



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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## Healthy Tots Act: Incentives to Make Meals More Nutritious in DC's Early Childhood Centers

By Wes Rivers

Research shows that eating nutritious meals in early childhood has positive impacts on cognitive abilities and health outcomes throughout adolescence and adulthood. With that data in mind, the DC Council is considering the [Healthy Tots Act](#) – introduced by Councilmember Cheh. This legislation improves standards for nutrition and physical activity in DC's early childhood centers, as well as creates incentives for those centers to serve locally sourced, unprocessed foods.

DCFPI policy analyst Wes Rivers [testified](#) in support of Healthy Tots Act earlier this week, and he offered some recommendations on how to make the legislation even more effective.

This legislation is important because childhood health problems related to a lack of nutrition and physical activity are prevalent in the District. About [14 percent](#) of DC's low-income preschoolers (children ages 2-4) and [15 percent](#) of teens are obese, which is a leading trigger for diabetes and other health issues. One way to improve these outcomes is to ensure that infants have proper access to nutritious meals and age-appropriate play in early childhood facilities.

The Healthy Tots Act strengthens nutritional standards for meals served in childhood development centers, and provides additional local reimbursement for participation in the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) – a program that reimburses childhood centers for serving nutritious meals. The bill also creates a financial incentive to centers that serve breakfasts and lunches made with locally sourced and unprocessed food. And the legislation allows the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) to provide grants that support increased age-appropriate physical activity, farm-to-preschool programs, and gardens.

This voluntary, incentive-based approach could help more providers participate in CACFP and increase consumption of local and unprocessed food. Additional local reimbursement can help those centers already participating in CACFP enhance the nutritional value of their menus and can make CACFP more enticing for small providers who are not yet participating. Grants will also help cash-strapped providers make the necessary start-up investments needed to build a garden or farm-to-preschool program.

DCFPI supports the legislation, and we asked the Council to consider ways to make it more effective:

- **Are the incentives high enough to attract smaller providers to CACFP or to improve the nutritional value of meals served by CACFP providers?** The Healthy Tots Act provides for an additional local reimbursement rate of \$0.10 per meal served by CACFP participating providers. Consultation with providers will be needed to see if these rates are high enough to incentivize participation in the program.
- **Aside from cost, what barriers already exist for participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program?** Some small providers may only have one or two staff members, so the administrative burden of joining the program may be too high. Larger child centers can sponsor smaller providers to help with administration, but if there are no sponsors available, it may be infeasible to join the program.
- **Does OSSE have the capacity to provide technical assistance, training, outreach, and monitoring of this program?** The Council will need to carefully consider the capacity and resources OSSE will need to successfully administer and monitor the program.

To view the entire testimony, click [here](#).