

Digesting School Lunch
by
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Part of my internship to become a registered dietitian was six months spent in the kitchen of my local middle school. As opposed to most people, when it comes to school lunch I am not going to give a blistering finger-wag at the lunch ladies and food service directors, but rather at the American public and our narcissism.

The reality is that most parents have no clue of what their kids do or eat at school. Mom and Dad spout all types of concerns with absolutely no knowledge of how those concerns become actualities. They have no idea of the nutritional abyss lying within the poor choices their kids make or the poor foods they send in the lunch box.

Since children do not vote, politicians do not care about their needs. People whose children do not attend public schools or folks with no school age kids or no offspring at all are worried more about today's value of their home than whether the teen down the street will be able bodied enough to assist them and their geriatric medical needs in the next 15 to 30 years.

We send our youth to school and figure they will somehow come out decently educated young adults ready to take on all of the world's problems so that we can retire to a sunny climate and win at bingo.

The reality is that today's youth will not live to the 78 year life expectancy of us older folks.¹ If you are an overweight teen [about 35% of the kids in my town], the girls life expectancy is around 72 years. If you are an overweight boy, your life expectancy is around 65. Thirty percent of teens are overweight or obese. In fact, they tend to shoot right past overweight to obesity and the risk factors for cardiac, pulmonary and diabetes problems climb right up with their weight.

Most people have no idea what school's feed students. If you are in this group, go to the nearest mall and sit in the food court. That is what you have to eat everyday in about 15 minutes amid all the cacophony of the Saturday before Christmas.

Oh yeah, nothing is eaten with a knife or includes whole grains.

The main reason for this is that the United States Department of Agriculture [USDA] has two missions:

1. Making sure our food is safe
2. Promoting agribusiness domestically and abroad.

Follow this link and read it for yourself:

http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os_gAC9-wMJ8QY0MDpxBDA09nXw9DFxcXQ-

cAA_2CbEdFAEUOjoE!/?parentnav=ABOUT_USDA&navid=MISSION_STATEMENT&navtype=RT

Making food safe is a good idea, on the other hand, it often smacks right up against “promoting agribusiness.” How does that relate to your local school? Well, let’s play “Are You Smarter than the Average School Food Service Director?” and follow the money trail.

[Loud trumpet 1970’s game show music plays, cue applause sign]

You are now the food service director of a school. Your challenge is to develop menus which abide by the guidelines of the School Lunch/School Breakfast Program of the USDA. The USDA’s guidelines state:

In addition to providing 1/3 of RDA [Recommended Daily Allowance] for lunch and 1/4 of RDA for breakfast, the Enhanced Food-Based meal patternⁱⁱ [categories of different foods to meet the government nutrition requirements] is designed to:

- provide 1/3 of the calories needed for specific age/grade groups for lunch
- provide 1/4 of the calories needed for specific age/grade groups for breakfast
- help ensure consistency with the 1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americansⁱⁱⁱ

Got that? Hope so. You, the food service manager have to develop menus adhering to these guidelines. You can use the tools from the government’s program, Team Nutrition to help you.^{iv} They will provide a big book of menus from which you will feed your school. You better be following these guidelines and be very close to their menus because you will get your menus audited by the state every five years. That means you can lose a lot of money if your menus are not up to snuff. More about the money ahead.

You became a food service director [FSD] because you lost “Let’s Make a Deal” and didn’t want to take home the goat behind door number 3. But other people become food service directors because they move up the cafeteria food chain and are director by default. They know a lot about ordering large quantities of food, but little about nutrition. Either way, the simplest thing to do is repeat the current menus and/or use the menus designed by the Team Nutrition. What could be easier?

Of course, these menus are based on the foods normally available on the USDA Commodities list and grown by US agribusiness. The commodities are surplus products which the government buys for a big, big volume discount from agribusiness. It was started during the Great Depression in the 1930’s to help out farmers who had crops they couldn’t sell due to no one having any money and kids in schools starving, literally. Looked like a match made in heaven.

[See my short article at the end connecting the military industrial complex and the school lunch program for a real eye opener.]

Nowadays, the school puts in their order months in advance based on what is on the list. To get a product, you have to order at least 1/3 of a truck load. This quantity can cause some problems

for the small school within a district or the small rural school districts who want to better their food. More about these problems later.

Here is what a publication from the Food Research and Action Center says about commodities and the school lunch program.

“ . . . commodities may be relatively safer from a food safety perspective than their marketplace counterparts because of more stringent specifications and inspection procedures. Moreover, commodities are a “safe” funding source for local school lunch programs, since they are supported by *politically powerful agricultural interests*. Finally, the financial contribution of commodities to the economic feasibility of offering school lunches is especially crucial in today’s world of rising food costs, rising labor costs, decreasing local and state financial support for “*non-essential*” *education-related school district costs*, and increasingly limited federal resources.”^v [Emphasis added]

This means that big agribusiness [i.e., “politically powerful agricultural interests”] wants school foods to be grown and sold by them, solely. That being the case, they have successfully stopped a sugar cap in school foods. They were also successful in preventing a calorie cap or a sodium cap and never setting a minimum level of fiber in school foods. Agribusiness has the processing plants to take care of a nation of school lunches. They also want to eliminate the small local farmer. It is more difficult for a local farmer to give the volume discounts of a Cargill or Monsanto. Another factor that keeps big business dictating student nutrition is that schools are getting less money for non-essential education aspects [i.e., school cafeterias] forcing foods to be really cheap.

You want to be a good FSD and order healthy foods. However, your school district only has 13,000 students. If you want to order brown rice, you have to order 1/3 of a truck load. How long is that stuff going to last? Where are you going to put it? Who is going to teach your staff how to cook it? How many kids are going to eat it? Most importantly, who is going to pay for it?

Okay, let’s start the money part. The school receives \$19.50 per student per year to buy from the commodities program. It will add up to be \$844 million in 2010 of foods distributed to school lunches across the country. This is only for the school lunch program. Schools that run a school breakfast program can use these foods for that program, but no additional foods can be bought from the commodities market and used for school breakfast.^{vi}

Still, that is a lot of food.

So your school gets a million pounds of potatoes for super cheap. Goody! Where are you going to store them? Most schools don’t come with storage for that quantity and you gotta take them right now. Well, you can ship them off to a processor like McCain. You want baked potatoes? Not really feasible, but how about baked fries? The processors may or may not have your product available. This year, [yes, you ordered for the year], they do have fried fries with a breading, but no baked fries. You have to make a decision. Your budget says commodity foods

are a must. You can't get what you want, but the potatoes are waiting. You opt for the fried fries, but you'll bake them when they come in. Win one point for the kitchen.

You start the school year. Out of your budget has to come all employee costs, food, electric bill, water bill, paper supplies, cleaning supplies, cooking equipment, office equipment, and their maintenance and anything else that comes down the pike and is used by your kitchen. Your budget is no longer within the school budget. Your expenses are to be paid from your own cafeteria. Just in case you wondered, dollar bill cookies aren't accepted by the Sysco foods corporation.

Commodities will give you a lot of supplies, but your money is going to come from the school lunch program and school breakfast program. You will get:

\$2.68 for each kid that qualifies for free lunch, that's 130% above poverty or family of 4 making \$27K or below

\$2.28 for each kid that qualifies for reduced price, that 185% above poverty or family of 4 making \$38K or below.^{vii}

Head spinning? We just got started. You may qualify for some money to pay for afternoon snacks and a fruit and vegetable program. Oh yeah, you need to keep track of each kid that is in school every day to get correct reimbursement. If you close down school for a snow day, you forfeit the reimbursement.

FYI - there has been NO increase for school lunch reimbursement since 1973.

So, how do you pay for the foods to offer the kids who don't get reimbursement? Will they take your lunch option? How do you pay for the days the school is closed?

You make sure you get the biggest bang for the buck according to the menus from the USDA. They have all the contacts with Tyson chicken, McCain potatoes, Sysco vegetables and everything else. Remember that brown rice you wanted to serve. Well, white rice at around \$20 a case versus brown rice at around \$60 a case. Ya know, that rice thing may not happen. You serve white bread or wheat bread that is white bread with caramel coloring that is less than half the price of whole grain breads. You sell a la carte foods.

A la carte foods are French fries, cookies, ice cream, and soda. They could also be salads, fruit, nuts, pretzels, non-dairy milks or cut veggies. You are looking for the largest profit margin. French fries yield a large profit margin, low purchase price, low labor cost, high sale price and are extremely popular. Salads are labor intensive, low popularity and low profit margin. What are you going to choose? Do you pay your workers healthcare or trying to change the taste and eating habits of a middle school? And fries count for a vegetable or a starch. Pair them with pizza and you have just about covered your lunch nutrition requirements. Both are easy to store, easy to make, no plastic ware and VERY popular. Who wins the point - agribusiness or nutrition?

Oh yeah, one more thing. You HAVE to serve cow milk with every meal.^{viii} That's right. You can serve juice instead of a real piece of fruit, but nothing, I mean, nothing replaces milk. That's because of two main reasons.

1. The dairy industry insists on it. They pay for conferences and breaks at conferences. They pay for speakers to come to your school or group. They pay for ads in journals for healthcare practitioners such as The Journal of the American Dietetic Association [ADA].

Every time I attend any ADA function we have a speaker from the Dairy Council. There is always a booth from the Council in the vendor area. They pay for snacks at conference breaks. The ADA never has a negative thing to say about dairy.

Here is something I found interesting as a dietetic student. When a nutrition student is taught about food allergies they are schooled to counsel patients to steer clear of what causes allergic reactions. It's like the old joke.

Patient: Doctor, it hurts when I do this.

Doctor: WELL, don't DO that!

Patient: Dietitian, it hurts when I eat wheat bread.

Dietitian: WELL, don't EAT wheat bread.

You may have cramps, bloating, diarrhea, acne, constipation, nausea, clogged sinuses or bed wetting when you chow down on dairy, but according to ADA it is THE source of calcium. Green leafy vegetables are only a consolation prize. If you can't do milk, you are going to love Lactaid.

Lactaid is the only lactose free milk I have ever seen in a school lunch program. In fact, students have to have a prescription for it in order for the school to be reimbursed. How'd you like to own a piece of a product used in most schools, hospitals and long term care facilities in a population of around 300 million? Lactaid will relinquish its hold on lactose intolerant individuals when it can own enough of the non-dairy market. That's just my opinion, but I'll bet you a glass of hemp milk on it.

2. We have only the DAIRY section of the USDA Food Pyramid. Our neighbor to the north has some crazy nutrition people. Canadian dietitians have a CALCIUM section. This includes dairy as a source of calcium, but also gives credence to collard greens, bok choy and the number one source of absorbable calcium in the US market - tofu. You can ingest all the calcium you want, but if it isn't absorbed it doesn't matter. According to the USDA charts and tables, tofu made with nigari has the highest percentage of absorbable calcium of any other products I could find in the average marketplace. Milk was number 7, behind collard greens and bok choy.

Starting to see the picture? Feeling like the game is rigged? How we do change from being the sap to winning the grand prize for the next generation?

First, go to your local school and have lunch for three days. It will cost a few dollars each day, but a good education was never cheap. You will see the kids who only have fries for lunch. You will deal with the time factor of trying to get through a lunch line, back to a table and shove down the food on your tray.

Then, do not have anything to eat or drink until after 3:30pm. Most people would quit any job that required such a ridiculous policy. But our kids can have lunch at 10:30 with nothing else until 3:30.

If you eat a plant-based diet, there will be little if any protein source for you. If you are a kid that qualifies for free lunch what can you eat? I hope there is a salad bar. Oops that may not be covered by your reimbursement. You will have no calcium source because only cow milk is provided. There is a partial reimbursement for non-dairy milks. What cafeteria is going to have the extra money to provide expensive non-dairy milk? You will get juice, but it will probably have no added calcium. Green leafy vegetables? Not unless you really are smarter than the average FSD.

After you are hungry and total ready to kill the food service director, sit down and talk with them. Ask them what you can do. Become a member of your school's Wellness Committee. Every school had to put together a Wellness Committee after 2005 to receive school lunch/school breakfast monies. A Wellness Committee should set nutrition and activity standards and goals for a school. Many schools created great ones. Others ended up with a committee of one making all of the decisions. You pay taxes for this school, you can have a voice.

There is a program where your school can get money by the variety and amount of servings of certain vegetables that, heretofore, have been left off many menus.^{ix} The vegetables are dark, green and leafy or orange. A school can earn \$1,000 by having them on the menu a few times a week. The award criteria also include whole grains, legumes and physical activity as part of the school program.

Is \$1000 enough? The money to pay for the menu upgrades may be coming.

The Institute of Medicine put together some new guidelines in January 2010 for school lunch. They include using whole grains every day, a cap on fat, saturated fat and sodium and a minimum for fiber. I am really excited about this fiber minimum. Right now many school lunches have a fiber content of 2-5 grams. When you see that the kids eat only the pizza or fries that level can drop to 1 gram. Breakfast may have only 1-3 grams. When we are trying to get kids to eat 35 grams a day, this makes dinner a Metamucil night. If we have a minimum of fiber then breakfast and lunch must include sources of fiber, such as whole grains, fresh fruits and veggies to increase those grams. A cap on fat may be the beginning of the end of the daily fries.

Right now the US Senate is debating the reimbursement bill, **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010**. Here's a link to explain it: http://www.frac.org/pdf/summary_cacfp_cnr2010.pdf There is a lot of money on the table to upgrade our school foods. To even begin to the change needed, the House of Representatives must hear from you. One billion dollar per year

increase...the money proposed, will start getting us on the winning team. Call your senators and representative and tell them our kids need their help. Our future generation's well being should not be left to spinning the wheel of fortune or pitching pennies and hoping for long term vitality.

Who knows we may even be able to upgrade our local school lunch to be as important as our neighborhood curb appeal.

ⁱ Frazier P. [nd] Healthy Lifestyle Begins with Exercise, Balanced Diet, CWK Network, Inc. Retrieved from http://www.connectwithkids.com/tipsheet/2003/109_jan29/cut.html on May, 14, 2010.

ⁱⁱ USDA Food and nutrition service. Retrieved from www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/menu/menu_planning.doc on May 12, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA Team Nutrition. Chapter 2, pg 25. Retrieved from http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/menuplanner_chapter2.pdf on May 5, 2010.

^{iv} USDA. Team Nutrition. Retrieved from http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/menuplanner_chapter1.pdf on May 5, 2010.

^v Food Research and Action Center. 2008. Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the National School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential. Executive Summary. FRAC. Retrieved from http://www.frac.org/pdf/commodities08_execsummary.pdf on May 12, 2010.

^{vi} USDA. [2010] Schools and Commodity Programs. Retrieved from http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/schcnp/schcnp_fags.htm on May 5, 2010.

^{vii} Federal Register. [2009] Notices. Fed. Reg. Vol. 74, No.58. Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/iegs/IEGs09-10.pdf> on May 5, 2010.

^{viii} Team Nutrition. Milk. Section 4, pg. 1. Retrieved from http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/FBG_Section_4-Milk.pdf on May 12, 2010.

^{ix} Team Nutrition. [2009] Tips for meeting the challenge. Healthier US School Lunch Challenge. http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/HealthierUS/HUSSCkit_pp13-24.pdf on May 5, 2010