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### School Lunch Crunch

***Nutritionally inadequate school lunches might be contributors to childhood obesity – but a handful of committed advocates are working to reverse this dangerous trend***

*By Jessica Goldbogen*

It's a scenario that is repeated in school cafeterias throughout the city and across the country. Parents feed their kids nourishing meals and stock their cabinets with healthy snacks, but their diligence is foiled when their kids get to school. What's for lunch? All too often, this captive, hungry audience is offered greasy slabs of pizza, ultra-processed meals that are high in fat and sodium, and fattening snacks from the vending machines.

With public and private schools experiencing budget cutbacks, understaffing and overcrowding, it's no surprise that the school foodservice programs continue to suffer. Meanwhile, deep-pocketed soft drink and snack food manufacturers have taken the opportunity to step in, in many cases offering funds in exchange for prominent placement in cafeterias and vending machines.

The outlook, however, is far from bleak. Concerned parents, nutritional advocates and even culinarians are getting involved, joining forces with both public and private schools to implement changes at the lunch counter. Even the New York City public school system has seen the need for change, hiring a new executive director of the New York City Department of Education's Office of School Food and Nutrition Services, and the Department of Education's first-ever executive chef.

#### **Cafeteria Confidential**

"The frustration is decades old, but people have finally taken it into their own hands," says Julia Jordan, president of Spoons Across America, a program dedicated to food and nutrition education, of the recent changes to school lunch programs that New York City is beginning to experience. "We've been so focused on standardized testing that we've missed the message of education. Plus, school budgets have been cut so drastically and consistently, and now we're in crisis."

What exactly is the crisis? According to a study published in last September's *American Journal of Public Health*, more than 40 percent of New York City public school students are overweight – nearly a quarter of them obese. And yet, schoolchildren are offered lunches which are high in saturated fat, sodium and sugar, and low in nutritional value. Thanks to a deal made in the '70s by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, called the commodities program,

large quantities of high fat and high cholesterol surplus products have been regularly funneled into school lunch programs. This deal with the National School Lunch Program, which today serves more than 28 million students a day, may have helped boost slumps in the agribusiness industry, but it has done no favors for the children in our nation's public schools. Overweight children may be preparing for a lifetime of severe health problems linked to poor nutrition; complications of obesity include diabetes, heart disease and arthritis.

Another problem is the deals schools have been making with the fast food and snack industries. For the last couple of decades, chains like Pizza Hut™ have been setting up snack bars within schools, or directly outside of them. According to an article on starchef.com, by 1999, 95 percent of public high schools in California were selling branded fast food on their campuses. Schools are also agreeing to “pouring contracts,” giving exclusive vending rights to companies such as The Coca-Cola Company. With many of today's public school children getting nearly half their weekly meals in school cafeterias, these are alarming facts.

### **Chefs to the Rescue**

But, in the midst of this dreary situation, a quiet revolution has begun. Lately, there have been signs that the city is preparing for extreme improvements to the lunch program in public schools. And, many private schools have already implemented serious changes, using the cafeteria as a prime place for teaching and implementing nutritional values.

“I think it's just wonderful that this is happening,” says Robert Surles, better known as Chef Bobo to the students he cooks for. The Executive Chef and Director of Foodservice for The Calhoun School, a private school on the Upper West Side, Surles was hired several years ago when a group of concerned parents – headed by foodie Dorothy Hamilton, president and owner of the French Culinary Institute – wanted to improve the school's foodservice program. “The fact that public schools and other private schools are ready to get involved shows that people are beginning to hear what's happening to our kids,” says Surles.

Thus far, Surles' program has been immensely popular, spawning a cookbook and, he claims, an appreciation among his students for dishes such as cauliflower soup and rutabaga fries.

Chef Ann Cooper, the former Executive Chef and Director of Wellness at the Ross School in East Hampton, has been blazing the same trail, on an even wider scale.

“I'm trying to really change the way America feeds its children, all across America,” says Cooper. Her work literally is spanning the country – she's involved with the Berkeley School Lunch Initiative in Berkeley, Calif., as well as the Community Food Resource Center (CFRC) here in New York City.

While at the Ross School, Cooper developed a successful lunch curriculum model that was centered on organic, regional, seasonal foods. With the CFRC, Cooper has been involved with developing a Community-Supported

Agriculture program that feeds The Promise Academy, a charter public school in Harlem. She and the CFRC are also working with New York's Office of School Food and Nutrition Services to help upgrade its offerings, and Cooper has even helped develop recipes that are now being tested in public schools.

"It's important for kids to have good, nutritious food," says Cooper. "If they don't eat healthier, they can't think." She believes that a combination of situations have contributed to the current conditions in schools, including lack of funding; cafeteria kitchens that have become derelict or even have been removed; and a workforce of foodservice employees who don't necessarily know how to cook.

But, she is heartened by the changes that the city's school system is making. "I think that the New York City Office of School Food is working very hard and diligently," says Cooper. "Do I wish there were more change? Yes. But, with 850,000 meals being served a day, making change in that system is very slow."

### **Changes Afoot**

However slow, the changes are encouraging. As part of Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein's Children First reforms, the Office of School Food and Nutrition Services is implementing higher nutritional standards for all food and drinks sold in schools – including the cafeterias, school stores and vending machines. Menus will reflect lower fat and sodium content and more whole wheat, fish and plant-based proteins, and fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables. Additionally, a free, healthy breakfast is now available to all students.

### **Better Convenience Foods**

David Berkowitz joined the Office of School Food and Nutrition Services as executive director a little more than a year ago, after working for 20 years at Aramark, a company that manages foodservice programs for corporations, institutions and schools. He immediately saw that he had a tall order.

"Over time, most of our schools were serving convenience foods," admits Berkowitz. "Up to recently, companies weren't paying attention to reducing trans fats and overall fat content. Now that this issue has gotten a tremendous amount of attention in the press, more [and better] products are available. Our system realized that we need to lead the nation and really make these changes. Fortunately, we have the volume because we serve so many meals. So, when we talk to our suppliers, they listen."

Under Berkowitz's watch, the department hired Jorge Leon Collazo, the school system's first executive chef, and a former instructor at the New England Culinary Institute.

"We wanted to hire an executive chef who could create a restaurant in our schools – a program that was attractive, colorful and tasted good," says Berkowitz. "We think it's critical to set the tone, teaching kids to eat healthy and give them more variety of healthy foods."

Collazo is responsible for new menu items like chicken nuggets that are made

with more white meat and less fat and sodium, a salad bar that's rich with variety, lasagna made with whole-wheat noodles, and veggie burgers. And, he's working with regional chefs to ensure that student preferences from neighborhood to neighborhood are taken into account.

"We have so many different communities in New York City," says Berkowitz. "In the Bronx, they might like Spicy Chicken Caribbean, while on Staten Island, they might like Chicken Teriyaki."

In vending machines, kids will see healthier options like Frito-Lay® Baked! Lay's potato crisps, Skinny Cow ice cream and pita chips.

But, the changes to the school cafeteria don't end with the food. Recognizing that a dreary, grim setting does not inspire confidence in young diners, Berkowitz is overseeing improvements that will make the serving and dining areas more attractive with new paint jobs, signs and banners, and even new uniforms for the staff.

These changes, however, come at a cost – this school year, the price of school lunch was raised from \$1 to \$1.50, the first time in nearly a decade. However, one of Berkowitz's missions is to make sure that the kids who are eligible for free and reduced meals, actually are able to receive these benefits. The office worked with advocacy groups and unions to spread the word for parents to fill out and submit the applications – there was even a sweepstakes with a Hawaiian vacation as a prize.

And, as one food activist has pointed out, yes, it costs money to improve school lunch programs. But health complications linked to obesity cost employers more than \$220 billion annually. Why not spend some of that money early on, investing in the raising of healthy schoolchildren?

### **Getting Kids to Eat**

One of the challenges faced by both private schools and the public school system is teaching kids to appreciate nutritious, wholesome foods.

Chef Bobo takes delight in the fact that his students are beginning to love nutritious powerhouses such as roasted tofu and fresh fruit as dessert instead of baked goods.

"Kids take a while to come around, but peer pressure is sometimes the best motivator," says Chef Bobo. Additionally, setting an example at home can work wonders in teaching kids about healthful food choices. "Parents have to be role models. If you have cupcakes and cookies at home, that's what kids are going to eat. If you have low-fat popcorn and fresh fruit, that's what they'll eat."

### **National Movement**

On the national level changes are happening as well. Beginning in the 2006/7 school year, each school participating in USDA's school meals programs will be required to create a "local wellness policy." This requirement will allow school districts to address their own local needs. Schools will have to set goals for nutrition education and physical activity, and create school

programs to enhance the health of the students. The overall objective? To promote student health and reduce childhood obesity. How these requirements will manifest themselves remain to be seen; but one school on Long Island has already begun implementing the program, and is having great success with "Salad Shakers" – cups of salad, which change every day and are served with breadsticks and milk. Hopefully New York City will encounter the same level of interest.

### **Dinner Parties**

Teaching kids about food and nutrition – how to eat, prepare, serve and enjoy it – is the cornerstone of Spoons Across America, a 10-year-old organization that works with children and schools.

The organization's Dinner Party project, for instance, works with kids to plan a dinner for their parents and siblings – from planning a menu, sending invitations, decorating the cafeteria and even helping cook the meal in the kitchen.

"We think it teaches the kids more than just about food," says Jordan, who is also a professor in hospitality management at New York City College of Technology, which is part of the City University of New York. "It's not necessarily labeling things good and bad, but showing that when you do eat something, you're literally making a choice."

Spoons Across America also runs other programs designed to teach kids about their food sources and making healthy choices. Days of Taste is a program that teams up chefs, farmers and other foodservice professionals with classrooms to give kids the opportunity to savor different locally grown foods and learn about where they've come from. And the On The Farm program actually organizes an excursion to a working farm so kids can see firsthand where their food is grown.

The 2005 goal of Spoons Across America is to work with school foodservice programs directly to help them refine their menu offerings and improve nutrition.

"We want the next generation to have at least the advantages that we had," says Jordan. "And parents can get involved just by raising the question of what are we feeding our children."

### **Get Involved!**

Despite all the pending reforms, it's likely that your child's school lunches are less than savory. If you want to push for change, or at least make sure your child is eating well, consider these options:

**Join the nutrition committee** at your school. As part of the reforms, every school is required to have a wellness committee of parents that works with the school administration to ensure that healthful foods are offered in the cafeterias. Contact your school's principal or administration office for information about your committee.

**Volunteer at your school.** Approach your school's administration to see

how you can get involved, whether it be decorating the cafeteria for holidays and seasons, assisting the kitchen staff in serving lunches, or monitoring the dining area.

**Help your child make choices.** “If you can see your school menu in advance, go through it with your child and show them what would be the best choices to make in the cafeteria,” recommends Chef Bobo. If your child has allergies, notify your school’s cafeteria manager and ask if he or she can help you make sure your child avoids problematic foods.

**Make your voice heard.** If you’re not satisfied with the meal programs at your child’s school, speak up. After all, your tax dollars and tuition money is paying for their education. Talk to the principal or administrators about your concerns and see if you can help them make some changes.

**Set an example.** Stock your kitchen with fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dips like hummus and salsa, and nutritious snacks like soy crisps, air-popped popcorn and baked potato chips. If your kids see you making these healthy choices, they’ll be more likely to opt for healthier foods as well.

**Make food fun.** “Greenmarkets are prevalent in New York City,” says Julia Jordan of Spoons Across America. “Take your child to the greenmarket and talk to them about the fresh, seasonal produce that the farmers are selling.” Together, you and your kids can pick out an unusual seasonal vegetable and figure out how to cook it at home.

### Books

***The New Enchanted Broccoli Forest***, by Mollie Katzen, Ten Speed Press, 2000. Vegetarian chef and author Mollie Katzen offers fun recipes for kids.

***Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal***, by Eric Schlosser, Perennial, 2002. A brutal look behind the scenes of the fast food industry.

***Bitter Harvest: A Chef’s Perspective on the Hidden Danger in the Foods We Eat and What You Can Do About It***, by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes, Routledge, 2000. A passionate and political history and commentary on the industries that feed us. Get more information from Ann Cooper at [www.chefann.com](http://www.chefann.com).

***Beyond Macaroni and Cheese***, by Mary Beth Lagerborg and Karen J. Parks, Zondervan Publishing Company, 1998. A collection of recipes and tips from moms across the country.

### On the Web

**Eat Well** – [www.eatwell.org](http://www.eatwell.org) – A free directory of stores and restaurants that offer sustainably raised produce, meats, eggs and dairy products.

**Office of School Food and Nutrition Services** – [www.opt-osfns.org/osfns](http://www.opt-osfns.org/osfns) – Check out lunch menus, see information about the Children First reforms, and keep track of changes being made to the public schools’ food programs.

**Spoons Across America** – [www.spoonsacrossamerica.org](http://www.spoonsacrossamerica.org) – Join the Spoons network, organize a program in your child's school, or make a donation.

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