School Food Politics

THE COMPLEX ECOLOGY OF HUNGER AND FEEDING IN SCHOOLS AROUND THE WORLD

EDITED BY Sarah A. Robert AND Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

2011

• CHAPTER SIX •

School Food, Public Policy, and Strategies for Change*

Marion Nestle

School food is a "hot button" issue, and it well deserves to be. It lies right at the heart of issues related to equality in our society. Americans live in a pluralistic society. For democracy to work, the interests of constituencies must be appropriately balanced. School food is about the balance between corporate interests and those of advocates for children's health.

The nutritional health of American children has changed during this century, improving dramatically in some ways, but not in others. In the early 1900s, the principal health problems among children were infectious diseases made worse by diets limited in calories and nutrients. As the economy improved, and as more was learned about nutritional needs, manufacturers fortified foods with key nutrients, the government started school feeding programs, and the results were a decline in nutrient deficiency conditions. That severe undernutrition has now virtually disappeared among American children can be counted as one of the great public health achievements of the twentieth century. For the great majority of American children, the problem of not having enough food has been solved. Whether children are eating the right food is another matter.

Indeed, the most important nutritional problem among children today is obesity—a consequence of eating too much food, rather than too little. Obesity rates are rising rapidly among children and adolescents, especially those who are African-American or Hispanic. The health consequences also are rising:

---

* "School Food, Public Policy, and Strategies for Change" by Marion Nestle was originally published by the Center for Ecoliteracy. © Copyright 2004 Center for Ecoliteracy. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. For more information, visit www.ecoliteracy.org.

high levels of serum cholesterol, blood pressure, and "adult-onset" diabetes. This increase has occurred in response to complex societal, economic, demographic, and environmental changes that have reduced physical activity and promoted greater intake of foods high in calories but not necessarily high in nutrients.

This shift—from too little to too much food—has created a dilemma for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), other federal agencies, and many of my fellow nutritionists. Since its inception, the USDA has had two missions: to promote American agricultural products and to advise the public about how best to use those products. The school lunch program derived precisely from the congruence of the two missions. The government could use up surplus food commodities by passing them along to low-income children. As long as dietary advice was to eat more, the advice caused no conflict.

Once the problems shifted to chronic diseases, however, the congruence ended. Eat less means eating less of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sugar, and salt, which in turn means eating less of the principal food sources of those nutrients—meat, dairy, fried foods, soft drinks, and potato chips. USDA was then faced with the problem of continuing to promote use of such foods while asking the public to eat less of them—a dilemma that continues to the present day.

For the federal government to suggest that anyone eat less of any food does not play well in our political environment; such suggestions hurt sales. This matters, because we vastly overproduce food in this country—a secret seemingly known only to analysts in the Economic Research Service. The average per capita supply of calories available from food produced in the United States—plus imports, less exports—is 3,900 per day for every man, woman, and child, more than twice what is needed on average. These are food availability figures and they cover food wasted, fed to pets, and fats used for frying, but they have gone up by 600 calories since 1970 and are more than sufficient to account for rising rates of obesity among adults and children. The point here is that overproduction makes for a highly competitive food supply. People can only eat so much. So to sell more, companies must get us to eat their foods rather than those of competitors, or to eat more, thereby encouraging us to become obese.

The stakes are very high. Food is a $1.3 trillion annual business, with the vast percentage of profits going to added-value products rather than basic commodities. It pays to turn wheat into sugared breakfast cereals, or potatoes into chips. Farmers get only a small share—18% or so—of the consumer's food dollar, less for vegetables, fruits, and grains than for meat and dairy. So there is a big incentive to marketers to make food products with cheap raw ingredi-

ents like fat and sugar. And they do—to the tune of 12,000 or so new products every year. There are now 320,000 foods on the market (not all in the same place); the average large supermarket contains 40,000 to 60,000 food products, more than anyone could possibly need or want.

This level of overproduction has kept growth in the food industry stagnating for years at about a 1% growth rate, far lower than in comparable industries. Corporations need better growth rates than that to satisfy shareholders. To expand sales, food companies can try to sell products overseas, or they can try to increase market share at home. With this understood, it is evident why marketers so relentlessly pursue children as potential sales targets: children 7 to 12 years of age spend billions of their own money on snacks and beverages, and teenagers have billions more to spend on candy, soft drinks, ice cream, and fast food—precisely the types of foods that promote high caloric intakes. The influence of children on adult spending is even greater. Kids are said to influence one-third of total sales of candy and gum, and 20% to 30% of cold cereals, pizza, salty snacks, and soft drinks.

Food companies say they are not responsible for the changes in society that make kids demand their products. They point to decreasing family size, older parents, working parents, and single parents all predisposing to greater indulgence of kids. Kids are more spoiled; coupled with other changes in society, they are also less independent. From the age of eight on, my friends and I could and did take New York subways by ourselves, a level of independence utterly inconceivable today. Parents want their kids to make independent choices whenever they can, and foods are perfect opportunities for such decision-making, which is just what marketers want.

Of course, what kids are doing instead of taking subways is watching food commercials on TV or on the Internet. Advertisers quite unapologetically direct marketing efforts to kids as young as six. They consider this targeting quite sensible. And they know how to do it. The research available to help advertisers target children is awe-inspiring in its comprehensiveness, level of detail, and thoroughly undisguised cynicism. Not only have marketers identified precisely the kinds of packages and messages most likely to attract boys, girls, or kids of varying ages, but they also justify advertising to children as a public service.

The USDA is a complex agency with multiple constituencies. Because of internal conflicts of interest, the agency cannot protect the integrity of the school meals program on its own. It is already clear, for example, that Congress believes that more competition is good for schools. If USDA wants to help children prevent obesity through healthier school lunches, it needs to be working with a much broader set of allies. USDA cannot tell children to eat

less of any food, and the school meal programs still reflect the dual goals of their origin. My recommendation would be to enter into partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to develop an interagency alliance for a national school health campaign focused on obesity prevention using the Healthy People 2010 goals as a starting point.

What particularly disturbs me about commercial intrusions into school meals is that they are so unnecessary. Schools are perfectly capable of producing nutritionally sound foods that taste good and are enthusiastically consumed by students as well as teachers. From my own observations, a healthy school meals program (in every sense of the word) requires just three elements: a committed food service director, a supportive principal, and devoted parents. It just seems so obvious that the future of our nation demands each of these elements to be in place in every one of the 95,000 schools in the country. These are, after all, our children.

There needs to be one place in society where children feel that their needs come first—not their future as consumers. In American society today, schools are the only option. That's why every aspect of school food matters so much and is worth every minute spent to promote and protect its integrity.