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## **SCHOOL DISTRICTS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY WORK TOGETHER IN CHICAGO TO SOURCE BETTER SCHOOL FOOD**

*Food Service Professionals Joined by Community Organizations, Government Officials and Vendors to Learn, Share, and Make Change Happen*

MARCH 11, 2010 – Over 100 school food service directors, community activists, and government agency partners will convene at the second Annual Meeting of School Food FOCUS, March 25-27, 2010, at the University of Chicago’s Gleacher Center to change how school food is sourced. It couldn’t have come at a better time.

School lunch is hot. A cause taken up by the likes of First Lady Michelle Obama, the quality of meals that kids eat in the lunchroom is capturing America’s attention as never before. A growing number of Americans are getting in touch with their food through farmer’s markets, cooking at home, and even growing their own. Rising rates of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents has caused widespread concern.

This shift in thinking, combined with the upcoming Congressional debate on the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, has Americans thinking: how do we change what kids eat?

School Food FOCUS supports the nation’s largest school districts in their efforts to procure more healthful, more sustainably produced and regionally sourced food. In Chicago, FOCUS is bringing together a passionate, knowledgeable network of committed people to learn from one another, share successes and create new paths to change school food. Representatives from a dozen food companies will also be in attendance, selected for their work toward reaching FOCUS goals.

“Those with the drive to change food procurement practices in schools have opened up an incredible set of opportunities,” said Toni Liquori, executive director of School Food FOCUS. “This is the right time. By working closely with everyone involved, we can create real and lasting change that affects children, farms, local economies, public health, and food systems for the better.”

The Annual Meeting, which opens with a keynote speech by **Jan Poppendieck**, author of the new book “Free For All: Fixing School Food in America,” and includes a welcome from **Gail C. Christopher**, Vice President for Programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, will feature:

- **Demonstrated successes in procuring more healthful, more sustainable and more locally sourced produce, meat, dairy and grain** items for school meals, told by school food service professionals and their community partners from four school districts: Chicago, Denver, Portland (OR), and Saint Paul.
- The first **Real School Food Showcase**: a selection of carefully chosen **chicken, whole grain and other products** available for institutional purchasing that strive to meet FOCUS criteria for more healthful, local, and sustainable. The Showcase is presented by School Food FOCUS in collaboration with Kids First, a Rhode Island-based non-profit known for its pioneering Regional Healthy Foods Marketplaces. The Showcase is augmented with a series of roundtable discussions to examine barriers, develop solutions and determine how best to change the school food supply chain.
- A conversation with representatives of **USDA** about how the agency can partner with school food service, community organizations and others – including opportunities

around the “**Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food**” initiative and **Child Nutrition Reauthorization**, currently being reviewed by Congress.

“I’m excited to stand alongside my fellow school food service professionals, confident that we are significantly transforming school meals,” said Bob Bloomer, regional vice president of Chartwells-Thompson at Chicago Public Schools. “Providing healthy food for kids is a top priority for all of us. In this collaborative environment, we’re creating powerful relationships and tools for change,” added Gitta Grether-Sweeney, MS, RD, assistant director of nutrition services at Portland Public Schools.

#### **About School Food FOCUS**

School Food FOCUS (transforming **F**ood **O**ptions for **C**hildren in **U**rban **S**chools) is a national initiative that helps school districts with 40,000 or more students to procure more healthful, more sustainably produced and regionally sourced food, so that children may perform better in school and maintain healthier lifestyles. FOCUS maximizes its programmatic impact through a strategic partnership with Public Health Solutions, a nonprofit that develops, implements and advocates solutions to prevent disease and improve community health, providing FOCUS with financial and administrative services. FOCUS is supported by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Please visit [www.schoolfoodfocus.org](http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org) for more information.

#### **About Kids First**

Kids First is a non-profit organization whose mission is to help guide communities to improve the nutritional and physical well being of children. For more information, please visit their website at [www.kidsfirstri.org](http://www.kidsfirstri.org).

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If you’d like more information about the Annual Meeting including the Real School Food Showcase, or to schedule an interview with a school food service professional doing great work – Bob Bloomer of Chicago, Leo Lesh of Denver, Gitta Grether-Sweeney of Portland, or Jean Ronnei of Saint Paul – or with Toni Liquori, Executive Director of School Food FOCUS, please call Meredith Modzelewski at 646-619-6449 or email [mmodzelewski@schoolfoodfocus.org](mailto:mmodzelewski@schoolfoodfocus.org).