



The School Lunch Lobby



187 billion lunches served!

BY RON HASKINS

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ids may not like the peas and carrots served up by the nation's school lunch program, but many of the country's leading food companies enjoy the billions of dollars in sales that bring those vegetables to their plates. Behind the overcooked vegetables and steam-table pizza that some 29 million American children confront each school day is an industry that rivals defense contractors and media giants in its ability to bring home the federal bacon—er, the seasoned lettuce cup.

School lunch. A prosaic, even nostalgic event, multiplied hundreds of millions of times—187 billion lunches served—becomes, voila! a \$6.6 billion annual all-you-can-eat lunch line, one of the most popular

and sturdy of all federal social programs (see Figure 1). Except for food stamps (\$27 billion), it is the most expensive of all federal food programs. Pass the gravy!

But there's more. Add to that the \$1.8 billion for school breakfasts and the nearly \$1 billion school commodities program (a relic of the 1930s, when the Department of Agriculture started buying food and giving it to the schools directly) and you realize that, at \$9.5 billion, providing food to school children is a major federal commitment.

Consistent with the intent of the original school-lunch program, created by Congress in 1946 to provide "nutritious agricultural commodities" to children, the major purpose of today's school-lunch program is to ensure that children, especially those from poor and low-income families, have nutritious food at school. The school-breakfast program started as a pilot in 1966 and was made permanent in 1975. How these programs, and the money that travels with them, have grown steadily over the years is a story that illustrates many of the underlying mechanisms of social policy creation in the nation's capital. But can this aging machinery adapt to

A charmed federal food program that no longer just feeds the hungry

the demands of a fast-food culture? We created school lunch to feed the hungry. Can we now ask it to fight obesity?

A Special-Interest Stew

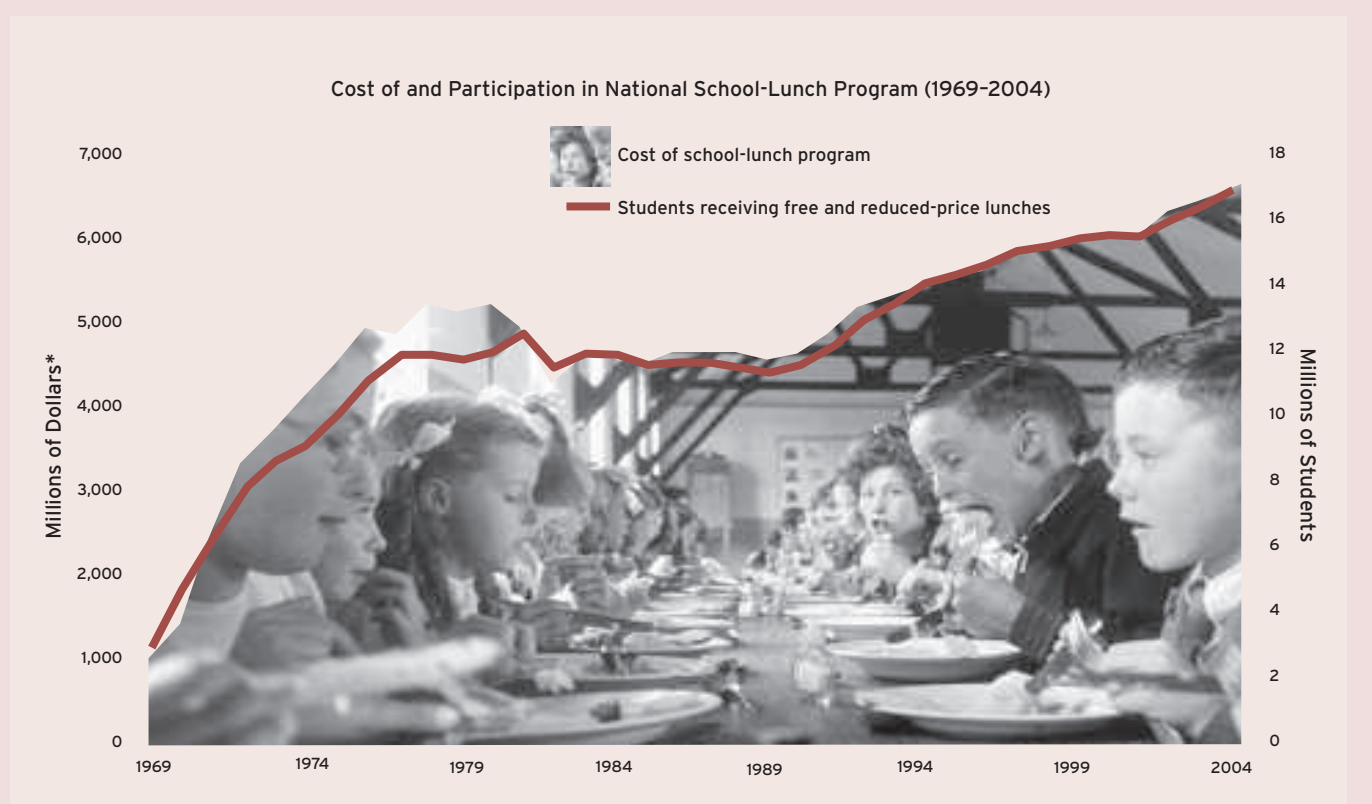
Since the strength and longevity of these programs come from an ample and well-balanced diet of public compassion, political sensitivities, and powerful lobbying, change does not come easily. There are occasional food fights between those who have stakes in the programs, but the rules are well established. The interests of the schools—primarily teachers, administrators, school nutritionists, and food-service workers—are represented by groups like the School Nutrition Association and the National School Boards Association, both headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, a stone’s throw across the Potomac River from Capitol Hill. With well-funded and sophisticated national organizations, these groups lobby for more federal money while fighting to keep federal mandates to a minimum.

The giant food and beverage industry—names like Tyson and Archer Daniels Midland—is also involved. Its various lobbying arms, including food processors, distributors, service management companies, soft drink makers, and agricultural giants, work to ensure that the government buys food products from its members and keeps schools open to vending machines and à la carte offerings in the school cafeteria, a little oasis of choice that represents millions of extra dollars of revenue each year. Food advocacy and nutrition groups like the Food Research Action Center and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities represent the interests of children who consume the food offered by schools. They are the nutrition watchdogs, providing reliable and timely information about any food issue that comes before Congress.

While these three sets of lobbying groups have opposing interests on some issues—the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, for instance, will throw its weight behind programs for the poor before pushing programs that cover all children—they share the goal of maintaining or increasing federal

No Free Lunches (Figure 1)

Since 1969, the cost of—and participation in—the free and reduced-price school-lunch program has increased dramatically, despite a robust economy and an expanding national waistline.



* 2004 dollars, adjusted for inflation.

SOURCE: Food & Nutrition Service, United States Department of Agriculture

spending on school lunch and related nutrition programs. And the president's 2006 budget proposal reflected the priorities: numerous cuts in social services, but don't touch school lunch.

If these well-financed and effective lobbying interests keep watch over school lunch from outside government, there is a host of congressional insiders and bureaucrats at the Department of Agriculture (from where the program is administered) who help grease the skids. And it is a bipartisan effort. Bob Dole, the powerful Republican senator from Kansas (he arrived on Capitol Hill in 1960 and didn't leave until 1996) and no friend of big government, was one of the most consistent supporters of expanded, even guaranteed (in federal jargon, "entitlement") spending on food programs. Beyond such celebrity supporters, however, is a horde of lesser-known members of Congress who are vital to the program's stability. Through a process of growth that even a psychologist could not explain, the chairmen of the various subcommittees with funding jurisdiction often become the biggest fans of these programs. They write the first drafts of legislation and play the major role in planning and conducting the legislative strategy to ensure passage. Then, once a program is established, there is no way to reform its statutory basis except through the same committee and, most likely, the same chairman. Even Republican chairmen, reputed to be more beholden to the frugal taxpayer than to social program spendthrifts, exhibit a sense of proprietorship over nutrition programs for children that rivals that of any Democrat.

This combination of forces is capable of producing considerable good, but it does not take to change very well.

Don't Touch That Food Program

Anyone who doubts the political clout of the school lunch lobby will be directed to two examples of what happens when you attempt to change the channel. First, there was the Reagan revolution and a 1981 attempt by Congress, riding the new president's spending-cut coattails, to enact legislation slashing child nutrition programs by \$1 billion. At the time however, Congress did not specify how the cuts would be achieved, so the Department of Agriculture, scrambling for a palatable

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way of reducing the costs of the food program by more than 25 percent, proposed a novel approach: pickle relish and ketchup would count as the vegetable portion of the five required school-lunch food items (meat, milk, bread, and two servings of fruits or vegetables). So swift was the reaction to this "ketchup as vegetable" plan that the Reagan administration quickly put the billion dollars back into the program.

Republicans didn't quite learn their lesson, however, and when Newt Gingrich and his Contract with America conservatives swept the Democrats out of power in 1995 promising to balance the budget, they included a cut in the food program among the hundreds of spending reductions they proposed. In fact, the GOP wanted to merge the five school-based food programs into a single block grant, while recommending a 4 percent increase in the overall program. They got clobbered. That rate of growth was less than projected under the Congressional Budget Office baseline, and the block grant

was labeled a sneak attack on future funding. The food lobbying groups and congressional Democrats quickly charged the Republicans with stealing food from children again. One senior Democrat, James Clyburn of South Carolina, took to the podium in the House of Representatives to excoriate the Republicans for their “mean-spirited attack [and] hatchet job being waged against child nutrition programs.” And the *New York Times* joined in with an editorial, “The Return of Ketchup,” calling the child nutrition proposal “gratuitously mean,” certain to “imperil mothers, babies and hungry school-age children.”

Another lesson learned.

Though this powerful lobby network helps preserve the nutrition programs, its longevity and stability are also due to a certain obscurity within the much larger education universe. In recent years, especially, the effort to improve the academics

of education has been so conspicuous that many of the subsidiary missions of schools—like drivers’ education, sex education, transportation, sports, and child nutrition—have been lost to view. Most school systems, burdened with accountability measures, are thankful that nutrition programs seem to run themselves.

Fighting Error, Finding Fat

Even as contentious and partisan budget authorization battles last year stalled such popular programs as Head Start and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Congress approved increases in child nutrition programs. It was not all smooth sailing, however.

Most of the debate, heated at times, focused on issues of income verification for people receiving free lunches, vending machines, and obesity. The income issue is not new to federal poverty programs, and the government is always trying to sort the fraud from the honest error—in order to find ways to save money by combating both. Recent studies for example, show that the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides low-income working families with up to \$4,300 per year in cash and costs taxpayers around \$35 billion annually, has an error rate of as much as 30 percent, or well over \$10 billion. Although specific causes vary across programs, the greatest problems are that the income of poor families changes frequently and that income is difficult to verify. Moreover, it is expensive to verify income because families must bring or send evidence, such as a pay stub or bank statement, to a central location, where someone must check it, record the income, and compute the benefit. If income changes three weeks later, the process must be repeated. Imagine the lumbering bureaucracy of a typical public school system trying to keep up with the income of thousands of parents, bearing in mind that such a major undertaking has nothing to do with schools’ main goal of promoting student achievement—and indeed might even drain resources away from investments in learning.

It is little surprise then, that Congress has not required schools to do very much to ensure that students receiving free and reduced-price lunches come from homes that qualify. Nonetheless from

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time to time, especially when money is tight, all poverty programs that have high error rates are vulnerable to attack over the issue of fraud and waste. Concerned about this problem in the late 1990s, the Department of Agriculture funded Mathematica Policy Research to conduct a pilot study in 12 mostly non-metropolitan school districts to determine the extent to which children receiving school lunch came from families that actually met the income requirements. (In 2004, a family of four with annual income of \$24,500 or less qualified for free lunch; those earning between \$24,500 and nearly \$35,000 qualified for a reduced-price lunch. Even the nearly 12 million children who are in families above the income cutoffs enjoy a federal subsidy of more than 20 cents per lunch.) The Mathematica study revealed that up to 20 percent of the families certified by school districts as eligible for free and reduced lunches were actually not eligible.

School lunch, then, faces a classic tradeoff: tighter income-verification procedures mean lower participation; looser income verification means lower program integrity and heightened vulnerability to criticism that could lead to funding cuts. For the time being, schools do not have strict income-verification requirements, but that could change if the broader study—which is now under way—shows high rates of participation by ineligible families.

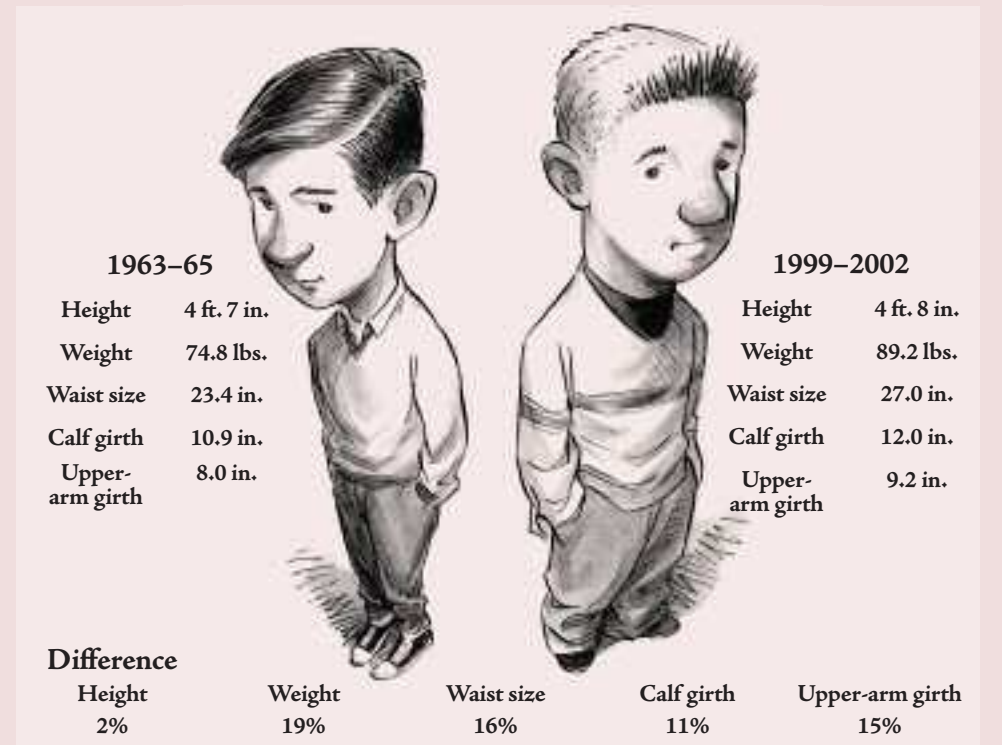
Congress also had a lively debate about vending machines, which are pervasive in school buildings and account for about \$1 billion in sales every year. Because the machines are packed with foods and drinks that feature high sugar and fat content, there is now a controversy about whether the federal government should require their removal, restrict their use, or order changes in their content.

The Obesity Epidemic

If income verification threatens to impose economic burdens on the school lunch program, the debate over vending machines feeds the growing fight over childhood obesity. Ironically, given that the original goal of child nutrition programs was to

A Bigger Ten-Year-Old (Figure 2)

The average ten-year-old American boy around the turn of the millennium was more than 14 pounds heavier than the average boy of the same age in the early 1960s, while the difference in height was just over an inch.



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics: National Health Examination Survey, Cycle II (1963–1965); 1999–2000 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey; and 2001–2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

ensure that poor children received enough to eat, the school lunch program, when not being accused of helping spread the disease, is now being called on to cure obesity.

The figures on obesity are startling. According to national survey data, the number of overweight children has quadrupled since 1960, jumping from 4 percent of the youth population to 16 percent in 2002 (see Figure 2). And several studies show that the incidence of obesity is greatest among poor children. Obesity has both health and social consequences for children, but it also imposes substantial costs on society. Increased risk of diabetes, heart attack, hypertension, kidney failure, gallstones, arthritis, and several types of cancer are all associated with obesity. The surgeon general has estimated that the economic cost of obesity in 2000 was \$117 billion.

There is still controversy about the exact causes of the weight-gain epidemic, but everyone agrees that physical activity and food consumption play important roles. And schools are among the chief suspects on both counts. According to the Centers for Disease Control, fewer than 10 percent of the nation's elementary, junior, and senior high schools offer daily physical education. Children get less regular exercise at school,

and many also get less at home and in their neighborhoods. A national study by University of Michigan researchers shows that the percentage of high-school boys and girls who exercise consistently declined greatly between 1979 and 2001. Among 10th-grade boys, the number of those who “exercise vigorously” nearly every day declined by more than 20 percent during this period. In view of the rising obesity rates, it is hardly surprising that professionals and parents agree that kids need gym classes.

In addition to getting too little exercise, many children are getting too much of the wrong kind of food. This simple claim, which everyone who has studied the exploding weight of children agrees is a major problem, should cause school administrators and policymakers to engage in fresh thinking about school food programs. Unfortunately, until very recently, it hasn't.

Douglas Besharov, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has been the most outspoken critic of the traditional thinking that surrounds school food programs. “We’re still feeding the poor as if they’re starving,” he says, alluding to the original intent of the school lunch programs. In testimony before Congress in 2003 and in a long article in the *Washington Post* in 2002, Besharov argued that school meals give children too many calories. Worse, they do so even if they follow the new program guidelines. Specifically, federal rules require a school lunch to provide 33 percent of the recommended daily allowance of calories; a school breakfast should provide 25 percent. That leaves only 42 percent of the recommended number of calories to be consumed outside of school, more than covered by one “supersized” hamburger and a soda.

What Can Be Done?

As public and congressional concern with obesity has grown, the Department of Agriculture has commissioned two scientific surveys to examine the nutritional value of school meals. The first, conducted by Mathematica during the 1991–92 school year, showed that lunches served by nearly all schools failed to meet accepted guidelines for intake of fat and saturated fats.

Soon after obtaining these results, the department undertook an initiative to help school food-service personnel prepare healthy meals for students. One component of the initiative was promulgation of new standards on fat and

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saturated fat. Logically enough, the department then funded a second national survey to determine if school food had improved. This study, conducted by Abt Associates, found that although most schools failed to meet the guidelines, there had been a noticeable decline in the fat and saturated fat content of the lunches. (For elementary schools the fat declined from 37.5 percent to 33.5 percent, and saturated fat from 15.2 percent to 11.9 percent.) Moreover, more than 80 percent of elementary schools and 90 percent of high schools offered food choices that would meet guidelines for fat and saturated fat intake if students selected the right foods to eat. But while you can lead students to good food, you can't make them eat it. Pizza- and doughnut-loving adults will understand: Foods that are low in fat and sugar often just taste lousy. Schools must walk a fine line between serving foods that are low in fat and sugar but boring, and foods that are high in fat and sugar but attractive to student palates. (See “What’s for Lunch?” page 19).

Nonetheless, the Abt study shows that federal bureaucracies sometimes respond to changed circumstances with rational policies and practices. School lunch, never mind the

sins of the past, is now playing at least a modest role in attempting to reduce children's waistlines.

Children, meanwhile, continue to break records for bulk, forcing Congress to consider, at least, the kind of nutritional rethinking recommended by Douglas Besharov. Recall that one of the few sharp partisan debates during reauthorization was over vending machines. Although there was bipartisan agreement that the question should be addressed during reauthorization, Republicans and Democrats conducted a debate that fell along traditional fault lines between the parties. Democrats wanted to exert federal control over vending machines by giving the secretary of agriculture authority over all foods available in schools rather than just school lunch and breakfast. Giving such authority to the secretary was expected to result in the removal, alteration in content, or restriction of operating hours for vending machines because they contain food of questionable nutritional value. By contrast, Republicans wanted local authorities to figure out their own solutions rather than mandating a "one size fits all" federal fix. Further, Republicans pointed out that profits from vending machines, which can be considerable, are usually retained by the school and are used to pay for sports teams, drama, and other school-related activities that are important to students, parents, or faculty.

In the end, Congress, in part because of pressure from the food and beverage industry to leave vending machines in the schools, decided to require all local education agencies to have a "wellness policy" in which they spell out their goals for nutrition education and physical activity as well as provide guidelines for all foods sold in the schools. The wellness policy must be developed in consultation with parents, students, school food-service professionals, and school boards and administrators. If school districts take this policy seriously, wellness plans could lead to further improvements in the types and quality of foods served and to an increase in required physical activity during school hours. It could even lead to removal of vending machines or alteration of their contents to reduce children's consumption of sugar and fat. But there is ample reason to doubt that many districts will aggressively implement this requirement and use it as a way to stimulate local debate and reform. Schools are generally not in the business of stirring up parents and the public to provoke reform.

The second possibility for using school food programs to address obesity is to alter the amount and types of food served. Here, as we have seen, the schools have already made some progress. Many schools now offer an impressive variety of foods, including salad bars and à la carte menus with many choices. There also has been a serious attempt to increase the availability of healthier foods.

The school-lunch reauthorization bill enacted by Congress last year contained a host of measures to improve nutrition, such as encouraging the Department of Agriculture to make

more fresh fruits and vegetables available to local schools, creating an initiative to encourage partnerships between schools and local produce farms, and increasing the availability of whole grains in school meals. Of course, Congress and school administrators must face the fact that students will not necessarily make the food choices that are best for their health. Children will choose a salad over a juicy cheeseburger about as often as they choose educational TV over MTV.

It is hard to argue with any of these good food initiatives, but expectations about how much school food programs can contribute to increasing the consumption of nutritious foods and reducing the national problem with childhood obesity should be modest. There are after all, around 120,000 elementary and secondary schools in the United States, and more than 90 percent of them participate in the school-lunch program. Trying to move all these facilities in the same direction is a huge undertaking. What's more, even if school food met every guideline for fat, saturated fat, and sugar, the impact on children's weight would probably be modest because children's consumption of food at home and in fast-food pens would continue unabated. By the time they reach middle and late childhood, students seem determined to maximize consumption of their two favorite food groups: fat and sugar. Children's preference for foods that are bound to make them fatter is established outside the school system. Unless we are prepared to remove all unhealthy foods from the schools—to minimize consumption of sugars and fats—there are obvious limits to the strategy of giving kids food choices. Schools can and should fight to improve the consumption of nutritious foods, and even to change students' eating habits, but unless the nation's food culture, food advertising, and patterns of food consumption at home and in fast-food restaurants undergo massive change, the schools will be waging little more than a rear-guard action. Even so, given the level of federal spending on the school food programs, it is reasonable to expect both Congress and the Department of Agriculture to put pressure on schools to aggressively implement wellness policies that minimize the consumption of fat and sugar on school property. To do so, schools may well be forced to reduce some food choices that have minimal nutritional value.

Expect school lunch to continue moving inexorably along its well-traveled path of slow change and modest improvement while relying on its friends inside and outside Congress to fight off big shocks and spending cuts. At this very moment, as in 1981 and 1995, Washington is gearing up to make serious cuts in social programs to balance the budget. Will school lunch, and that 20 cents per meal middle-class subsidy, be on the menu? Fat chance.

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