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Audience: parents who believe their children are eating healthy at school

Mystery Meat and Obesity:

How Eating from the Lunch Line is Harming America's Children

Hot dogs. Salisbury steak. Mandarin oranges. Mystery meat. School food, which should be known as highly processed, fat laden, sugar heavy junk. Maybe you think it doesn't matter. Kids can eat whatever they want when they are young and still make good choices later in life. But, what about all the health problems associated with these types of foods? Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, the list goes on and on. The choices we make today will affect us tomorrow. Today's generation is speculated to be the first that won't live longer than their parents, and all because of a new phenomenon called childhood obesity. Obese is defined in the Webster's dictionary as "very fat or overweight; corpulent." It comes from the Latin word *obedere*, which means "to eat away." According to the American Journal for Public Health, obese is defined "as having a body mass index in the 95th percentile or greater for age and gender" (Wojcicki). 18.4% of children now fall into the obese category by age four (Wojcicki). There is an even higher prevalence of childhood obesity among minorities, with 22.0% of Hispanic children and 20.8% of African American children being considered obese (Wojcicki). The highly processed, unhealthy foods being offered in school cafeterias are contributing heavily

to these frightening obesity statistics, especially among those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale.

The School Lunch Program started out with good intentions, providing poor, malnourished, hungry immigrant children with necessary nutrients for life. It was extremely important during the Great Depression, when many families did not have enough money to put food on the table. They relied on the free lunches their children received at school to keep their families from starving. Today, many kids in the United States still receive free lunches; families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (\$28,665 for a family of four) or on food stamps or other public assistance are eligible for free school meals (Kalafa 121). Families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals (Kalafa 121). The same goes for school breakfasts. So, school food is important. It provides many children with the only food they will eat all day. For example, in Indiana, where a minimum of 180 days of school are required per year, if a child eats lunch at school every day, they eat 17% of all their meals at school. If they eat breakfast and lunch at school, then they eat 34% of all their meals at school. Theoretically, then, these meals should be high quality, nutritious, and tasty.

Many schools rely on the USDA food pyramid as a guide to what they should feed students. The food pyramid also started out as a result of positive intentions, providing food service workers with basic goals to meet in order to keep children growing at a healthy pace. However, times have changed. Children are exercising less as compared to the early twentieth century when the food pyramid was created (A Brief History...). Over the years, the pyramid has been revised, but many people and schools remain stuck on the 1992 Food Guide Pyramid, which suggests the average American should eat six to eleven servings of carbohydrates, three to

four servings of vegetables, two to four servings of fruit, and two to three servings each of protein and dairy every day (A Brief History...).

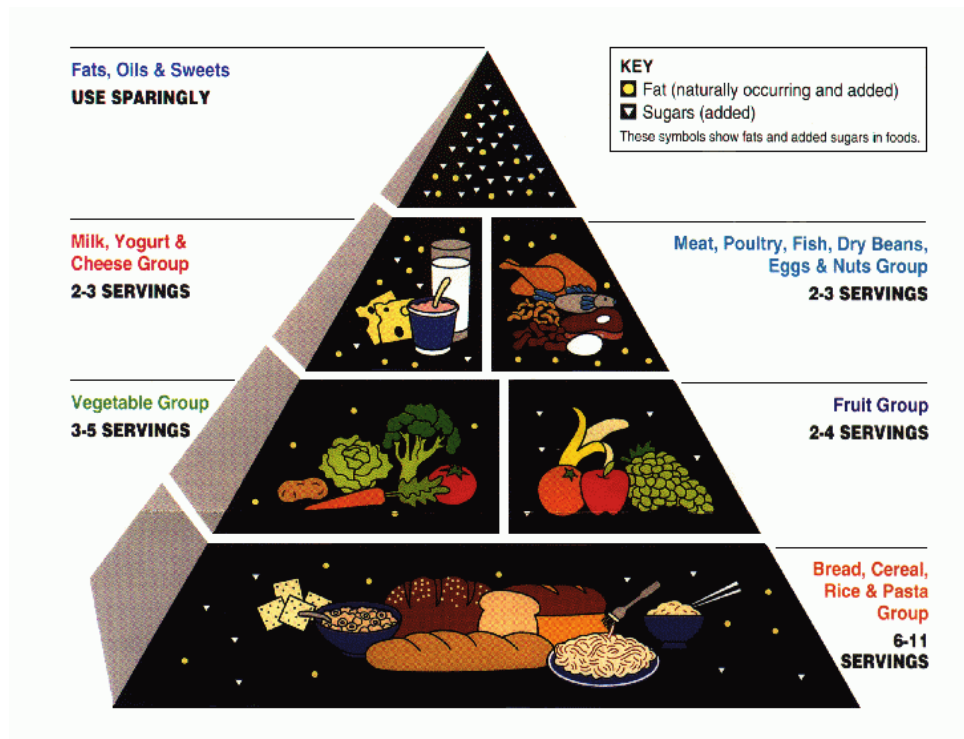


Figure 1. The 1992 Food Guide Pyramid. "Past Food Pyramid Materials." *United States Department of Agriculture National Agriculture Library. USDA,* 16 November 2012. Web. 18 November 2012.

Unfortunately, the classic American diet needs to be changed because, with less exercise, children do not need nearly as many servings of carbohydrates, which are very calorie dense. Also, the foods providing carbohydrates have changed over the years to a much more processed version. According to a study performed by the National Institute of Health, "Eating more refined grains and sweets or desserts led to weight gain, while consuming whole grains helped with weight loss" (Bierly). Across the United States, schools are attempting to transition from white breads and pastas to wheat breads and pastas, but unless the ingredients of the product explicitly say "whole wheat flour," the wheat option is nothing more than white flour with

molasses added to color the product brown. Because people associate “brown” bread with eating a healthy, whole wheat carbohydrate, large baking industries are successfully fooling the general public into thinking they are making a healthy decision.

The food provided to students at a typical American school is neither delicious, nor nutritious. A report on childhood obesity found in the 1970s a shift in food production that produced a trend away from meals cooked from scratch and resulted in more meals created from processed foods. In order to help schools with the expense of cooking for hundreds of children every day, the USDA has implemented a commodity program, where they essentially buy products in enormous quantities and donate them to schools. The school system in the United States feeds over 31 million children daily, so the sheer volume of food they need to purchase is astronomical (Bhatia). The school systems take any help they can get, and the commodity program is their help. However, the USDA has lower standards for school systems than many fast food chains. “In the past decade, the USDA paid \$145 million for pet-food grade “spent-hen meat” that went into the school meals program” (Kalafa 19). So, not only is the food children are eating unhealthy, but the basic building blocks of their meals are not even quality ingredients.

Contributing significantly to the problem with the quality of food offered in lunch lines are the standards schools are required to follow for each meal. When people attempt to eat a balanced diet, they know they should incorporate vegetables, fruits, dairy, protein, and carbohydrates, but they do not measure out each and every nutrient their meals contain. However, at schools, food service directors are required to follow strict regulations that tell them how much of each nutrient a meal must incorporate. The cafeteria workers spend all their time measuring and calculating nutritional values, which they have to submit to the National School Lunch Program each week, and therefore do not have time to cook *real food* for students. A chef

turned school cafeteria director, Paul Correnty stated, “Every few years, the USDA comes in and does an evaluation and I flunk it badly. If they can’t count and measure then you don’t meet the regulations. They ask for production records; I don’t have them because we spend all our time cooking. They’d like to see canned pears all lined up in little plastic three ounce cups....The system is designed to squash innovation and creativity” (Kalafa 45). Yet, Chef Paul’s kids are eating meals that could be coming out of a gourmet restaurant. For example, a Monday lunch consisted of flakey white fish with sautéed carrots, celery, onions, snow peas, and spinach topped with panko breadcrumbs, fresh slaw with tangelos and mineolas, and soup. And he is flunking the USDA’s assessment? No wonder the system doesn’t work!

Another issue found with school lunches is the concept of offer (what has to be available for students to eat) versus serve (what students actually have to put on their trays). The federal guidelines for the lunch program state a lunch must have five key meal components: one serving of meat, two servings of fruits or vegetables, one serving of grains, and one serving of fluid milk (Kalafa 120). However, when a student purchases a meal, they are only required to select three of the five components (Kalafa 121). Can you guess which products the students choose to leave in the line? Yep, the fruits and vegetables. Offering good food is only half of the battle. The other half is making sure the kids take the fruits and veggies and at least try them. Studies have shown children are more willing to try things than adults give them credit for. Although students may not love cauliflower the first time they take it, after a time, it is sure to grow on at least some of them.

A further concern with lunches in schools, which is contributing significantly to childhood obesity, is the beverages served with meals. Schools must serve low-fat milk to students at lunch. However, they can serve any kind of low-fat milk, whether it be plain,

chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, or some other flavor. The nutrients in milk are important to a child's health, so plain, low-fat milk *is* a good drink to serve at lunch. But, most children, when offered plain milk or flavored milk, choose the flavored milk, which is not a healthy option. Lunch directors say they offer the flavored milk selections because, if they don't, the kids do not drink their milk. The issue with this logic is that on average, an eight ounce carton of chocolate milk contains four teaspoons of sugar, fifteen calories per teaspoon, and an assortment of artificial colors, stabilizers, and thickeners (Oliver). That amount of sugar is the same as is found in a can of soda!



Figure 2. Nutrition facts on a carton of chocolate milk. Notice the ingredients include much more than chocolate and milk and the container contains 27 grams of sugar.

Source: "Chocolate Milk, Yeah Baby!" *Be Fit Foodie*. Wordpress, 2012. Web 18 November 2012.

Furthermore, as students progress through school, additional beverages become available for them to purchase at lunchtime, such as fruit juices, flavored waters, and fizzy juice drinks. These products are referred to as "competitive products," and although they can help a school bring in extra revenue, they can cause serious health implications for students. A study performed on high school students found 22 percent of students

consumed these competitive items on an average school day (Kakarala). Consuming an extra 250 calories per day for 200 days results in an extra 14 pounds per year, which, over

time can add up quite quickly (Kakarala). Drinks with high calorie counts from added sugars can be referred to as "empty calories" or "nonnutritive beverages" because they add a significant number of calories to a diet without enhancing the nutritional value of the product. This is what flavored milks and "competitive products" are.

Overall, the biggest obstacle to the school lunch program is the limited funds schools have to work with. A study performed by the American School Health Association found children attending public schools had a higher Body Mass Index (BMI) than children attending private schools (Li). Private schools have more flexibility with their money, which they can choose to spend on lunches; basically, private schools have an easier time making quality food a priority. Parents send children to private schools because they feel they will get a better education or have better facilities. This comes from having more funds. In public schools, where attendance is free for everyone, many schools have a fair percentage of their students eating reduced cost or free lunches. When the primary concern at a school is to feed the kids so they don't go hungry, providing extremely healthy meals may not be a top priority. Additionally, a school that has 75 percent or more of its students receiving free lunches is eligible for universal free lunch (Kalafa 121). Although it may seem like flawed logic, schools actually like this plan because they receive a larger reimbursement from the government for free lunches than lunches paid for by families. When schools participate in a program such as this, their meals come from the commodity program, and therefore are highly processed garbage. Since the schools that have a high participation rate in programs such as these are the schools with the highest percentage of students with families falling on the low end of the socioeconomic scale, those students are most at risk of becoming obese as compared to wealthier schools, because they are more reliant on bad school food.

Many school corporations insist their school lunch programs must "break even," meaning they cannot lose any money on the lunch system. Schools therefore, often offer a la carte items, which cancel out the benefits of any good food that was possibly on the menu for a particular day. The reasoning behind serving a la carte is it will bring in additional funds to help schools

stay within their lunch budgets. The USDA is not responsible for regulating a la carte items, and through this loophole, many unhealthy choices are offered on school property (Bhatia). Many students prefer the options offered for a la carte as opposed to the actual lunch being served. Instead of a moderate lunch of sketchy spaghetti, a slightly stale breadstick, and sugar laden canned peaches, many students choose a worse lunch of processed Pop Tarts, fruit snacks, and Doritos full of artificial flavors and colors. Often times, although school food is not good, it is the “extras” students choose to eat that are the bigger problem. Multiple studies have shown that, no matter the product, students prefer the one with a brand name or a recognizable face. Unfortunately, apples and oranges aren’t sold in a package picturing the latest movie whereas Pop Tarts and fruit snacks are.

The only way to solve the school food crisis is to take action at a local level. School lunch is a missed opportunity to teach children about good nutrition and to be sure they get at least one healthy meal each day. A study showed the majority of children consumed far less than the USDA recommended five servings of vegetables each day (Robinson-O’Brien). School lunches are a great way to help children get that recommended amount, especially in poorer areas, where children may not receive any more healthy meals at home. Furthermore, multiple studies show the increase childhood obesity is due to eating more refined, processed foods, in combination with children exercising less. School lunch is a perfect place to feed children proper amounts of nutritious, whole foods. Although it may be difficult to kick-start change in a school district, many people are willing to listen when it deals with their children’s health. One simple change schools can incorporate is to make the healthy foods look more appealing to students. Placing a salad bar or fruit in a central location in tempting serving bowls will make students more willing to try the healthy options, rather than chips, which are typically placed in a bowl at

checkout. Offering wholesome food to kids will help them appreciate nutrition for the rest of their lives, encouraging them to make good lifelong decisions. And, when healthy lunches are offered, more students will want to eat lunch at school, which can improve a district's problem of making enough money to support their cafeteria budget. America needs to stop looking at their children as consumers and start looking at them as people who need to learn about lifelong healthy habits.

The school lunch system is a system in crisis. Children are being fed unhealthy, highly processed garbage made to appear healthy by school corporations. They drink flavored milk, which is no better than soda, and fill up on a la carte items which are typically processed carbohydrates and refined sugars, all of which have been proven to cause significant weight gain. Furthermore, school lunch is an under-utilized chance to educate America's children on lifelong healthy habits. At the rate the school food program is going in the United States, this generation's children will be inflicted with more life-threatening diseases and lower survival rates than previous generations. That is a scary thought, and the worst part is, the problem can easily be improved with a few small changes in school lunch programs. People concerned about the problem must take action now, and encourage their school districts to make students health a priority, because every child deserves to live a long, healthy life.

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