

Due to the compelling evidence on the harm dyes do to children’s behavior, the European Union requires warning labels on foods containing artificial dyes. Many companies are now using natural substitutes in their European products but use cheaper synthetic dyes in the identical foods sold here in the U.S. Yet change here is feasible: major chains like Trade Joe’s and Whole Foods also bar the use of artificial dyes in all of the foods they sell, and other school districts around the country have already banned, or are in the process of banning, dyes and other harmful additives.

We cannot and should not wait for federal action. FDA has failed to ban dyes or even put warning labels on them despite the strong and growing evidence of harm over the past two decades, and its own admission that some children are susceptible to behavioral problems after eating foods with dyes. The problem is larger than dyes, of course. FDA is underfunded, often under siege from food companies, and has many competing priorities.

While FDA dithers, children in our schools struggle to identify healthful foods and are exposed to needless risks to both their ability to thrive and to the threat of cancer. Nearby Fairfax County Public Schools has recently reduced exposure to a short list of harmful ingredients by 91% through improved sourcing. The Montgomery County School Board should eliminate artificial dyes and other harmful additives in the foods it serves to children. My daughter and all the other kids whose health is in your hands deserve no less.