

# The School Lunch Wars

*Sixty-five years ago, the federal school lunch program was created to make American schoolchildren healthier. Today, it's helping to make them fatter. Will a new law change the diets of millions of kids raised on French fries and chicken nuggets?*

BY KRISTEN HINMAN

WHEN COLOMBIA NATIVE BEATRIZ ZULUAGA, a professional cook for 20 years, became the admissions director at CentroNía's DC Bilingual Public Charter School in 2007, she thought she was leaving her old career far behind. Then she laid eyes on the trays in the lunchroom. Mashed potatoes from a box, chicken nuggets, chocolate milk—to Zuluaga, the processed fare didn't look fit for growing kids. At her last job, Zuluaga had cooked for 450 people a day. Surely she could take over the school's kitchen, no?

She unpacked her knives and started whipping up from-scratch dishes: lasagna with lentils, peppers stuffed with barley and turkey, roasted beets. The reformation did not go over well. One offense after another set the tongues of parents and teachers wagging. *What is that? How can you serve that to children? Why are you trying to turn my kid into a vegetarian?*

Three years later, Zuluaga has given up on the beets. But American cheese has been scrapped for calcium-rich provolone. White flour has been swapped for whole wheat in pizza crust. Fruit juice, high in sugar, is out. The school nurse is reporting fewer sick kids, and Zuluaga has chuckled at

least once when a parent remarked on the new efficacy of her child's bowel movements. More than a third of parents have participated in the school's nutrition workshops.

But when I visited the school last fall, all Zuluaga had to do to temper her optimism was walk into a DC Bilingual lunchroom and discover a chubby, misbehaving fourth grader relegated to a table facing the wall and going to town on his brown-bag lunch: an Oscar Mayer Lunchables "pizza." As the boy perched a piece of pepperoni and some shredded cheese atop a cracker, Zuluaga picked up the packaging to inspect its long ingredient list, then put it back down, crossed her arms, and frowned. I expected her to seize the opportunity for a teachable moment, but she was silent. Later she explained, "He didn't go to the grocery store and buy that."

Zuluaga's education, as it were, mirrors what's occurring in schools across America as proponents of whole—that is, minimally processed—foods try to introduce children to more nutritious diets through the \$9.8 billion federal school lunch program, which feeds about 32 million of America's 50 million schoolchildren every school day. One in three American children and teenagers today is overweight or obese. Last year, in a report titled *Too Fat to Fight*, a group of retired military brass blamed school lunches for the fact that an estimated 27 percent of American youth are too over-

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School lunches such as this one are a fat target in America's war against childhood obesity.

weight to serve in the armed forces. A study of Michigan sixth graders published in December found that regularly consuming school lunches was a greater risk factor for obesity than spending two or more hours a day watching television or playing video games.

First lady Michelle Obama, a former hospital executive, has made the war on obesity her defining cause, and put the school lunch program in her crosshairs. In December, thanks in part to her lobbying, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which awards schools that meet certain nutritional guidelines an extra six cents per student meal. The extra pennies increase federal reimbursements for lunches above the rate of inflation for the first time in three

decades. The law, which cuts funds from future federal food-stamp benefits to cover the reimbursement hike, also grants the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) more power to police what's served in school cafeterias. In reality, though, the battle over school lunches is just beginning, as educators confront a culture that prizes its hamburgers and French fries.

How did a program that was designed to improve the nutrition of the nation's children become a culprit in the scourge of childhood obesity?

As early as the 19th century, some American schools operated their own school lunch programs, often with the help of volunteers. In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, the federal government began providing some funds for school lunches on an ad hoc basis. But many children still didn't get enough to eat. The problem was thrown into stark relief during World War II, when it was discovered that half of all draftees

who were deemed unfit for service were rejected because of malnutrition. In 1946, Congress passed the National School Lunch Act "as a measure of national security." The law guaranteed a free or subsidized midday meal for millions of needy children. It was also intended to teach America what to eat. "Not only is the child taught what a good diet consists of," noted a congressional agriculture committee report, "but his parents and family likewise are indirectly instructed."

During the Depression, when farmers were surrounded by mountains of unsold commodities and schools were full of hungry children, New Deal politicians had used the USDA to funnel surpluses to school cafeterias. Thus, when it came time to designate an authority for the new national lunch



Even during the lean years of the Great Depression, educators had to coax youngsters—including these kids fed by an early federal lunch program—to drink their milk.

program, the USDA seemed a natural choice. Schools would receive subsidized commodities and cash reimbursements in exchange for feeding low-income children lunches that met USDA nutrition standards. And so the same law that was supposed to ensure a nutritious midday meal for millions of kids also created an enduring market for American farmers.

It was up to state officials to administer the federal funds. For the first two decades student participation was low, partly because many schools lacked adequate facilities but also because local authorities often established the eligibility threshold with little regard for students' actual need. The poor results prompted Congress in the 1960s to establish a federal eligibility standard linked to the poverty level.

Today, students from families with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty level (\$28,665 for a family of

four) eat for free. The school receives a federal subsidy of \$2.72 per meal. Children from families earning up to 185 percent of the poverty level pay 40 cents per meal, and the subsidy is correspondingly reduced. Other students pay the "full" price, an average of \$1.60. The government also provides a small subsidy for these meals, on the principle that child nutrition contributes to national security. (Even so, schools often are not able to cover the production cost of the "full" price meals and essentially make up the difference from the subsidies meant for lower-income kids. A controversial provision of the new law will rectify that by requiring some districts to charge more for full-pay lunches.)

Student participation doubled within the first few years after the federal eligibility standards were set. Educators suddenly found themselves in the food business. Poorer districts, particularly, didn't have functioning kitchens, or the money to improve them. It became standard practice for cafeteria staff to purchase ready-made heat-and-eat meals, whose less-than-palatable qualities made headlines once it was learned that much of the food was being thrown out. These reports, along with the fact that the government was subsidizing lunches for middle-income fam-

ilies that could afford to pay full price, caught the attention of Ronald Reagan's cost-conscious administration. Among the resulting USDA proposals was the reclassification of ketchup as a vegetable—on the theory that replacing broccoli and lima beans with cheap condiments would reduce so-called plate waste. That idea caused a political uproar and was never carried out, but in 1981 Congress slashed school lunch reimbursement rates by a third and eliminated money for equipment.

Already making do with slim resources and now facing more budget pressures, some schools turned to professional vendors to replace the cafeteria ladies of old. At the same time, many schools added "à la carte" items that could be sold to anyone who could pay. Since the government didn't reimburse for à la carte fare, and thus didn't regulate its nutritional content, school officials were free to offer

French fries, nachos, and pizza. Some items were branded by fast-food companies such as Domino's Pizza and Taco Bell. Many schools also allowed companies to install vending machines that dispensed snack foods, candy, and soda, from which the schools kept a portion of the sales.

Consumption of government-subsidized school lunches began to fall off because of the “needy” stigma associated with the reimbursable meals. Kids who had once purchased meals at full price switched to the more tempting à la carte line. Some lower-income students simply went without. In response, cafeteria managers goosed the offerings to make them more enticing. Out went baked chicken, in came chicken nuggets; roasted potatoes gave way to Tater Tots. Cheap commodities were available from the government, in all the processed forms kids were believed to covet. USDA nutrition standards were lax enough that it was possible to satisfy the grain and protein requirements with, say, breaded and fried fish sticks, or the fruit requirement with sugar-laced canned peaches.

**I**n 1990, the USDA commissioned a comprehensive analysis of the school lunch program to see how it stacked up against the agency's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In yet another bureaucratic oddity of the program, schools had to meet a different, and looser, set of nutrition standards. “The results were disturbing,” recounts sociologist Janet Poppendieck in *Free for All* (2010), a survey of the politics surrounding school lunch programs. “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. . . . Only one percent of schools were serving, on average, meals that complied with the dietary guidelines for percentage of calories from fat—one percent!”

Without allocating more money, Congress in 1994 required that school menus meet the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. But what was on the plate changed very little. Today, less than 20 percent of schools cook lunch from

scratch. Eighty percent of schools exceed the fat allowance per meal. The average high school lunch has 1,600 milligrams of sodium—100 milligrams more than the daily amount deemed within healthy limits for children.

In the late 1990s, some school districts around the country quietly began removing vending machines or putting the kibosh on minimally nutritious à la carte programs. But the

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reformers who eventually drew national attention were two chefs who had far more ambitious goals. Alice Waters, whose Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse was in the vanguard in serving seasonal and local cuisine, won over the California state superintendent of education with Edible Schoolyard, a garden project at a Berkeley middle school. By 2002, produce gardens had been established in more than 2,000 of California's 9,000 schools. The same year, Waters convinced the Berkeley Unified School District to hire Ann Cooper, who became known as “the Renegade Lunch Lady,” to revamp its food service program with whole foods. (Cooper has since gone to work for the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado.)

To the California duo, the biggest culprit in the child nutrition crisis is the transformation of agriculture since World War II and the rise of agribusiness. Livestock is raised in mechanized indoor facilities rather than pastures, cash-crop monoculture has replaced the diversified family farm, and the food industry has undergone far-reaching consolidation. Today, only two percent of Americans—supported by government subsidies—produce food, and they do so at prices so low that the other 98 percent don't have much incentive to question the system. Pervasive marketing by fast-food companies pitching cheap children's “Happy Meals” and other convenience foods to working parents has helped establish a drive-through culture. The eat-your-vegetables ethos has given way to an emphasis on

food that can be put on the table quickly (if it's consumed at a table at all) and that children will eat without a battle royale every evening.

The view that poor-quality school lunches are the result of a broken food system has led food activists to see the USDA as part of the problem. How, they ask, can an authority responsible for helping agribusiness produce and market its output also be an effective nutrition watchdog in school cafeterias?

In 2009, two months after moving into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Michelle Obama planted an organic kitchen garden on the White House lawn, a step of both symbolic and practical significance. With her backing, the USDA dusted off projects that promote local and regional food systems, rolling out a local-foods marketing campaign called "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food." Another initiative aims to help small and medium-size farms sell their products to schools.

What elevated Obama's whole foods advocacy above the charges of impracticality and foodie snobbery leveled at Waters and Cooper was the rollout last February of a campaign dubbed "Let's Move" that puts the focus squarely on health—and on those responsible for the well-being of children. "Our kids didn't do this to themselves," Obama said when she announced the wellness plan. "Our kids don't decide what's served to them at school or whether there's time for gym class or recess. Our kids don't choose to make food products with tons of sugar and sodium in supersized portions, and then to have those products marketed to them everywhere they turn. And no matter how much they beg for pizza, fries, and candy, ultimately they are not, and should not be, the ones calling the shots at dinnertime. We're in charge. We make these decisions."

In placing the blame for the obesity epidemic on corporate food processors, educators, and parents, Obama picked the right targets. Conventional agriculture isn't the main problem. If there were greater demand for less-processed ingredients, agribusiness companies could produce them. Nor is the USDA's jurisdiction of the program a real obstacle to reform. In the 1970s and again in 2001, the department pressed Congress for more regulatory authority over à la carte and vending machine offerings—only to come up short against the soft drink and snack food lobbies. The real problem—and the solution—is a lot

closer to the school lunch lines than Washington, or America's feedlots and farm fields.

About five years ago Linda Henke, superintendent of the Maplewood–Richmond Heights School District in suburban St. Louis, decided to start mingling with her high schoolers in the lunchroom. When she saw the array of Pop-Tarts, candy, and "cheese fries" that had been mainstays on the à la carte menu for years, she was disgusted. "It was the fish not seeing the water," she says of her years-long inattention to what her students were eating. She started to lay the groundwork for some drastic changes.

Three years ago, with the help of her congressman, Russ Carnahan, a local university, and a group of family farmers desperate for new markets, Henke began making over the district's food program. She prohibited candy and chips in the cafeterias and had all vending machines but one removed. She required that all the starches come from whole grain sources and banned the purchase of chicken patties and nuggets—processed chicken, period. Whenever possible, ingredients were to be Missouri grass-fed beef and pesticide-free produce. Local sourcing would allow the staff to order whole foods, which is not always an option when purchases are made through the USDA or a distributor. This way, the district could prepare the foods as desired—apples for apple-sauce, tomatoes for marinara and salsa, for example—while controlling for calorie, fat, and sodium content. An à la carte line was preserved at the high school, but it no longer serves cheese fries and other junk food.

When I visited last fall, I was struck by the positive vibe around the revamped program. A teacher said he'd lost seven pounds by eating in the high school cafeteria every school day for the previous three months. A senior girl who had embraced the changes from the beginning observed that even she was surprised when football players started eating salads. The elementary school's cook of 14 years told me her job is now harder, but it's rewarding. She recounted a recent visit to the school her sister's kids attend in Indiana. "They had all this processed food that we don't serve anymore, and I was thinking, 'This is farm country! If we're city people and we can cook, why can't they?'"

These reforms have not come cheaply. The meals cost from \$3.75 to \$4.25 apiece to prepare. Henke's board of education has allowed her to run the program at a deficit equal to roughly one teacher's salary. But if she wants to keep using



**At the Maplewood–Richmond Heights Middle School in St. Louis, Missouri, salad is cool, thanks to the efforts of a visionary district superintendent.**

local food sources, she has to convince a consortium of schools to buy in. The farms that have been supplying Maplewood–Richmond Heights on an experimental basis need to sell their food at great volumes to turn a profit. One of Henke's selling points to other school officials? Her cafeterias are selling 10 percent more lunches.

Administrators such as Henke, Beatriz Zuluaga, and others in Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Texas have revealed some important principles. It takes a tough-minded school leader to assert that nutrient-rich food is the right choice for kids—and that it's an appropriate use of government dollars. Kids will complain initially but will come around. And a number of collateral benefits follow when students eat well. Anecdotal reports from schools with healthful and flavorful food indicate that teachers have started eating with students, attendance rates are higher, and fewer students fall asleep in class or commit vandalism and violence at school.

So far, these cafeteria visionaries are the exception. Since 2004, the USDA has administered the HealthierUS School Challenge, awarding distinction, but no money, to schools that voluntarily improve the healthfulness of their meals. By last fall, only a paltry 841 of the 101,000 schools in the

National School Lunch Program (less than one percent) had received awards. That leaves a lot of schools that are still promoting Tater Tot Day and reheating frozen pizzas.

Food activists hope that the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will make a big difference. More money will buy better ingredients and pay for more staff to prepare foods from scratch. At least as important is the USDA's increased authority over the nutrition standards of all food served in schools, and the department's proposal to establish more rigorous standards, including two vegetables per meal, strict sodium limits, and, for the first time, maximum calorie counts.

It could take another generation to see meaningful change in the waistlines of American children. Yes, reform will require more government money. But at least as important is a stomachs-and-minds campaign aimed at the nation's adults: food service directors who cling to the argument that a child won't drink low-fat milk, so cookies 'n' cream-flavored milk is better than no calcium at all; parents who ask, *Why do you want to turn my kid into a vegetarian?*; and teachers who snort, *How can you serve beets to students?* ■