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sympathetic, and compelling.”

— Marion Nestle, *Food Politics*

FREE FOR ALL

FIXING
SCHOOL FOOD
IN AMERICA



Janet Poppendieck

Free for All

CALIFORNIA STUDIES IN FOOD AND CULTURE

Darra Goldstein, Editor

FREE FOR ALL

FIXING SCHOOL FOOD IN AMERICA

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For my daughter, Amanda

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INTRODUCTION

In Search of School Food

School meals don't have a very good reputation. Mention them and many people think of noisy, crowded cafeterias where children wait too long in line, then have too little time to eat. For people of a certain age, they evoke images of dreary, repetitive, unappetizing menus, airline-style entrees, overcooked vegetables, unripe fruit. For those who have been in a school cafeteria more recently, the imagery is apt to be what one critic has called "carnival fare": corn dogs, french fries, burgers, pizza, offerings high in fat and salt and low in fruits and vegetables, color, flavor, and variety.

It doesn't have to be that way. In place of industrial kitchens turning out frozen entrees to be defrosted and reheated miles from where they are produced, we can have fresh foods, cooked on site in local kitchens. Instead of low-skill, poorly paid "McJobs" in central kitchens and school cafeterias, we can have meaningful work in which culinary trainees develop marketable skills under the direction of talented chefs. In place of surplus commodities purchased by the federal government to support industrial agriculture and then processed into fast food clones, we can have fresh, local, organic, seasonal fruits and vegetables, dairy and meats, produced by family farmers using humane and sustainable farming practices. In place of lunchrooms virtually segregated by social class, where poor children eligible for free food line up for a federally regulated meal while their more affluent peers purchase Taco Bell or Pizza Hut or Burger King items—or leave the campus altogether—we can have common meals, shared by all in an atmosphere of conviviality. In place of

noisy, chaotic, dingy, and unattractive cafeterias where teachers are reluctant to set foot, faculty and students can eat together in their classrooms or in comfortable, well-equipped dining rooms. In place of the enormous paperwork burden of determining eligibility for free, reduced price and full price meals, we can provide our school food service departments with budgets adequate to feed all of our children a nutritious and appealing meal at midday—and another in the morning if they want it. In place of meals that reinforce the high-fat, high-sodium, high-sugar food choices promoted by the fast food and snack industries, we can help our students to develop healthy preferences. In place of the increasingly narrow “teach to the test” curriculum, we can reintroduce the study of food and nutrition to our schools, providing opportunities for application of the core skills of reading and math by engaging students in menu planning, food production, and meal preparation.

Pie in the sky? Each of these alternatives is in use and working somewhere in the United States at this moment. Our spectacular failure to provide fresh, appealing, healthy meals for all our children is the result of a series of specific and identifiable social choices that we have made: a massive disinvestment in our public schools, an industrialized food system, an agriculture policy centered on subsidies for large-scale commodity production, a business model rather than a public health approach to school food programs. Concern about obesity among American children and adolescents, however, has created an opportunity to transform the way we feed our children at school. As anxiety about overweight and its attendant health risks has mounted, parents, educators, public health professionals, and legislators have joined school food service personnel, anti-hunger activists, and community food security advocates in demanding better, healthier meals. And we know how to provide them; exemplary programs abound. Of course, we cannot implement such innovations and improvements on a large scale without investing more in our children. There is no such thing as a free lunch makeover. The economics of diet-related disease, however, make it clear that our choice is between doing a better job now or paying much more later for medical care. Now is the time to revise our choice in favor of the health and well-being of our children.

DISCOVERING SCHOOL FOOD

For the past several years, I have been on a journey of discovery, trying to understand the challenges and realities of school food in the United

States. What are school meals like today? How did they get that way? What are program administrators and concerned communities doing to improve them? This book is an eclectic account of my observations; it encompasses firsthand experience in a school kitchen and cafeteria and extensive interviews with school food service personnel, research on the history of school meals in the United States, exploration of current issues in school food, including the menu, the nutritive quality, the factors that deter students who have effective access to school meals from taking advantage of them, and the factors that impede access, especially the dysfunctional three-tier eligibility system. It looks briefly at efforts to improve both access to and quality of meals and concludes with my own prescription for “fixing” school food.

My initial focus was the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and its younger sibling, the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the federal programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that subsidize and regulate school meals. Some 94,000 of the nation’s public and private schools offer the National School Lunch Program, and in 2008 more than thirty-one million children participated on an average day. The breakfast program, begun in 1966, was permanently authorized in 1975. It is currently available in 84,500 schools, and last year it served more than ten million children on a typical school day.¹ Together, the two programs support more than seven billion meals a year. Large numbers like these have a tendency to wash over us without sinking in. For me it is a major production to prepare a meal for eight or ten; the idea of forty million meals in a day is almost meaningless, seven billion meals unfathomable. I will always be grateful to a speaker at an antiwar convocation who explained to me, in terms that I could comprehend, the difference between a million and a billion. If he could keep us in the auditorium listening to his impassioned arguments for a million seconds, he said, we would be there for a little over eleven and a half days. If, however, he were allocated a *billion* seconds to make his case, we would be there for thirty-one years, eight months, two weeks, one day, eleven hours, sixteen minutes and forty-eight seconds. Seven billion meals is a very large number. Feeding our children at school is an enormous undertaking.

Although I began with the federally sponsored lunch and breakfast programs, I quickly learned that there is a great deal of food bought, sold, and consumed at school that is not part of these programs, and consequently not subject to the nutrition regulations or the burdensome accountability procedures that govern the official “reimbursable” meals.

Increasingly, children with the wherewithal to do so purchase essentially unregulated foods in a la carte lines, food courts, school stores, or vending machines, collectively dubbed “competitive foods” because they are sold in competition with the federally regulated meal. As an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it, “The lunch lady serving a government-approved hot lunch is but a dusty icon. The most popular school lunch is a small pepperoni pizza, nachos, a peanut butter cookie and a diet soda . . . a dietary bomb containing 1,116 calories and 51 grams of fat.”² A USDA study conducted during the 2004–2005 school year found that competitive foods were available from vending machines in 98 percent of high schools, 97 percent of middle/junior high schools, and 27 percent of elementary schools, and that foods were sold a la carte in the cafeterias of more than 90 percent of middle and high schools and 75 percent of elementary schools.³ Neither children nor their parents are very good at distinguishing between the nutritionally regulated lunch offered by the NSLP and the other foods waiting at the checkout counter or in the vending machine. For them, it is all part of “school food.”

School food service directors and school business officials know the difference, however. The complex financing arrangements that govern the program make the distinction crucial. When I say that more than thirty-one million children “participated” on an average school day, I mean that they selected a federally reimbursable school meal, one that complied with federal nutrition standards, although they may also have purchased a la carte items in the cafeteria or supplemented the official meal with vending machine goodies. All reimbursable meals are subsidized, but the depth of the subsidy and thus the size of the reimbursement depend on income eligibility categories derived from the federal poverty line. Some children eat free; others qualify for a “reduced price,” typically 40 cents for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast, and others must pay what is misleadingly referred to as the “full price,” a figure that averaged \$1.85 in the 2006–2007 school year.⁴ Subsidies range from \$2.57 per meal for free meals to \$0.24 for “full price” or “paid,” plus an allocation of commodities based on the total number of lunches served. Nationally, about three-fifths of lunches and four-fifths of breakfasts were served free or at the bargain rates of the reduced price category. The lion’s share of the program’s federal expenditure of close to \$11 billion in fiscal 2007 thus went to fund free and reduced price meals.

The administrative burden created by the three-tier system is substantial; it is complex, prone to error, and difficult to operate. Further, many parents of children who pay the “full price” have no idea that they

are, in fact, receiving a subsidy of nearly \$0.45 per lunch in cash and commodities combined. The invisibility of the full price subsidy affects the image of the program. In some communities it is normal for most students to eat school meals; in others, however, it is looked down upon as “welfare food.” Nearly everywhere, as students reach the middle school and high school years, they begin to attach a stigma to eating free or reduced price meals. As a result, some students who qualify for these meals are deterred from eating them, and others eat a meal soured by embarrassment. Either way, the three-tier system hampers the program from realizing its full potential. We need to rethink it.

Nutrition regulations are another aspect of school food policy clearly in need of revision. Ironically, the regulations designed to protect the quality of school food can end up undermining it. Formal compliance with the federal standards can lead to counterproductive and sometimes downright unhealthy offerings, as when schools add sweetened, flavored milk in order to meet required calorie minimums. Further, the fear of losing reimbursements if the meals are found wanting has driven many systems to heavy use of prefabricated products that have achieved a federal Child Nutrition, or CN, label. Manufacturers of these products guarantee that they provide specified components of the federal meal plan and assume the financial risk if they should be found to fall short. Unfortunately, while this system may guarantee that a product has a particular number of ounces of protein, it does not guarantee that it is truly healthy.

The nutrition regulations are currently under review by a task force of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies of Science. It seems reasonable to hope that such anomalies will be addressed, but the regulations they are revising apply only to the federally reimbursable meal. The situation in which the reimbursable meal must meet nutrition standards but competitive foods have almost none sets children up to shun the healthier meal and select their favorite (heavily advertised) foods, which may be on sale right in the cafeteria. Even where foods are not sold a la carte in the cafeteria itself, candy, cookies, soft drinks, and salty snacks may be available in snack shops and vending machines throughout the day. Some progress in limiting competitive foods has been made over the past few years by state governments and local school districts, but the fundamental situation remains one in which the nutritionally regulated meal must compete with less healthy options.

Principals who permit vending machines and food service directors who offer a la carte snacks are not driven by a secret perverse desire to destroy the teeth and undermine the health of children, but by the need

for revenue. Where vending machine revenues accrue to the principal, such funds may be virtually the only unrestricted, discretionary dollars at his or her disposal. They are often used to pay for sports, arts, and enrichment programs or to meet emergencies. And in many cafeterias, as we shall see, the a la carte offerings subsidize the federally reimbursable meal, helping to keep the price down for “full price” children and filling a gap between federal reimbursements and actual costs for free and reduced price meals. The recent escalation of fuel and food prices, especially the price of dairy products, has intensified the cost-price squeeze in the cafeteria. Add school food finance and reimbursement rates to the aspects of federal policy that need a thorough reconsideration. Clearly school food is in need of an overhaul, not only in the local cafeteria, but also in the federal policy arena.

Fortunately, pressures are mounting for just such a transformation. The changes we need in school food will not occur without substantial public effort and concern. As Texas State Secretary of Agriculture Susan Combs memorably declared, “it will take 2 million angry moms to change school food” in America.⁵ One reason that I am optimistic about the potential for change is that the school cafeteria represents a kind of intersection, a meeting place, of skilled and motivated change agents with a whole host of worthwhile agendas. New voices and new allies are joining the effort every day. In the last major piece of school food legislation, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, Congress accelerated this process by including a Wellness Policy Mandate; essentially this required school districts that receive federal funds for school lunch or breakfast to form committees and establish policies governing physical activity at school and foods sold or served on campus. The latter category includes food in the school lunch and breakfast programs, foods served a la carte, foods in vending machines and school stores, foods served in classrooms at parties or used as rewards, foods sold at bake sales or other fundraisers, and refreshments at school events. The mandate did not specify the content of these policies, but did specify that the committees that established them should include administrators, parents, students, school food service personnel, the school board, and representatives of the public. “Wellness” has become a watchword, and the wellness policy process has drawn many new stakeholders into the school food arena. The anti-hunger activists and school nutrition professionals who have been the protectors of child nutrition programs since the discovery of severe hunger and poverty-related malnutrition rocked the nation in the late 1960s have

been joined by advocates of public health and environmental activists, particularly champions of sustainable agriculture. Now is the time for what Kevin Morgan and Roberta Sonnino, writing from a global perspective, have called a “school food revolution.”⁶

NOW IS THE TIME

It is not only the convergence of agendas and the addition of new voices that make this the time for school food reform. It is also the urgency of the underlying concerns to which school meals are addressed. Hunger is on the rise. Our children’s health is deteriorating. The environment is under assault. School food reform holds the promise of addressing all of these issues. That is why it cannot wait.

Hunger

Despite national wealth that is astounding by historical standards, childhood hunger continues to blight the lives and reduce the potential of too many of our children. USDA’s most recent annual “household food security” survey found that 36.2 million Americans were living in households that lacked access to adequate food sometime during 2007 because of poverty. These 13 million households were 11.1 percent of U.S. households, about the same rate as the previous year, although the absolute numbers are larger because the population has grown. The federal government tries to avoid the term “hunger” and instead reports households with “low food security” (at risk of hunger), “very low food security” (formerly known as “food insecurity with hunger”), and the most troubling category, “households with very low food security with children.” Talk to any school cafeteria manager in a low-income neighborhood about the rush of children for breakfast on Monday mornings after a long weekend, however, and she will convince you that hunger by any other name hurts just as much. Among the 13 million food-insecure households, 4.7 million had “very low food security,” the more severe category. Both the size of this group and its share of the overall population have risen over the last decade. Of particular concern is the fact that the number of children living in households that reported very low food security among children rose by over 60 percent between 2006 and 2007, from 430,000 to 691,000.⁷

There is always a considerable lag between the collection of federal food security data and their release, so currently available data fail to

reflect either the dramatic food price increases that have stymied many American households in 2007–8 or the recession officially under way as of this writing. State and local organizations can sometimes process results more quickly. A recent report released by the Massachusetts anti-hunger organization Project Bread, for example, found a sharp increase in the number of food-insecure households. “High food prices combined with the current economic crisis are driving a crisis in food insecurity that is broader and deeper than we’ve seen before in this state,” according to Ellen Parker, the executive director of Project Bread, who predicted that “hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts citizens will need help to cover the basics—including many who have never needed help before.”⁸

Recessions hit children particularly hard, in part because younger families are less well positioned to weather the storm. They have lower incomes to begin with, fewer assets, lower savings, and more debt. Younger workers, as parents of young children tend to be, have less seniority; more recently hired and more expendable, they lose their jobs more quickly. And because children are rapidly developing organisms, the effects of deprivation of health care, shelter, and nutrition are more damaging than for mature people. The census figures that will quantify this disaster for families and children have not yet been collected, but other indicators make the trends clear. Case loads in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps, which typically track both poverty rates and unemployment, rose 13 percent between December 2007 and November 2008. School districts around the country are reporting more homeless children. And job loss is leaving more children without health insurance. As Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children’s Health Fund in New York City explained, “We are seeing the emergence of what amounts to a ‘recession generation.’ This includes the children who were already living in poverty, but also millions more whose families had a reasonable chance of making it. Two years ago, they saw themselves as working class and middle class, but now many are unemployed or underemployed, and one of the results is that we’re seeing growing numbers of children depending on emergency rooms for health care or going without care.” These forms of deprivation pile up and interact; the children who are exhausted from moving from shelter to shelter are the same ones who are delaying needed health care and weakened by inadequate food. As the columnist Bob Herbert has reminded us, “This is a toxic mix for children, a demoralizing convergence of factors that have long been known to impede the ability of young people to flourish.”⁹

And nowhere is this failure to flourish more acute than in the classroom. Study after study has shown that hunger interferes with the ability of children to absorb an education. Long-term malnutrition can interfere with brain development, but even short-term bouts of hunger are a problem. Children who do not get enough to eat are listless and withdrawn or irritable and hostile. They find it difficult to concentrate and are easily distracted. They get sick more often and miss school more frequently than well-fed children. They may act out in the classroom and thus interfere with the learning of other children.¹⁰ Experienced principals report that the first question they ask children referred for disciplinary reasons in the morning hours is “Have you had breakfast?” and the answer is usually “No.” A reduction in such disciplinary referrals is the single most consistently reported impact of universal breakfast programs. Hunger is the enemy of education.

School meals, along with SNAP, are the front line in efforts to avert hunger, and last year 17.5 million low-income children participated in school meals on an average day, about twice the number of school-aged children served by SNAP. One reason that the school lunch and breakfast programs serve so many more children is that their eligibility standards are more generous and realistic. Families can qualify for the remarkable bargain of reduced price meals with incomes up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line, a figure that in 2008 equals \$39,220 annually for a family of four; in order to obtain SNAP, gross income in most states cannot exceed 130 percent of poverty, and income after certain allowable deductions must be under the poverty line itself, or \$21,200 for a family of four in 2008. There is no doubt that reduced price meals are a boon to many families in the “near poor” category, though it is equally true that many such families cannot actually afford the reduced price meals for all of their children. Elimination of the charge for reduced price meals is one of the reforms being sought by anti-hunger advocates and school food service organizations.

Economic hardship in the current economy, however, is not limited to those in the lowest income sectors. Many families with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line are suffering. Sharp reductions in income due to job loss by one earner in a dual income family can place a tremendous strain on the family budget, even if the remaining earner’s pay exceeds the cut off. Families struggling to meet mortgage payments or pay for health care can easily find themselves too strapped to take advantage of school meals, even though they are a bargain. The school food eligibility and price structure are ripe for reconsideration. Meanwhile,

the rising rate of childhood hunger makes attention to school food programs particularly urgent.

Childhood Obesity

It is not hunger, however, but childhood obesity that has put school food on the national radar screen. By now, nearly everyone has heard the figures. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have reported that the prevalence of obesity has more than tripled for children aged 6 to 11 since the 1970s and that it has more than doubled for adolescents aged 12 to 19 in the same period. They estimate that about nine million children over the age of six are obese, another sixteen million are overweight.¹¹ This is not an aesthetic issue. Overweight in childhood is associated with increases in type 2 diabetes and atherosclerosis, formerly regarded as adult diseases, with asthma and joint problems, and with depression, anxiety, and sleep apnea. It contributes to low self-esteem and increases the likelihood that a child will be bullied or teased. Like hunger, childhood obesity can interfere with children's academic performance and ability to concentrate in school.¹²

I confess that I felt some discomfort about jumping on the childhood obesity bandwagon.¹³ It is an issue that seems to me fraught with dangers and ambiguities. I worry that calling more attention to weight will increase the stigmatization of the overweight—and do so in their tender childhood and adolescent years when stigma has such destructive power. I worry that a climate of stigma will drive even more young people to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. I worry that a focus on overweight will inevitably reinforce an unappealing and counterproductive ideology of “personal responsibility.” Despite mounting evidence of the importance of advertising and what the Yale University psychologist Kelly Brownell has called a “toxic environment”¹⁴ in which high-calorie foods of limited nutritive value are everywhere convenient, the personal responsibility story is deeply ingrained in our culture. Indeed, when I think about my own extra pounds, I tend to think moralistically in terms of personal choices and will power. I am not surprised that much public discourse about obesity falls into that mode, but I remain convinced that systemic public health approaches will have a far greater impact on the problem than will homilies, just as research suggests that cigarette taxes have done more to encourage smoking cessation than health messages. Finally, I worry that a focus on obesity “problematizes” overeating, directs our attention to this one negative

aspect of our food system when in fact the whole system is fraught with hazards and social costs. Nevertheless, childhood obesity has captured the attention of the nation, and as any good teacher knows, one does not lightly forgo the potential for learning inherent in such “teachable moments.” Further, it is childhood obesity, more than any other factor, that has induced us to take a closer look at what our children are eating, and that scrutiny can only be a good thing, because our children’s diets are in bad shape, whether or not they result in excess weight.

I was impressed when I looked at the figures. The federal government has provided us with a tool for assessing our food consumption: the Food Guide Pyramid. It is not devoid of controversy, yet nearly everyone agrees with its recommendations about fruit and vegetables. Only 2 percent of school-aged children meet the Food Guide Pyramid recommendations for all five of the major food groups.¹⁵ Two percent! One child in six (16 percent) consumes a diet that meets *none* of the recommendations. Less than 15 percent meet the recommendations for fruit, and less than 20 percent for vegetables. Less than 25 percent consume the recommended servings of grains, and only 30 percent meet the milk recommendation on any given day.¹⁶ Thinking in terms of key nutrients, more than 60 percent of U.S. children and adolescents do not eat enough fiber, and 85 percent of adolescent females do not consume enough calcium. No wonder broken bones and joint diseases have become more common among children and adolescents. And what are they consuming when they are not eating the fruits and vegetables, beans and whole grains that could supply the fiber or the green leafy vegetables and dairy products that could provide the calcium? More than three-fifths of U.S. children and adolescents eat too much saturated fat, and during the last twenty-five years, average daily soft drink consumption has almost doubled among adolescent girls and almost tripled among adolescent boys. Nearly a fifth of calories consumed by children and youth come from added sugars.¹⁷ And french fries are the most popular vegetable.

When childhood obesity first captured national attention and people began to focus on school food, many school food service professionals adopted a defensive posture. They felt unfairly blamed for what the veteran journalist Eleanor Randolph has called “The Big Fat American Kid Crisis.”¹⁸ They pointed out that even children who eat lunch at school five days a week were eating fewer than a quarter of their meals at school over the course of a year.¹⁹ Further, they argued, schools could not undo what children learned at home. “You can’t serve fast food at home and then expect the kids to come to school and make healthy

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