Introduction to Should Junk Food Be Sold in Schools?: At Issue

Should Junk Food Be Sold in Schools?, 2011

Pureed butternut squash soup, mushroom risotto, zucchini and red onion flan, organic black bean tortillas, pineapple gratin ... Is this the menu for the latest trendy restaurant opening in town? No—it is a sampling of menu items offered as part of innovative school lunch programs around the country. For decades, public and private school children who bought hot school lunches as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National School Lunch Program became accustomed to chicken nuggets and corn dogs, perhaps with a snack cake or soda from the vending machines for dessert. Recently, however, thanks to growing public interest in food, cooking, and nutrition, children in some school districts are finding a lot more than pizza and macaroni and cheese on their lunch trays.

Part of the incentive for this renewed interest in the quality of school lunch is prompted by the revamped federal Child Nutrition Act (passed by the Senate and awaiting House approval as of September 2010), which mandates healthier ingredients; prohibits many high-sugar, high-fat items from being sold in vending machines on school property; and also provides the first increase in per-meal reimbursement rates since 1973. In addition, First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" anti-obesity campaign sponsors the "Chefs Move to Schools" initiative, a program that encourages working chefs to provide nutrition education and menu development for their local schools.

But doesn't this approach cost far more than old standbys like hamburgers and French fries? Not according to Jonas Falk and Justin Rolls, whose small company Organic Life, LLC, serves organic, free-range meals to kids in several Chicago-area schools. Founded in 2006, the company was profitable by 2009 and has even outbid major providers, such as Sodexho, in obtaining public school food service contracts. The key to the company's success, according to Rolls, is that these young entrepreneurs are bringing a new, scaled-down approach to school food service, an industry whose menu offerings and distribution channels have been stagnant for nearly fifty years. And, as one award-winning school food service director reminds others, the USDA's National School Lunch Program has always provided funding and support for schools to serve dozens of fruits and vegetables; it's just that old habits can be hard to break.

And what about the kids? Will they really eat unusual or unexpected foods like blueberry soup or sushi? Absolutely, says an administrator at one school where Organic Life serves lunch; there the number of students purchasing daily hot lunch rose to 330 from 225 during the course of the school year. One student at the school praised the change, saying "There are no more mystery meats."

Robert Surles (also known as Chef Bobo), the French Culinary Institute-trained executive chef at New York City's Calhoun School, argues that adults underestimate the sophistication of kids' palates. Particularly popular for its soups (including cauliflower, split pea, and miso), Chef Bobo's menus have resulted in kids eating a lot more vegetables—by request. Chef Bobo notes that when he first took over the kitchen, he was ordering just one crate of vegetables per day; now, "We've had to increase
... to five cases, or we run out." Chef Bobo has managed to make all these changes without increasing the amount charged for school lunches or the number of staff members he oversees, although he does rely heavily on parent and student volunteers to help with preparing and serving lunches and promoting and modeling healthier eating to younger students.

Despite such examples of promising practices, schools still face major hurdles in efforts to retool school lunch programs to include innovative menus and healthy choices. Long-standing food service contracts, complex distribution networks, and established vendor agreements all mean that administrators and concerned parents must be dedicated, persistent, and patient if they want to bring about systemic change. Many U.S. schools no longer even have their own on-site kitchens (hot lunches are trucked in from centralized kitchens), further complicating chefs’ goals of serving food that’s both locally grown and prepared on-site, often with student or volunteer help. But, thanks to the federal government's renewed commitment to student health and nutrition as well as growing pressures from grass-roots organizations, the incentive for improvement is strong. Many schools have found the right formula of healthy food, great tastes, and budget-friendly prices, and their examples can serve as inspiration for parents, students, and schools eager for change.

**Further Readings**

**Books**

**Periodicals**


**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2011 Greenhaven Press, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning.

**Source Citation**

**Document URL**
http://via.galegroup.com/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&limiter=&amp;currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=OVIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010754101&source=Bookmark&u=aust8213&jsid=587b369b8269dcf295e8e5900a128275

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|EJ3010754101