

Battle of the Lunches

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“School meals can have a large impact on children's diets, especially those of low-income youth, who are most likely to be the recipient of school meals.” (Story, Nanney, Schwartz 78).

Many students are enrolled in the school lunch program that provide them with at least half of their food intake on a daily basis, for some students these are the only meals they consume.

Changing public lunch menus to fresh, healthier meals will yield lasting benefits to the students.

With school meals having such an impact on what our students eat during their growth it is important that schools maintain healthy meals by reducing sugar and fatty foods, creating a sensible calorie consumption per grade, offering whole grains, and fresh fruit or vegetables for breakfast and lunch.

Students who do not eat healthy, well balanced meals could have a harder time focusing on academics, which may lead to a decrease in concentration throughout the school day. If students do not understand the importance of healthy nutritious breakfasts and lunches, then how are we to blame their lack of focus on the student? Professor Colquhoun said, “Evidence suggested that improving the nutritional value of school meals not only tackled obesity but had a significant impact on children's behavior and ability to concentrate in class” (Hall). Not only can proper nutrients help with the concentration in class but they can also help students throughout their entire school day. This can start as young as Kindergarten and follow them until they graduate High School. A study, “involving 11,192 kindergartners found that overweight children had significantly lower math and reading test scores at the beginning of the year than did their healthy-weight peers and that these differences persisted into first grade.” (Story, Kaphingst, and French 110). Not only will the students have a higher academic achievement, but they will also have a better learning environment after consuming healthy, nutritious meals. This impacts both

student and teachers when it comes to helping our children increase their learning abilities for their future.

Changing school lunches from pre-packaged processed meals to foods that are lean in protein, 100% whole wheat, and fresh will decrease the amount of sodium, calorie intake, and fat students receive. All of these play an important role in healthy students today. In 1990, the USDA analyzed school meals to see if they were meeting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Janet Poppendieck, a sociologist, found the results disturbing. She states, "On average, school lunches were deriving not [the recommended] 30 but 38 percent of calories from fats, not [the recommended] 10 but 15 percent from saturated fats. The meals were also found to be high in sodium" (Hinman). Because students were receiving the percent of sodium and fat higher than recommended, Congress in 1994 required schools to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Since this was to be done without allocating more money, not much changed. Marion Nestle says, "School lunches hardly resemble real food -- they serve items such as chicken nuggets, which are highly processed, with additives and preservatives, and list more than 30 ingredients instead of just chicken," (Larsen). This is just one example "of how schools rely on too many foods that are heavily processed and high in sugar, sodium, and chemicals." (Larsen). With these types of processed foods allowed in our schools, we are telling our kids that it is okay to not eat healthy.

Not only should school meals help impact our students' healthy eating habits, but the knowledge of our parents also play a key role in changing lunch menus. Lack of knowledge from parents about the nutrients in school meals have caused health issues to increase in our students. Author Amy Kalafa explains six substances including residues, flavorings, additives, hydrogenated oils, sugar and artificial sweeteners, and genetically engineered foods that parents

need to watch out for in her book, *Lunch Wars: How to Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for Our Children's Health*, "These false foods can play havoc on a child's immune system, causing repeated illnesses, behavioral problems, and long-term chronic sickness" (17-18). Most of these substances are unfamiliar to our parents. Many have never even seen or tasted food that is being served to our children. Waldow, a mother of three, got involved by accident after volunteering to help the principle of her children's school. Waldow, who always made her kids lunch, said, "When I saw what was being served, I felt relieved they never asked me for money to buy it and I felt sorry for the kids who did or who had no other choice but to eat what was being served" (Christensen). She has been involved since 2002 and since then has helped make the district's lunch meals healthier.

Removing flavored milk from school meals will decrease the high amounts of sugar, calories, and sodium that many kids consume daily. If we can teach our children that flavored milk is good for them, we can teach them that it is not. When comparing school milk choices, "eight ounces of white milk ... contains 14 grams of natural sugar or lactose; fat-free chocolate milk has an extra six grams of sugar for a total of 20 grams, while fat-free strawberry milk has a total of 27 grams — the same as eight ounces of Coca-Cola" (Hoag). Many claim that children are still getting their nutrients from milk, whether it is flavored or not, but children do not need the added sugar that goes along with it. Recent studies show, "71 percent of the milk served nationwide is flavored ... but chocolate milk can contain about twice as much sugar as plain low-fat milk" (Severson). This is just one easy way to decrease high amounts of sugar and calories but still give students the nutrients they need.

High sugar, calorie and fat intake in schools breakfast and lunch meals have caused an increase in childhood health problems. This causes majority of our children to lack the proper

diet that is recommended in school. A study found that “NSLP participation leads to an increase in children's intakes of several key vitamins and minerals and also leads to an increase in children's intake of dietary fat” (Gleason and Suito 1047). Schools, parents, and children need to come together to change the high intake of unhealthy food. One way that schools have already started to implement these ideas are “increasing fruits and vegetables in children's diets is one way to displace energy-dense, low-nutrient foods that contribute to excess calorie intake and childhood obesity (DeMattia and Denney 94).

Even though changes have been made in the past to improve the nutrition in school meals, stronger efforts are still needed. By creating a maximum and minimum calorie intake for school lunches, students will learn good eating habits that will affect their daily lives. Author's Janice Thompson and Melinda Manore say in their book *Nutrition for Life*, “Between the ages of 3 and 13, children begin to make some of their own food choices. The impact of these decisions on children's health can be profound, so the age-appropriate nutrition education is critical” (357). This is such an important time for students to be taught and shown what they should and should not eat. With students at school for 6 hours, or longer, 5 days a week, it should be the school's responsibility to teach students healthy eating through their breakfast and lunch program. Wilson, President of the School Nutrition Association, says: “Unless kids are properly educated, they're going to choose junk over healthy food at school and at home” (Bornstein). Meanwhile children ask the number one question regarding nutrition, “Why don't schools teach us right from wrong?” (Bornstein). Changes are a priority for school aged children and may take time, “but with multiple exposures to healthier foods, students “can be more receptive to greater variety in the diet” (Helen Jensen quoted in Mantel). This seems to be a revolving cycle that will only lead to the next generation of students.

However, many will say that it is cheaper for schools to have lunches brought in prepackaged than to prepare them fresh at school, while others argue that long run healthy meals prepared in the school's cafeteria are not more costly than our normal school meals. Findings state that "an initial capital investment is needed to improve the methods and technology used to produce healthier meals. Once the necessary investments are made, variable production costs are not higher." (Wagner, Senauer, and Runge). Therefore, current costs have made it harder for school food programs to invest in healthier production of meals. One time grants or funding to provide proper training and equipment would be the start to a healthy new generation. The treasurer of North Fork district, Jack McDonald "said the move to frozen meals is expected to save the district about \$76,000 this year ... most of the savings will come from reduced staff time needed to prepare the meals" (Jarman). Many of the parents are not very happy with these changes and say that the new prepackaged meals are not as healthy and fresh as before. We strived years back to produce hot, healthy meals in our school cafeterias and we are now striving for just the same results today.

"School environments are a major influence on children's eating and activity habits, given the limited options children are given in a school setting." (Segal and Gadola 198). All school meals do not have to be healthy, just healthy options need to be available on a daily basis for our students. If we all devoted our time in becoming aware and help to improve the National School Lunch Program we might be able to prevent obesity or many health issues that students suffer from today. In conclusion, healthy and fresh meals in our schools will benefit students for years to come.

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