

School Lunch Programs May Encourage Poor Nutrition

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Adam Bornstein, "Why Are Schools Selling Junk Food to Kids?" *Men's Health*, vol. 23, no. 9, November 2008. pp. 158-164. Copyright © 2008 by Rodale, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

"As odd as it sounds, one of the key contributors to poor nutrition in schools—at least indirectly—may be the National School Lunch Program."

In the viewpoint that follows, Adam Bornstein claims school lunch programs are failing to encourage proper nutrition habits in students. According to the author, schools are trying to meet government nutrition standards, but the cost of doing so is depleting school treasuries. To make up for the shortfall, many schools feel compelled to offer à la carte items and vending machine snacks that are popular, empty-calorie foods, Bornstein writes. He also blames government academic agendas for stressing math, science, and reading at the expense of teaching health and nutrition. If younger generations are going to acquire healthier eating habits, Bornstein argues, then the government must pass sweeping reform to assist schools in providing better lunches and to eliminate junk food from school premises. Adam Bornstein is the fitness editor for *Men's Health* magazine.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How does Bornstein define foods of "minimum nutritional value"?
2. How much of a financial deficit do America's schools run to provide for the 29.6 million children participating in the NSLP, according to Bornstein?
3. Why does Bornstein fault the No Child Left Behind Act for contributing to the problem of poor nutrition in schools?

It's no secret that childhood obesity is a major problem in America's schools. What's so baffling, though, is that despite our awareness, it's a *growing* problem. After all, one solution seems obvious and simple: Pull the plug on vending machines, ban junk food on campuses, and serve only healthy fare in cafeterias. Case closed, right? If only it were that easy.

"The government system is forcing our schools to choose," says Katie Wilson, Ph.D., president of the School Nutrition Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving school meals and nutrition. "Schools can either provide only healthy foods and go into debt, or allow unhealthy options, which generate revenue but are also a contributing factor to weight gain."

This unappetizing proposition, says Wilson, is the result of education budget cuts and a flawed system. But while it may be hard to swallow, it's just one piece of the puzzle. That's because, well, French fries taste good. So do candy bars, potato chips, and soda. "Unless kids are properly educated, they're going to choose junk over healthy food at school and at home," says Wilson. "Unfortunately, the number one question children ask me about nutrition is, 'Why don't schools teach us right from wrong?'"

We wondered that, too. We also wanted to know how, exactly, a system meant to help kids is ultimately making them fat.

The Economics of Providing Healthy Meals

As odd as it sounds, one of the key contributors to poor nutrition in schools—at least indirectly—may be the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Established in 1946, this federally subsidized program provides calorie-balanced meals at cost to all children, or at reduced or no cost to children in low-income families. The intention, of course, is to give every child access to an inexpensive, healthy lunch. And to ensure that this goal is met, the USDA [US Department of Agriculture] has set these basic nutrition standards for schools to follow.

All meals must provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for calories, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, and calcium. This makes sense, considering that children consume 19 percent to 50 percent of their daily calories in the school cafeteria, according to the USDA.

The meals must also match the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which limit the fat content of a meal to 30 percent of total calories and cap saturated fat at less than 10 percent.

The program forbids foods of "minimum nutritional value" from being served inside the school cafeteria at mealtimes. These are items that provide less than 5 percent of eight specific nutrients—i.e., "empty-calorie" foods such as gum, soda, and jelly beans, which are primarily sugar.

All of which sounds sensible, but plenty of loopholes exist, particularly in that last requirement: Turns out, foods of minimum nutritional value, while not allowed for sale in the cafeteria, can be sold anywhere else in the school—for instance, from a vending machine on the way to the lunchroom. What's more, candy bars, chips, and doughnuts actually avoid the foods-of-minimum-value designation. (A main ingredient in many of these foods is refined flour, which by federal law is fortified with vitamins and minerals.) As a result, they can be sold in the lunchroom, side by side with healthier options. Of course, that's only if the schools choose to do so. And that leads to the bigger issue: dollars and cents.

"Schools lose money every day because it costs more money to prepare meals than the reimbursement they get from the federal government," says Donald Schumacher, M.D., medical director for the Center for Nutrition and Preventive Medicine, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Case in point: In 2008, the government increased the NSLP subsidy to schools, to \$2.57 per meal per student, but the cost to prepare the lunches rose to \$2.88. And while schools that purchase foods directly from the USDA receive an additional 20 cents per meal, they're still at an 11-cent deficit.

That amount might seem trivial, but multiply it by the 29.6 million children participating in the NSLP and it comes out to a daily nationwide deficit of \$3.2 million. For perspective, a middle school with 1,000 students would be \$19,800 in the hole after just 1 year.

Competitive Foods Make Money

Schools can raise prices, of course, and some are being forced to do so. But Wilson says this strategy leads to other problems: It defeats the purpose of providing low-cost, healthy meals in the first place, and it can also result in fewer kids purchasing the nutritionally balanced lunches.

The upshot is that schools have instead turned to offering "competitive foods." These items aren't part of the NSLP. They include foods of minimal nutrition—which can be sold in vending machines, school stores, and snack bars—as well as foods that don't meet other USDA guidelines but that can be offered à la carte in the cafeteria. This is where the trouble really begins. For instance, students buy competitive foods in greater proportions than the USDA-approved meals, taking away from their consumption of fruits and vegetables, according to a report to Congress presented by the Center for Science in the Public Interest [in 2001]. So while the NSLP helps schools serve healthy food, it has also opened the door to options that undermine that effort.

"Without full funding from the government, schools are being pinched, and we need a quick way to make money," says Wilson. "That's why we have vending machines. That's why we sell à la carte. And that's why we purchase unhealthy foods along with healthy foods. They're cheaper than the healthier foods, and we can turn a greater profit."

Only Some Schools Are Working on Healthier Food Choices

With 71 schools and 64,000 students, Volusia County, Florida, is one of the largest school districts in the country. And when it comes to instituting nutrition reform, it's also one of the most progressive. "Schools have a responsibility to address healthy eating and fitness," says district superintendent Margaret Smith. "And we're determined to protect the health of our students."

So despite a crisis that has forced the closing of several schools, Smith's district has instituted policies to ensure that fresh fruit, vegetables, and whole grains are offered in all schools on a regular basis. At the elementary level, signs are placed throughout cafeterias encouraging students to make healthy food choices, and water is placed at eye level in vending machines to compete with sports drinks. Soda is permitted only in high schools and only after the lunch hour is over. And this year [2008], one school in the district, Pierson Elementary, was among 43 schools nationally recognized for their promotion of healthy initiatives.

But Volusia administrators openly admit that the problems haven't been eliminated entirely. For example, some high school students still have easy access to vending machines throughout the buildings after lunch is over. "Vending machines provide revenue that helps fund extracurricular activities for students," says Joan Young, the school district's director of cafeteria services. This is one way the district manages to keep athletic programs afloat in the midst of big budget cuts.

And while healthy dishes are readily available in Volusia schools, the cafeteria also stocks what many teenagers would consider more desirable options, including chocolate cake, cookies, and pizza.

But remember, Volusia is working hard to fix these flaws. Many school districts across the country aren't so proactive. And all of these issues are compounded by the soaring cost of food due to high oil prices and a weak dollar. "I've been working in the food industry for 30 years and I've never seen price increases like the ones we've experienced over the past 18 months," says Bob Bloomer, regional vice president of Chartwells-Thompson, a subsidiary of Compass Group, the largest food distributor in the world.

Even small price fluctuations can have a major impact: A five-cent increase in the price of milk will cost the Volusia school district an additional \$750,000 in the 2008-2009 school year. And Young has especially noticed price increases for the so-called healthiest items, such as whole wheat bread and products with less sugar.

"The minute you say 'healthy,' it costs more," says Bloomer. "When you say 'zero trans fat,' it costs more. It's the nature of the beast." In Albany County School District 1 in Laramie, Wyoming, margarine with no trans fat costs 262 percent more than the option with trans fat, leading the schools to use the less healthy version. "There are some districts that just don't have the money. They don't care about whole wheat. They don't care about trans fat. And when I say they don't care, I mean they just can't afford it," says Bloomer.

In the end, superintendents and the school board are left with a dilemma: Find new ways to raise millions of dollars, or buy the types of foods students will purchase. "School administrators know that foods of minimum nutritional value provide a profit margin that makes up for what they're losing from the federally mandated meal," says Dr. Schumacher. "And these products can even give them a little bit of profit to put back into the school. Where is their incentive to stop that?"

A National Reform Is Needed

Make no mistake: Many schools are trying, according to the School Nutrition Association. In fact, 71 percent of them have attempted to make "significant" efforts to offer healthy food choices on their menus. And several states now ban vending machines in elementary schools or limit what can be sold in the machines and when students can access them. But clearly, it's going to take sweeping national reform to repair this problem.

New legislation is a good place to start, says Dr. Schumacher. He's working hard to push a bill ... that will hopefully help build momentum for improving children's nutrition in schools nationwide. The proposal is an update to the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. It uses current nutrition science to rewrite the definition of foods of minimum nutritional value and requires that they be removed from schools, effectively eliminating a multitude of unhealthy options. "The issue isn't about removing children's ability to make choices, it's about providing healthy options and making it harder for them to access bad foods," says Dr. Schumacher.

Research has shown that this strategy, along with education, can help. In a recent Temple University study of grades four through six, researchers removed all sodas, sweetened drinks, and snacks that didn't meet USDA nutrition standards from vending machines and cafeteria lines in five Philadelphia schools. They also implemented 50 hours of nutrition education for students and encouraged parents to purchase healthy snacks for their kids to eat at home. After 2 years, half as many of these kids became overweight, compared with kids in similar schools without the program.

While those numbers are encouraging, they also underscore the daunting challenge of overcoming childhood obesity. Sure, the study results sound impressive. But some of that is nifty data crunching—7.5 percent of the children in the prevention program packed on too many pounds, compared with 15 percent of the group that made no changes. Still, we have to start somewhere. And there's little doubt that a combination of approaches is necessary. "If you don't teach kids what's good and what's bad, you don't solve a whole lot by restricting things," says Wilson. "Education is our fat burner."

One barrier is the No Child Left Behind Act [of 2001]. Designed to improve the quality of education in public schools, it puts tremendous pressure on schools to ensure that students perform well on standardized tests in math and science. But as a result, physical education and health classes have been minimized—crippled, even—since tests aren't given in those subject areas.

So while some form of nutrition education is offered in many schools, it's very limited because the government doesn't see it as a priority.

"Until more money for federally funded school food programs and a mandate for nutrition education are in place, we'll always be in this situation," says Wilson. "We need major support from our national government."

Making Informed Consumers of the Next Generation

Interestingly, there may be a parallel between today's childhood obesity epidemic and the youth smoking problem from the 1970s, says Marlene Schwartz, Ph.D., the director of research and school programs for the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. Back then, Schwartz recalls, no one thought the situation would improve. But as education matched preventive measures, children became informed and behaviors changed.

A 2007 University of Michigan study found that only 22 percent of high school seniors said they had smoked a cigarette in the previous 30 days, compared to 1976 when the number was 39 percent.

The big changes didn't begin, though, until the mid-1990s, when the government began to make it more difficult for the tobacco industry to target America's youth, according to the report.

Dr. Schumacher has seen the impact of this type of childrens' nutrition education in the research he's conducted. "Recently, one of our children went home for dinner and saw his father pouring ketchup all over his food," recalls Dr. Schumacher. "This fourth-grade kid took the bottle and said, 'Dad, you need to read this label. Look how much sugar you just put on that.' And I thought, *Wow*."

Children answering health questions rather than asking them? Maybe that's the true solution to the obesity epidemic.

Further Readings

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