

THE SCHOOL FOOD REVOLUTION: IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL SCHOOL LUNCH REFORM

Shannon Conk (Dr. Jean Lavigne, Environmental Studies and Dr. Matt Lindstrom, Political Science)

Abstract

Each day, approximately 31 million children crowd into school cafeterias across the nation to consume federally funded school lunches which consist of highly-processed, nutrient-deficient, commercialized foods. At the same time, an increasing number of children are developing unhealthy food relationships and habits that have distanced them from fresh, whole foods during one of the most vulnerable times of their lives in molding such important behaviors. These unhealthy food relationships paired with a troubling increase in childhood obesity and lifestyle diseases have become the impetus of a grassroots school lunch reform movement. This research identifies the most significant barriers that school foodservice administrators encounter when they decide to improve the lunch experience within their districts, specifically looking at local case studies of the St. Cloud and Sartell-St. Stephens school districts.



The National School Lunch Program feeds over 31 million students daily, equating to 6 billion lunches each year. Over half of these students come from low income households.

Methods

First, I conducted a comprehensive literature review on the subject of school lunch reform and the National School Lunch Program. I then interviewed five individuals who have experience with school lunch reform issues, from the local foodservice administrators of the St. Cloud and Sartell-St. Stephens school districts (where I ate lunch with students numerous times) to Alice Cooper, a nationally recognized leader of the school lunch reform movement. Finally I analyzed how reform efforts and barriers encountered in these local school districts compare with efforts and barriers to school lunch reform observed on a nation-wide scope.

Understanding Today's School Lunches

The Reimbursable Hot lunch:



Brown and Breaded: Majority of the food is highly processed.

One order of Obesity Please: Only 10% of high schools and 25% of elementary schools met USDA standards for fat content .

Vegetables: French Fries? Yes. Tator Tots? Yes. Ketchup? At one point.

Banana (1000+ miles transportation): Food for the NSLP is required to meet 'lowest-bid' procurement practices. Consequently, the quality of the food deteriorates, and the environmental consequences of lengthy transportation distances are not considered in this practice. Where are the local apples?

\$\$\$ (or lack thereof): After overhead and labor costs, schools are working with roughly 80 to 90 cents per lunch.

Flavored Milk! Much more popular than white milk, and contains more sugar than the average soda. Milk is typically the only beverage choice, every lunch, every day.

"The bottom line is we're killing our kids with food." - Ann Cooper

Typical Barriers Encountered in School Lunch Reform

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Logistical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Extra labor to handle unprocessed foods. ▪ Liability/Concerns about food safety. ▪ Finding new vendors, using multiple invoices. ▪ Lack of appropriate kitchen infrastructure and culinary skills for cooking unprocessed foods. ▪ Increased Costs | <p>Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resistance of students (often supported by parents) to trying new foods. ▪ Resistance of administrators and kitchen staff to employ a new food procurement and preparation system. | <p>Political</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regulation: Nutrition and procurement guidelines dictated by USDA require that schools often purchase the cheapest food available. ▪ Funding: 80-90 cents per meal. Schools often resort to selling competitive foods. |
|---|--|---|



Instant Potatoes (8 ingredients plus trans fat) VS. Potatoes (1 ingredient, no trans fat)
When schools are already strapped for time and financial resources and may not have sufficient infrastructure to process raw potatoes, instant potatoes win every time.

Sartell and St. Cloud School Districts

Shared Successes

- Feature a local food each month, interested in expanding local foods sourcing and incorporating local foods into classroom curriculum.
- No longer use fryers in any of the school kitchens.
- Restrictions on vending machines; in St. Cloud, soda is banned outright.
- All breads are whole wheat, all other grains are whole wheat or multi-grain.
- Reconsideration of foods offered as a la carte options.
- Experimentation with grass-fed meats.
- In general, enthusiasm for improving school food.

Shared Barriers

- The most restrictive barrier for these two local school districts was the extra labor needed to handle unprocessed foods (especially since both districts are focusing mostly on sourcing more local, unprocessed foods).
- Cost: According to the Sartell school foodservice director, current funding only allows for one local food per month.
- Student Resistance towards new foods
- Parental Concern (children won't eat the healthier foods)
- Multiple invoices

Students struggling to handle this foreign object



Conclusion

While there are some factors like growing season or the number of students that qualify for free/reduced meals that vary by region or district, almost all of the most commonly observed barriers in nation-wide reform efforts are present in our local school districts. In a sense, the relative uniformity of experienced barriers makes school lunch reform a more feasible goal for school food administrators in their efforts to improve the school food experience. It is imperative to address the failures of the National School Lunch Program, realizing that reform efforts can have significant impact on a number of societal ills: childhood obesity and disease, the revitalization of local economies and small farms, and the formation and maintenance of healthy life long eating habits, among other benefits. The easiest way to provide healthier and less processed foods in schools is through federal increases in funding for the NSLP. Funding can address the major barriers, allowing more money to be spent on healthier, fresher foods, and more hired help for school kitchens. Ingenuity and local excitement can also be extremely powerful tools/resources for successful reform efforts, but even the most creative school food administrator finds it difficult to provide the best lunch she can to students for less than one dollar per day.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Brenda Braulick of the Sartell-St. Stephens school district, Connie Jopp of the St. Cloud school district, and Jean Lavigne, Environmental Studies professor. Their continuing support and patience was instrumental in the success of this research project.