Failing to Make the Grade: How the School Lunch System is Falling Short of Its Purpose

By Artifacts • Sep 5th, 2012 • Category: Culture, Featured, Food Science, Health and Society, History, Issue 7, Missouri Food

By Sam Rourke

1,000 dollars a month reads the income box of my computer screen as I check out another family at the Central Food Pantry. There stands a woman with four children by her side. I glance at her cart, full for now, but wonder how it will realistically last for an entire month given her paltry income. Inside her cart lies limited amounts of meat and produce and countless piles of donuts and processed food. This is the harsh reality that the pantry faces – the individuals at the pantry need as much food as they can get their hands on, but due to limited resources the pantry can often only provide cheap junk food. As I look at her four children, ranging from age 5-12, I am thankful that these children have the National School Lunch Program to rely on. Twice a day during the week, they can rely on their school to provide them a lunch and breakfast for free or an extremely reduced price.

But what are they really eating? A quick check of any school lunch menu around the country quickly reveals meals that aren’t exactly most people’s definition of “nutritionally-balanced” as the NSLP claims. Staples in my high school and countless others, were chicken nuggets, hamburgers, and mac & cheese. These were normally offered with some form of fried potato and an optional vegetable that many students didn’t take. Fortunately, I was in an economic position where I could choose most days to bring a healthy lunch from home to avoid the junk that the school gave out on a daily basis. However, for many in my town and across this nation school food is their only choice if they want to stave off hunger. Here in Boone County, 31.5 % of children receive free or reduced lunch, meaning they live at or near poverty and have no choice but to accept the food school’s present on a daily basis (“Kids Count Data Center”).

The school lunch program is unable to meet the needs of those who rely on it daily for their daily sustenance and contributes to rising childhood obesity rates and poor school performance. In this paper, I advocate for workable solutions parents can take to improve the school lunch program and ensure it becomes an asset in a healthy diet rather than its current status as a hindrance with numerous negative consequences.

Beginnings of a Failure

The National School Lunch Program began in 1946 under Harry S. Truman as an effort to “safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children” (Gunderson 1). Since its inception the program has been the subject of continuous controversy as it struggles to meet the health needs of an ever-growing number of students. With over 1/3 of the nation’s children overweight or obese according to the Center for Disease Control, concerns over what children are consuming have become ever more prevalent among parents across the United States (“Obesity and Overweight”). Serving over 32 million children a year, the lunch program certainly plays a large role in what our nation’s children consume on a daily basis (“NSLP Fact Sheet”).

Rampant Regulations and Paltry Funding = Anything Becomes Acceptable

Funding is one of the obvious problems with the school lunch program and certainly the most
criticized. Healthier foods simply cost more to make and many schools across the country don’t have the resources necessary to improve the quality of their food. The National School Lunch Program cost 10.8 billion to administer last year, a sharp increase from only 3.7 billion just 20 years ago (“NSLP Fact Sheet”). While NSLP receives some reimbursement for each lunch they sell, most of the funding comes through students paying for their meals. However, this amount continues to decrease as more and more students qualify for free and reduced lunch. According to a USDA fact sheet, 81.7 percent of meals in 2011 were given as a free or reduced lunch (“Child and Adult Care Food Program”). The program simply cannot support this percentage of children who pay very little back into the system and have their meals subsidized almost completely in their entirety.

While funding is certainly an issue, it is unrealistic to believe the government will be drastically increasing funding in today’s economic climate. Another significant problem is the unnecessary regulations that bog down the lunch system. A Fox News article from last winter, shows how off-based many of these regulations in the program are. A preschooler had to eat a school-supplied meal of chicken nuggets instead of eating their home-prepared lunch (“School Lunches Deemed Unacceptable”). Apparently their lunch of a turkey and cheese sandwich, a banana, apple juice and potato chips just wasn’t up to the high standards of the USDA. Jamie Oliver was also able to expose some of this illogical regulation through his “Food Revolution” show the past few years (Gunlock 1). The very first meal Oliver made was denied because it didn’t meet government standards. The problem? No bread. His lunch of roast chicken, brown rice, salad and yogurt with fresh fruit wasn’t good enough for the USDA. How was the school meeting the bread requirement for the day? Plain old white pizza crust. A couple episodes later Oliver again prepared a healthy meal consisting of a vegetable pasta dish, baked chicken, and a fruit cup. Again he was told the meal did not meet standards and thus would not be reimbursable. The problem this time? Not enough veggies. The solution? Add french fries (“Children, Parents, and Obesity”). These examples clearly illustrate how the inflexibility of school lunch regulations further exasperates the problem of unhealthy food. Many of these regulations are dictated by the large corporations that supply the industry, leading to such things as pizza sauce and fries inclusion in the vegetable category. In 2011, when the USDA was proposing changes to the program that would have decreased potato consumption and increased the amount of tomato needed to qualify for a vegetable serving, food companies jumped in to block the changes. According to an investigative article published in the New York Times, companies such as Con Agra and Del Monte spent 5.6 million lobbying congressional representatives to vote against the proposed revised standards (Nixon 1). This unfortunate example shows that many of the regulations within the system are set by large food suppliers desperate to keep their money, who have somehow convinced legislators that their product is the only thing kids will consume.

With these strict regulations and lack of funding to meet them, the USDA has begun to set a strikingly low standard for many of the products they end up doling out to children every day. The hottest topic regarding this lately has been the USDA’s continued acceptance of “pink slime”, despite the fact that McDonald’s and Taco Bell have rejected the concoction. The substance is made by “grinding together connective tissue and beef scraps normally destined for dog food” (Knowles 1). Microbiologist Carl Custer, a 35-year veteran of the Food Safety Inspection Service, stated, “My objection with having it (the pink slime) in the schools is that it’s not meat” (Knowles 1). It is a pretty sad state when we are feeding millions of kids something that we aren’t even really sure what to call it. In my own high school, we had a regular main dish called the “panther rib.” After three years of eating it, I’m still not really quite sure what the concoction was made of. I personally avoided it whenever possible, but most other kids reluctantly ate it with no other choice in hand. The few times I did eat it, I actually thought it was pretty good, but I couldn’t get over the fact that I wasn’t sure what I was eating. Daily lunches, like the one chronicled above, that leave
parents unsure of what their children are eating on a daily basis are not acceptable to any healthy society.

Mentally and Physically Unhealthy Children

School lunches are often blamed as a contributing factor in the ever-increasing rates of obesity in children. A recent study by the University of Michigan found that 38% of students who routinely eat school lunch were overweight or obese, as compared to only 24.4% of children who bring their own meals (Bruske). This may have something to do with the fact that 91.2% of the children who brought lunch from home consumed fruits or vegetables on a regular basis as compared to only 16.3% of children eating school food (Bruske 1). According to a 2009 Center for Disease Control study, obesity costs the U.S. 147 billion in health costs every year and that number continues to rise as obesity rates rise among children and all age groups (CDC’s LEAN Works! – A Workplace Obesity Prevention Program).

While weight gain is a serious consequence and the most commonly discussed, children face many other consequences tied to reliance on school lunch as well. A study in Canada published in the Journal of School Health found that students who eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, protein and fiber, coupled with less fat calories, did better on their literacy tests than those eating foods high in salt and saturated fat. (Asbridge, Florence, Veugelers). Additionally healthyschoollunches.org, a website dedicated to improving school food, states that more than 70 percent of schools struggle to meet the maximum saturated fat requirement set forth by USDA. Add in the fact that a disproportional amount of students who rely on school lunch come from poor families and you can see how the school lunch program contributes to poorer children being fatter and less academically successful. The effects don’t stop there as inadequate nutrition can also severely hamper a child’s cognitive development according to the American Psychological Association (“Changing diet and exercise for kids”). Every parent wants their child to perform well in the classroom, but every day you allow your child to consume school lunch you hamper their ability to be a star student.

Fight for More Funding

Concerned parents and any caring citizen all over this country need to continue to remain vigilant in the fight for improvements to school lunches. Over the past couple of years it seems lawmakers are finally hearing the cries of citizens concerned for the health of our nation’s children. Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act last year as the first major overhaul of the program in 15 years (Wootan 1). Under the new regulations, schools will be required to offer fruits and vegetables every day, increase the amount of whole-grain foods and reduce the sodium and fats in the foods served, according to an MSNBC article (Wood 1). However, they will only be getting a .06 cent increase in funding per meal, presenting many schools with the hard task of meeting healthier standards with a very unsubstantial increase in funding. Improving the standards is an important step, but this solution alone won’t create any substantial change. Increased funding is always welcome but there have been many attempts on the federal level to increase support for nutritious eating and all have largely failed up to this point.

Make your Kitchen Reflect the Change you Want

The next solution as these regulations come into place is to actually get children to eat the foods put on their plates. This is where parents can really make the greatest effort. It is easy to blame the government for failing to feed children healthy foods and that is what many of us do. However, the foods children are exposed to at home play a vital role in their willingness to accept healthier food at school. If a child never consumes vegetables or fruit at home why should they be expected
to magically consume these items at school? One key step parents can take is to take the time out of their hectic schedules to sit down and have a family meal together. Family meals increase the likelihood that children will eat fruits, vegetables, and grains and decreases the likelihood of them snacking on unhealthy foods, according to the website Kidshealth (“Healthy Eating”). Another important step for parents is making sure to feed their children a healthy breakfast. According to the American Dietetic Association, children who eat breakfast perform better in the classroom and on the playground, with better concentration, problem-solving skills, and eye-hand coordination (“The Many Benefits of Breakfast”). By providing a healthy breakfast and sitting down for a healthy dinner in the evening, parents can play an important step in ensuring their children are receiving the proper nutrition that may be missing from their child’s school lunch. And feeding your child at home isn’t the expensive venture many make it out to be. A recent New York Times article entitled “Is Junk Food Really Cheaper?”, pointed out that a meal for four at McDonalds costs around $28 dollars while a meal of chicken, vegetables, salad, and milk can be made for only $14 dollars. With proper planning and budgeting parents can make serving healthy food at home a reality without emptying their wallets.

**Get Involved at School as Well**

It doesn’t just have to be at home that parents and concerned citizens can get involved in ensuring the quality of your children’s food. In a journal article entitled, “A Revolution in School Lunches” Douglas McGray takes a look at some of the positive reforms in regards to school lunches across America. McGray profiles a company called Revolution Foods, a fast-growing for-profit company that caters healthy breakfasts and lunches to mostly lower-income schools, as an example of positive reform in cafeterias across America. The company’s executive chef, Amy Klein, acknowledges the challenges of getting children to eat healthy food, but through careful techniques she has been able to feed approximately 30,000 kids (McGray 50). Another prime example of adults taking action has occurred in Appleton, Wisconsin over about the last decade, as profiled in a report prepared for Sen. Russ Feingold by Natural Ovens, the initiative’s founding company. In 1997, Natural Ovens, from nearby Manitowoc, began the program to bring healthy foods into local schools. Since that time Appleton’s program has experienced a remarkable turnaround in student behavior with Principal LuAnn Coenen reporting a dramatic decrease in dropouts, expulsions, drug use, and possession of weapons among students. Though the program has cost the school district some extra money to provide healthier food Coenen said repeatedly in the article that it has been well worth it because of decreases in violence, vandalism, and litter, which has reduced costs in other areas (“A Different Kind of School Lunch”). These examples highlight how when parents and concerned adults do take action real change does occur. Parents need to make it a prerogative to be creative and come up with solutions to improve the food situation at their child’s school. Maybe it’s a garden outside, a weekly farmer’s market field trip, or a complete overhaul of the lunch program like these two districts did. Whatever it is, make a promise to not be content with the status quo and be willing to step up and be the initiator of the change you want to see in your child’s school.

**Parting Words of Wisdom**

As the waistlines of America’s children continue to expand, numerous factors play a role. Undoubtedly one of the factors responsible are the nutrient deficient and often unhealthy meals provided everyday by the National School Lunch Program to over 32 million children. Children who eat these meals are more likely to be overweight and suffer many other consequences as well, including decreased school performance and cognitive development. As a parent, each one of you wants the best for your child. It is time for you to start realizing that what you feed your child has a direct correlation to many important factors. An easy step is to take matters in to your own hands...
and make your child a healthy lunch everyday. However, if that doesn’t sound reasonable parents can at least take control of what they feed their child at home. You need to take action by ensuring you feed your child a healthy breakfast to start the day. Then when evening comes and the urge to stop by McDonald’s for dinner arises, you have to be able to resist and instead choose to prepare a healthy meal at home. These children that are exposed to healthy options at home will be more likely to choose more nutritious options when in line for school lunch. These children will then be prepared to perform well in school, on the athletic field, and maintain a healthy body weight through their childhood and into the future. In other words, any parents wish for their child.

Works Cited


Artifacts is a publication of The University of Missouri.
Email this author | All posts by Artifacts

Leave a Reply