



VICTUAL REALITY

The eco-politics behind your food

Cookin' It Old School

Time to reinvest in the school-lunch program

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At private schools across the country, good cafeteria food is becoming as *de rigueur* as French classes taught by native speakers, Associated Press reports.

Schoolyard vegetable gardens bloom, tended by future Ivy Leaguers under the watch of "sustainability coordinators." In the kitchen, trained cooks transform that bounty into food worthy of enjoying, not merely enduring.

Unfortunately, in public schools, things remain rather grim.



Debt, warmed over.

Photo: whitehouse.gov

Sure, there are wonderful groundswells of change, such as Ann Cooper's transformation of lunches in the Berkeley public-school system, helped along by a grant from the Chez Panisse Foundation. But these exceptions prove the rule: public-school lunches remain grossly underfunded and generally in the grip of food-processing giants like Kraft Foods and Sara Lee.

Just how bad is it? In Wisconsin, cash-strapped school districts are saving funds by squeezing the lunch hour, according to the *Wisconsin State Journal*. Learning what it means to live in Fast Food Nation, the state's school kids have to wolf down lunch within 20 minutes (elementary), 30 to 34 minutes (middle school), and 35 minutes (high school).

The same budget constraints mean food must be reheated on site, not cooked from scratch. The *State Journal* describes the resulting eating ritual: "Students peel plastic from the main dish plate, from the side dish plate, from the 'spork' and napkin, and from the straw. They rip open -- sometimes with the help of adults -- milk cartons and packets of barbecue sauce and ketchup."

Meanwhile, budget shortfalls are leading school districts nationwide to enact draconian measures to force parents to pay up. In Louisiana -- which ranks 42nd among states in per-capita income -- one county has decreed that students who arrive at school with no money will be denied food: "no exceptions," not even for elementary-school students.

In Utah, one angry mom is rebelling against a similar policy. Her first-grade son arrived at school one day with his lunch account two days -- \$3.00 -- behind. When he reached the cash register that day at lunch, the cashier reportedly ripped his lunch tray out of his hands and replaced it with a roll and a carton of milk. The message: pay up, junior, or no lunch for you.

In other areas, budget-constrained school districts are passing price hikes onto "users": students and the parents who pay their way. In one Massachusetts district, high-school students are organizing to fight a 25 percent jump in lunch prices. The district's reasons for the increase illustrate the sad state of affairs in school lunches nationwide: "The School Committee made the move due to cafeteria repairs, such as a \$15,000 bill to fix the high school's built-in refrigerator last November, and the lunch program assuming the cost of its employees' health insurance from the town."

Another factor in that district's price hike is richly ironic. In the past, it kept lunch prices down by making money from sugary, fatty snacks like soft drinks and chips. New federal guidelines forced the district to phase out that revenue source, without making up the shortfall. In this case, the result was a substantial price increase for the same old reheated fare in the lunch line.

What we're seeing is the slow, drip-by-drip privatization of the school lunch program.

Food Fight

Until the 1980s, when President Reagan set out to dismantle the New Deal, the federal government paid for the upkeep of kitchen equipment and the salaries and benefits of cafeteria workers. Now the feds have washed their hands of those responsibilities -- and more than half of U.S. schools no longer have full-service kitchens.

Under the National School Lunch Program, the federal government reimburses school districts just \$2.40 per day for every meal for children who qualify for free lunches; \$2.00 per day for students who qualify for reduced-price fare; and a whopping \$0.23 for students who pay full price. Ann Cooper of the Berkeley Unified School System estimates schools spend about \$1.68 per meal on payroll and overhead. For actual food costs, that leaves cafeteria managers with all of 72 cents per each meal.

While that's a pathetic sum, it adds up to several billion dollars annually -- enough to pique the interest of industrial-food giants. While school districts economize, pinch pennies, and pass on price hikes to parents, they find it makes sense to outsource cooking to the likes of Kraft, Sara Lee, and Tyson Foods. School kids once caught a glimpse of lunch ladies diligently chopping up and cooking the day's produce. Now they're more likely to see the Sysco truck lurking out back, unloading the day's haul of stuff like Tyson chicken nuggets and Sara Lee "breakfast sticks" -- both cafeteria staples nationwide.

It's no wonder, given tight budget conditions, that parents are spending more time fighting off price hikes and cruel food-denial policies than they are improving the fare being served. Of course, school districts that want to buy higher-quality food can -- but parents and/or local taxpayers, not the federal government, will be picking up the tab. And that just means more economic stratification in the education system.

The National School Lunch Program began after World War II to smooth out income-based inequalities in food access among children. It is becoming a force for institutionalizing them.

The de facto privatization of school lunches amounts to a society-wide divestment in children's health. At this point, the statistics hardly need repeating: Nearly one in six children and teens are overweight, and diet-related (Type II) diabetes -- until recently rare in children -- is reaching epidemic levels.

The money we're saving by slashing school-lunch budgets will eventually be paid to the health-care industry, with interest.

The time has come to reinvest in public-school lunches -- to bring them up to the level now expected at the nation's tony private schools. Banning soft drinks and chips is necessary but insufficient. "These are little Band-Aids," the Berkeley restaurateur and school-lunch campaigner Alice Waters recently told *The New York Times*. "The whole body is bleeding and we must stop it. We simply must."

That means following in the footsteps of New York's Two Angry Moms and agitating for reform, from the school level to the national level.

The Two Angry Moms urge all parents to show up at lunchtime at their kids' schools the week of Oct. 15 to 19 -- National School Lunch Week -- and ask a set of hard questions.

Grist contributing writer Tom Philpott farms and cooks at [Maverick Farms](#), a sustainable-agriculture nonprofit and small farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.