The essays in School Food Politics explore the intersections of food and politics on all six of the inhabited continents of the world. Including electoral fights over universally free school meals in Korea, nutritional reforms to school dinners in England and canteens in Australia, teachers’ and doctors’ work on school feeding in Argentina, and more, the volume provides key illustrations of the many contexts that have witnessed intense struggles defining which children will eat; why, what and how they are served; and who will pay for and prepare the food. Contributors include reformers writing from their own perspectives, from the farm- to-school program in Burlington, Vermont, to efforts to apply principles of critical pedagogy for urban teens, to animal rights curriculum. Later chapters shift their focus to possibilities and hope for a different future for school food, one that is friendlier to students, “lunch ladies,” society, other creatures, and the planet.

“An extraordinarily valuable contribution to the growing literature on school food, School Food Politics will both engage your intellect and nourish your activism. Its theoretical framework of policy ecologies will expand your conception of school food reform, and its concrete accounts and case studies will remind you of why this challenging undertaking is worth pursuing with energy and creativity.” —Janet Poppendieck, Professor of Sociology, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

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School Food Politics
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Why Education Researchers Should Take School Food Seriously
Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower

Food and eating in schools have most often been thought of as utilitarian parts of the day, as distractions, and, for education researchers, as lacking incentives to study or even as objects of derision rather than serious concern. Yet there are good reasons why scholars of education should consider food and food practices. These include the confounding influences of school food’s impact on health and on academics, its effects on teaching and administration, the role schools play in teaching about food, implications for the environment and for other species, the large sums of money involved, the window that food provides into identity and culture, food’s influence on educational policy and politics, and the social justice concerns around food.

Keywords: cultural analysis; educational policy; food; learning environments; politics; social justice

Food is a basic aspect of life, intimately tied to our survival, our sense of self, our beliefs, our connection to or disconnection from others, and our impact on the natural world. Food is also a major facet of education. Nearly every culture with formal schooling feeds its children at school, pauses while they eat food brought with them, or allows them to leave school to eat. In the United States alone, nearly 7 billion meals are served in K–12 schools each year through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and National School Breakfast Program (School Nutrition Association, 2008). Yet even this huge sum does not cover everything eaten in U.S. schools. Schools also provide or sell food through vending machines, school stores, fund-raising drives, concession stands, snack programs, after-school programs, class parties, home economics and culinary courses, and incentive programs and rewards. Food is truly ubiquitous in schools.

Although food is ever present, its role in the life of schools has been little studied by education scholars. Why should this be? And what are the implications for leaving food out of education research? In this essay, I first describe existing work on school food, showing that it has come largely from fields outside education. Then I explore how the overlooking of food in education research has come about. Finally, and most important, I offer reasons why education researchers of nearly any ilk would do well to pay attention to what happens in the school cafeteria or bake sale.

Current Studies of School Food

Some education researchers have considered food in their studies, although often in limited ways that eschew the complex effects food has in schools. Perhaps most commonly, large numbers of studies use free and reduced price lunch demographics, whether as a variable or as context, usually as a shorthand for socioeconomic status—a highly problematic practice that misses deficiencies in the eligibility process (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010). Subsidy eligibility is a thin conceptualization of food’s place in schools, one that does not plumb food’s deeply political, cultural, and even practical aspects.

Some scholars have indeed focused on food practices. Barrie Thorne’s (1993) ethnography Gender Play, as just one example, shows how lunchroom behavior—where and with whom children sit (pp. 42–44)—contributes to the decidedly gendered socialization of students, just as much as behavior in the classroom or the playground does. Examples like this are not prevalent, however.

Despite the seeming dearth of attention to food in education research, interest in school lunches has recently cropped up in other academic fields. Historian Susan Levine’s (2008) School Lunch Politics, for example, traces the history of the NSLP, from the Progressive Era’s “social hygiene” movement to the 1946 signing of the National School Lunch Act, to the contemporary privatizing and fast-food-izing of school food services. Sociologist Janet Poppendieck’s (2010) Free for All: Fixing School Food in America offers an overview of the state of U.S. school food (quite poor, she argues) and crafts a persuasive argument for making school meals free for all students. Public policy scholars Morgan and Sonnino’s (2008) The School Food Revolution details reform efforts in diverse countries—such as England, Italy, the United States, and Ghana—to make educational food procurement more sustainable. And nutritionist Marion Nestle, a leading advocate for school food reform, dedicated two chapters of her pioneering Food Politics (2007) to the subject, along with numerous blog posts and newspaper columns (see Nestle’s website, http://www.foodpolitics.com/).

Despite such voluminous research on school food, these authors and scholars, because they are not educationalists, rarely speak to the issues that education researchers might address. This is not to say that other disciplines do not make valuable
contributions; quite the contrary, educationalists could learn a great deal about schools from these authors. It is also not to suggest that studies that focus exclusively on food are needed from education researchers. Rather, scholars of education have the opportunity to improve studies on almost any subject by attending to what happens in the lunchroom. Before I explain this further, it might be helpful to explore why food issues have thus far been marginal in educational studies.

**Why Food Is Often Overlooked in Education Research**

In his introductory food studies text, Belasco (2008) outlines several reasons why food has not been considered more in the humanities and social sciences. First, academia's classical dualism of mind over body has bred “disdain for something as mundane, corporeal, even ‘animalistic’ as eating” (p. 2). This dynamic is perhaps stronger in education, a field decidedly fixated on the mind. Learning is often conceptualized as occurring in a social vacuum—the black box of research—denuded of concerns of the body, its needs, its pleasures, and its politics. Food, as highly body-centric, thus might seem unrelated to schooling’s purest mission, the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Second, Belasco (2008) asserts that scholarship tends to focus on the public sphere of men and marginalizes the domestic, private sphere associated with women, thus overlooking the often “private” world of food preparation and consumption. This tendency has resonance in education, too. Although education research often focuses on women—who constitute the majority of teachers and principals—many aspects of women's labor in schools are hidden, such as their emotional labor (Lingard & Douglas, 1999) or gender-typed tasks such as cleaning and tending to sick children. Preparing food, teaching cooking skills, and supervising mealtimes are forms of labor that go undetected in education research. A devaluation that is perhaps connected to the devaluation of the gender most tasked with them. Social class also plays a part in this dynamic. School cafeteria workers are low paid and often lack training or higher education; their classed position and the classed valence of their work may account for why their labor is disregarded.

Third, Belasco (2008) argues that “technological utopianism” (p. 3), the automation of production and preparation of food alongside its scientific reformulation, has systematically diminished the amount of thought and labor that goes into human consumption (see also Vileisis, 2008). Food has become an “abstraction” for most consumers (Belasco, 2008, p. 5)—at least in highly developed countries—given the far-distant growing or killing, processing, fortification, packaging, and marketing of modern industrial food (see also Pollan, 2006, 2008). Education scholars, as part of the public, have been similarly distanced from the provenance and meanings of food, and this explains why they may overlook it in their studies.

Belasco’s impediments are a good starting point, but educational studies have unique challenges beyond these, I argue. Perhaps the most basic hindrance to the study of school-based food—at least in the United States—is that educators often view food as utilitarian, a necessary service if schools are to keep children over the lunch hour. For some educators, lunch is grudgingly endured so that children will not be distracted by growing stomachs from the “real” work of education (i.e., the formal curriculum). It is no surprise that researchers would overlook food when it is largely viewed as incidental.

Public concern over childhood obesity is changing perceptions of food as a mere practicality. School meals are, in this more generous view, increasingly seen as a health program, as nutrition oriented. Yet even this perspective makes studying food difficult for education researchers, partly because of ambiguous correlations between health and education (Muennig, 2007). That is, if education researchers view food as a nutritional arena, they may feel unable to speak to the topic or its relevance to their studies.

Funding for research also has a role to play in the overlooking of school food. If granting agencies do not connect food to schools’ educational and cultural missions, they are unlikely to encourage studies that do so. In the current educational milieu, funding agencies are focused mainly on school reform and school choice programs, achievement testing, teacher education and remuneration programs, and other structural policy. Food is now on the list of priorities for most funders of specifically educational research, so researchers have heretofore had little incentive to focus on food.

Not to be ignored as a cause of overlooking food, school meals have long been ridiculed or vilified. They are “the Rodney Dangerfield of meals” (O’Hagan, 2010, para. 1) because they get no respect. The “lunch lady” is frequently disparaged, prototypically depicted as an overweight, hair-netted woman who is humorless, disgusting, and/or angry. Think of Lunch Lady Doris in the television series The Simpsons, Ms. Beazly in Archie comic books, or Chris Farley as the lunch lady in Adam Sandler’s music video for “Lunch Lady Land.” The food has long been derided, too. In the United States, there is the common image of “mystery meat” and so-called carnival fare (corn dogs, pizza, burgers and fries); in England, there is the gray and tasteless school dinner of common lore, always with a pudding, like spotted dick. It is little wonder that education researchers would shun an aspect of schooling that is so pilloried; few would want to have their work tainted by similar lampooning.

Overall, the place of food in educational studies depends a great deal on how researchers (and their funders) view food’s role in schools. When school food is viewed as bodily necessity, as distraction, solely as nutrition, or as a joke, there is little to recommend giving it serious consideration. I argue, however, that we can and should instead view food as an integral component of the ecology of education—the broader interconnections of actors, relationships, conditions, and processes of which education is composed (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). In the next section, then, I outline ways that food and eating are relevant to almost any education researcher.

**Why Education Researchers Should Consider School Food**

Food and eating play vital roles in education that education researchers might explore. As noted earlier, though, one does not have to focus largely or exclusively on food itself to take its impacts seriously. Researchers might instead count food among the many issues that interact with, confound, or determine the results of their inquiries. In the following subsections I outline—though not exhaustively—ways that food can affect the ecologies...
of schools, influences that might productively be accounted for by researchers.

**School Food Affects Students’ Health**

The reason food was initially provided in schools was student health. From the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries, U.S. and British school meals programs targeted insufficient nutrition and lack of fitness for military service (Berger, 1990; Levine, 2008). Today, the mainspring of public and academic concern is still health, although the focus has shifted to obesity. U.S. childhood obesity has tripled since 1980, with 9.5% of infants and toddlers and 16.9% of children ages 2 to 19 considered obese (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). Many are also concerned about obesity’s economic toll, which accounted for $147 billion in health care in the United States in 2008, a full 10% of all medical spending (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, & Dietz, 2009). The military concerns about school food remain as well. In 2010 the group Mission: Readiness got tremendous press coverage for its report claiming that obesity was undermining the U.S. military’s recruiting and readiness. Their main culprit? School lunches.

Despite its importance, myopic focus on obesity can elide equally important health considerations. These include malnutrition, exposure to pesticides and food additives, allergies, and even the positive contributions of micro- and macronutrients supplied by school meals.

For education researchers, the health implications of the food environment can confound study results. Although it is difficult to disentangle the causalities in the health–education nexus, there are compelling correlations between the two (Muenning, 2007). Researchers who do not pursue the impact of food, then, risk missing important factors and contexts to be analyzed. How might improved health or damaged health from school food influence the results of, say, literacy or math tests? How might the behavior of children in a special education class be a byproduct of the foods eaten at lunch? It might be worth a trip to the cafeteria to find out.

**School Food Affects Student Attainment and Achievement**

Related to the health implications, it is difficult to unambiguously establish a clear causal link between eating (or eating nutritionally) and specific test scores or educational credentials (cf. Nestle, 2007, pp. 401–405). Yet many studies suggest that whether—especially—and what students eat at school influence their attainment of and success in schooling (e.g., Taras, 2005), perhaps even more than they influence health (Hinrichs, 2010).

A study by Belot and James (2009) provides an interesting example. It considers the impact of healthier food provision in Greenwich, England, the borough that participated in Jamie Oliver’s campaign to replace processed food high in fat, salt, and sugar with scratch-prepared, healthier meals (Gilbert, 2005). This campaign provided a “natural experiment” because the borough could be compared with a similar, neighboring borough with no food changes as a control group, looking at the “differences in differences” of test scores. The authors conclude that Oliver’s campaign resulted in substantial improvements in literacy and science tests alongside decreased absenteeism.

Other studies have shown that nutritional programs improve the behaviors that are associated with improved learning. The School Food Trust (2009), for example, found that English students in intervention schools were more on-task than control group students after implementation of food standards and improvements to dining environments.

The implications of such findings for education researchers are clear. Especially for researchers focusing on achievement and learning—for instance, as in studies of program or intervention effects—it is important to recognize that what goes on in the cafeteria may be influencing students’ scores. We ignore such nutritional confounding at our peril. Instead, we might productively ask, What positive or negative influences does food (or hunger) have on the scores of students participating in my study? Might nutritional changes explain my results? Also, if we are designing reforms, how might nutrition be constructively paired with or integrated into instructional or curricular programs to benefit student learning?

**School Food Affects Teaching and Administration**

Students are not the only stakeholders affected by food and eating; faculty and administrators are also directly or indirectly implicated in the food environment. First, of course, many teachers and administrators also consume school food and are thereby subject to the same health and professional learning consequences that students face. Second, educators are often the beneficiaries of profits from food sales. The staunchest opponents to removing junk food from vending machines, for example, are often principals, many of whom—because of ever-dwindling public financing—must fund vital school programs with proceeds from vending and “pouring rights” (contracts to sell one brand of beverage exclusively; see Nestle, 2007, chap. 9). Finally, school feeding involves massive amounts of teacher and administrator labor, thus exerting physical and mental pressures.

To illustrate the last example, consider the story of Mrs. Skinner (a pseudonym), the principal of an elementary school in the Midwestern United States whom I interviewed as part of a larger study. In her first year, she frequently cried at night over lunchroom problems. “I could tell you some horror stories,” she said. “Every day I would go home and tell my husband [also an educator], not instructional strategies, not leadership things, but ‘We made it through lunch.’” Everyone in the school—teachers, parents, cafeteria staff, and students—had “issues” with lunch: There was too much noise, the students were unsupervised and rowdy, they did not have enough time to eat, and so on. Fixing these problems consumed her, and each “solution” created new problems. A researcher working with Mrs. Skinner who did not ask about lunchroom issues would miss a great deal of context for what was happening to everyone in the school.

**Schools Teach Children About Food**

One complaint of school nutrition reformers is that often children are not explicitly taught about food and cooking in school. Many have thus suggested school gardens (Waters, 2008) and cooking classes (e.g., Cooper & Holmes, 2006; Smith, 2010) to instruct students (and adults) on how to get closer to their food and eat more healthfully.

Nevertheless, even lacking explicit instruction, the hidden curriculum teaches students much about food. As just one example, using food for manipulatives or art projects (like the iconic macaroni necklace) may teach students to think that food is for
play, not valuable, and acceptable to waste. For children with lives marred by hunger, such uses of food are deeply troubling and disrespectful (Hannon, 2006).

At the very least, children are taught the value, uses, and customs of food in the cafeteria. In the United States, school cafeterias can perhaps best be seen as laboratories for “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 1993), where efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of both labor and customers are preeminent concerns. But McDonaldization is not just a metaphor. According to the School Nutrition Association (2009), 35.5% of U.S. school districts offer fast-food-branded fare. Domino’s pizza is most prevalent, being served in about 26% of all U.S. school districts. In larger districts, urban areas where fast food is already omnipresent outside schools, this increases to 50.5%. And more than the food follows the fast-food model. The median time students are given to eat is 25 minutes in elementary and 30 minutes in middle and high schools, although some schools have lunches as short as 20 minutes—barely enough time to get food much less savor it. Students, while they rush through their meal, are also subjected daily to a “total advertising environment” (Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2009) in the cafeteria, hawking products from sports drinks to candy, from the military to milk. Although not the same in all cafeterias, massive numbers of American children are being trained to eat fast food or fast-food lookalikes in a fast-food environment.

Education researchers might ask important questions about what is being taught to students about food and how it is taught. How does food show up in both the explicit and hidden curricula? What are instructional strategies and the built environment teaching students about food? Are there ways to structure school cafeteria routines to encourage better attitudes about and habits of eating?

School Food Is a Window Into Identity and Culture

Food has long been known as a means of identifying and separating people. As Brillat-Savarin famously quipped, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.” Food establishes who we are in gendered, sexualized, racial, and ethnic senses, and who we are through food has social consequences (Bourdieu, 1984). This is just as true in school cafeterias as it is in the larger society.

Ludvigsen and Scott (2009) provide a compelling example. In the English schools they studied, both children and adults saw a strict separation between foods appropriate for children (“junk” food) and those appropriate for adults (“healthy” food): “To eat healthy food was almost viewed [by the children] as a rejection of the intrinsic meaning of being a child” (pp. 426–427). Moreover, the students who were interviewed made consistent prejudgments about the gender, social class, and identity of people who might consume the kinds of food the interviewees presented; particular foods were for particular kinds of people. The children used this acute sense of food and identity, the authors concluded, as a kind of “social camouflage” to fit in and avoid bullying.

Education researchers interested in culture and identity might consider similar ways food provides insight into individuals and culture-sharing groups in schools. Researchers might ask, How are my participants constructing similarities and differences, insiders and outsiders, through food and food practices? How do they view themselves and their food culture? Whose food is represented at school and whose is not? Failing to ask such questions risks missing important dynamics of schools’ enculturation processes.

School Food Affects the Environment and Animals

Considering the massive number of meals schools serve, how the food is grown or raised, processed, packaged, stored, transported, and prepared has tremendous environmental implications. School food is responsible for vast “food miles”—a popular metric for the distance food travels and thus the fuel used—as frozen and processed food travels from farms to factories to distributors to trays. The environmental consequences, however, extend beyond just transportation. The use of chemical and petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides; the mass production of milk and meat with its attendant fossil fuel usage, overuse of antibiotics, and production of animal waste; the running of greenhouses rather than seasonal food provision; the prevalence of food requiring round-the-clock refrigeration or freezing; the increasing use of plastics in storing and serving foods; the lack of recycling programs; and many more issues pose just as many (or more) ecological challenges.

The fate of animals is a related concern. Schools are a major purchaser of milk, accounting for approximately 470 million gallons in the United States alone (Prime Consulting Group, 2009). Mass volumes of beef, chicken, and pork are consumed in schools, too; commodity program beef alone (not all beef served) exceeds 100 million pounds annually (Eisler, Morrison, & DeBarros, 2009). At these quantities and for the prices paid, industrial scale production—often done in confined animal feeding operations—is inevitable, and such methods can be profoundly damaging to the environment and desperately inhumane to the animals (e.g., Pollan, 2006).

As education research on environmental sustainability and animal rights grows (e.g., Kahn, 2010), questioning school food’s impacts becomes more pressing. Not only do food production practices implicate schools in environmental degradation and animal cruelties, but, as I argued above, schools teach children—whether explicitly or implicitly—to ignore, accept, or resist these environmental and speciesist realities (see also Stewart & Cole, 2009). Education researchers, then, must explore the implications of schools’ practices for the ecologies and inhabitants of the earth and consider how and what children are learning about these impacts. They might also attend to those who are working to mitigate these impacts, including those advocating for and creating local farm-to-school programs (e.g., Davis, Hudson, & Members of the Burlington School Food Project, in press), school gardens (e.g., Waters, 2008), and vegetarian and vegan options (Kahn, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, in press).

School Food Is Big Business

The U.S. food system involves about 20% of the total workforce and about $1 trillion annually (Belasco, 2008, p. 20). Schools make up a sizable portion of that. According to the School Nutrition Association (2008), primary and secondary schools’ retail sales equivalent is $15.9 billion, making it 15% of noncommercial food service and 2.5% of all U.S. food service and restaurant sales. Again, though, lunch and breakfast are not the totality of food sold in schools. About 11.5% of the $22.05 billion vending market comes from schools and colleges as well (Maras,
School stores, canteens, and fund-raising—from chocolate bars to bake sales—also generate billions of dollars (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2007).

These giant sums are quite attractive to food manufacturers, of course. Schools are corporations’ prime targets for getting children to try new products, view advertising, and develop brand loyalty. Also important, schools are a relatively stable source of income for companies, less volatile than other food markets. As one school food broker told me, “It’s very secure. When the white tablecloths [restaurants] close because the economy gets bad and chain accounts start to close, kids will still have to eat.” Indeed, according to her, a bad economy actually benefits her because more children will eat free and reduced price lunches.

For education researchers, then, accounting for the economy of school food may be an important consideration. We need to ask, Where is the money coming from, and where does the money end up? Who benefits from the billions of dollars spent in schools on food, and what are the consequences of these flows of money?

School Food Is a Window Into Educational Politics and Policy

School food, like all food, is intensely political. Indeed, because it involves children and core beliefs about government’s role in helping raise them, school food is perhaps the most politically combustible arena of food politics. Consider, for instance, that school meals are often first in line for cuts when conservative political parties control governments. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher earned the rhyming nickname “the milk snatcher” while she was education minister in 1971 for eliminating free milk for children older than seven; this appellation was cemented when, shortly after taking over as prime minister, she removed the requirements that all schools serve meals, through the Education (No. 2) Act of 1980. Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan similarly earned lambasting in the early 1980s for his administration’s attempts to cut NSLP spending by counting ketchup as a serving of vegetables. Similar taunts are being hurled at the current Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition government in England (e.g., Moss, 2010); within weeks of taking office the new government cancelled plans to extend free school meals to nearly 50,000 students and slashed the budget of the School Foods Trust, the quasi-governmental office charged with helping reform school meal services. School lunches, clearly, can be a political wedge, and the ensuing tumult demonstrates the value that communities and governments place on something as seemingly simple as lunch.

School nutrition programs are at the center of much law and policy making, as well. In just the year 2009, 34 of the 50 U.S. states enacted legislation on healthy eating, physical activity, healthy community design, and access to healthy food (Winterfeld, Shinkle, & Morandi, 2010). These involve schools in profound and diverse ways, including school food, nutrition education, screening programs, school wellness, physical education, safe routes to school, farm-to-school and school garden programs, and marketing restrictions.

Although U.S. federal legislation has been more modest than state-level programs, First Lady Michelle Obama’s recent foray into childhood obesity and her Let’s Move! program signal a renewed federal-level interest in reform. Indeed, numerous federal laws already have tremendous influence; provisions of the Farm Bill, the Child Nutrition Act, and the National School Lunch Act all have sway over what happens in schools, and not just in the cafeteria. The 2004 reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, for example, mandated that all schools develop wellness policies involving multiple stakeholders from the school community, which resulted in policies from the anodyne to the revolutionary. Researchers would do well to understand how such policies influence operations in the schools they study.

Beyond governments, school food is also the domain of myriad organizations, political and social movements, and other stakeholders. These include professional food service organizations; antihunger groups; and a huge lobbying and nonprofit infrastructure that attends to public health, economics, food availability, and more. To disregard food and consequently these groups, then, is to disregard a mass of people working hard to change schools.

Because school food is so deeply political and subject to numerous laws, policies, and reform movements, education researchers must consider policies on food and related domains as integral and influential within educational policy ecologies (Robert & Weaver-Hightower, in press; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). To do otherwise is to impoverish one’s understanding of the context of schooling.

School Food Affects Social Justice

Food, because it is cultural and political, is a major social justice issue in schools, and critical educators and researchers cannot ignore food practices as means of social reproduction, oppression, and resistance. As Levine (2008) shows, for example, racial and class politics in U.S. school lunch programs have existed from the beginning, with conservative and progressive legislators battling over whether feeding African Americans would infringe on states’ rights and battling over the role of private business in public food provision.

One can see these and other food-related issues of social justice playing out in nearly all schools. There are the labor, environmental, and cultural issues pointed out above. Stigma also remains an issue, for foods continue to mark children as poor (Ludvigsen & Scott, 2009; Poppendeich, 2010), even in an era where most—although not all—separate lines or tokens for free and paid meals have disappeared.

Hunger, of course, remains another major social justice issue for schools. According to the World Food Programme (2009), around 66 million children in developing countries attend school hungry daily. Programs to reach these children struggle to provide even rudimentary nutrition, and not because the world produces insufficient calories. One need not travel to Africa or South America to find such hunger, though. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s latest food security report (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2009) estimates that nearly 15% of U.S. households—17 million families—had their access to food limited some time during the year by insufficient financial or other resources. This figure is the highest since statistics were first collected in 1995, and in the midst of recent economic turmoil, record numbers of children are qualifying for free and reduced price meals (Eisler & Weise, 2009). This represents a key social
justice concern because particular students and communities are bearing the brunt of food insecurity.

Taking a cue from Jean Anyon’s (2005) argument for including food reform the welfare and other economic policies of urban districts, we must begin to consider food policies a part of the pantheon of practices that contribute to educational successes and failures. To what extent can a particular school or district manage and afford healthier food? Is a particular community more affected by food insecurity than other communities to which it is being compared? How can food policies for developing countries be constructed to avoid exploitative practices (e.g., Patel, 2007)? Viewing social justice connections between the food system and schools compels us to consider the ethical implications of our research. If we overlook schools’ foodways, we overlook a mainspring of social, economic, and policy dynamics that create inequalities.

Conclusion

Considering the wide-ranging dynamics of food in schools, nearly all education researchers—from historians to program evaluators, curriculum theorists to foundations theorists, policy analysts to scholars of leadership, teacher educators to higher education scholars—can profit from attending to food issues. Education research could be a welcome contributor to the “big, lumpy tent” of what Pollan (2010) calls the food movements (emphasis on the plural) as well as food studies within the academy (Belasco, 2008; Nestle & McIntosh, 2010). Indeed, there are important opportunities and insights to be gained by interdisciplinary research among and between education researchers and researchers in the humanities, the social sciences, and the medical sciences.

Although intrinsically an important and worthy topic by itself, school food can also be an entrée (so to speak) into many other topics of interest to education researchers. It can be the highlight of an SES measure in education research. Educational Researcher, 39(2), 120–131. doi: 10.3102/0013189X10362578


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Fixing Up Lunch Ladies, Dinner Ladies, and Canteen Managers
Cases of School Food Reform in England, the United States, and Australia

Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower

Many people are out to change the way canteen managers in Australia, “dinner ladies” in England, and “lunch ladies” in the United States do their jobs and the products they serve. As obesity crises, particularly (e.g., Popkin, 2009), have gripped the attention of these Anglophone countries, school food—often seen as a major contributor to such crises (e.g., Mission: Readiness, 2010)—has been the subject of wide-ranging reform efforts. Whether slow food or grab-and-go food, organic food or fortified food, local foods or global cuisine, progressive attempts at expanding programs to three meals a day or conservative attempts to restrict or eliminate the programs entirely, varied reform efforts are competing to influence how governments and schools feed children.

In this chapter, I explore the context-dependent work of organizations advocating for school food reform in these three countries. From England I focus on the School Food Trust, the quasi-governmental organization charged with implementing the transformations wrought by high-profile school meals reform. From the United States I present legislative efforts by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine to insert vegetarian and vegan concerns within legislative processes. From Australia, finally, I present the work of the Healthy Kids Association, a New South Wales state organization with significant influence around the country. The important similarities and key differences of each country and each organization are telling of the complicated politics surrounding school food. Synthesizing what might be learned from
these cases can inform other reform efforts, ultimately illuminating key concepts about food, cultures, policy ecologies (Weaver-Hightower, 2008), and the educational project of these three nations.

I begin by outlining the methods used to construct the case studies analyzed. Then, I describe each case, surveying the national context as well as the mission and strategies of the three reform organizations. Finally, I present a cross-case synthesis, highlighting the complexity of reforming something so deceptively simple as school food.

Methods

The case studies presented here are developed from a large-scale study focusing on the politics of school food around the world. Methods of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996) were used. Research was conducted in South Africa (dropped here for space considerations), Australia, England, and the United States, all English-speaking countries and all currently focusing on reforming the food served in schools. Traditional qualitative procedures typified the data collection, including participant observation, interviewing, archival research, and document analysis. Each case varies slightly in the number of interviews, documents and observations obtained, but each has been rigorously checked for validity through triangulation of sources and, when feasible, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I alone collected and analyzed the data, though I depended greatly on others’ help in connecting with participants, finding documents, and transcribing interviews.1

The three cases presented here were chosen from among the many possible to illustrate—as Merriam (1998) suggests—the “hows” and “whys” of reform’s complexity in differing countries. Each case was bounded by focusing on a single organization with a major mission to reform school food in a single country—Australia, England, or the United States. Each also has telling differences, particularly in the overall contexts in which they operate. To highlight this I have used the terminology and techniques of policy ecology analysis (Weaver-Hightower, 2008; see the Introduction, this volume). Finally, a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2009) was performed to develop themes that illuminate the shared challenges of reform.

Case One: England: The School Food Trust

Overview of School Food in England

England’s school food provision has the earliest emergence of the three countries. With the Education Act of 1870 making elementary education compulsory, poor children began attending schools in large numbers, and
their health problems became a concern—a pressure on the system (Berger, 1990). The Education (Provision of Meals) Act of 1906 was the first organized governmental provision of school meals in England, though many voluntary agencies had already been feeding children. One of the main arguments for it was concern about the fitness of soldiers, given the major losses incurred by the British during the Boer Wars. The 1906 Act was not a mandate to provide meals, but it made it possible for local educational authorities (LEAs) to use local taxes for the purpose.

The postwar Education Act of 1944 dramatically changed schools in England, including restructuring LEAs, increasing the school leaving age and establishing a new secondary education system. It also changed school meal provision dramatically by mandating that LEAs provide a fixed price meal to every child who wanted one. Schools around the country had to expand or create meal services and many began to hire nutritionists and professional staffs to fill the needed niches and roles of an expanded service. A system of cafeterias also began springing up in both primary and secondary schools nationwide as a means of adaptation to these pressures. By 1947, the government paid 100% of school meals to those LEAs who met the conditions for poor children. The goal was still to provide meals free to all students universally. By 1952, however, the education ministry conceded that this was unlikely to ever happen given extant conditions, and prices for paying children began to climb thereafter.

Both Labour and Conservative governments of the late 1960s through the 1980s unraveled much of the school meals service. In 1968, Harold Wilson’s Labour government withdrew free milk from secondary schools, and the Education (Milk) Act 1971, championed by then Secretary of Education Margaret (“Milk Snatcher”) Thatcher, further withdrew free milk from students over age seven. (Like many other countries, in England provision for younger children tends to be more protected than those for older children and teens; see also Robert & Kovalskys, this volume.) The Education (No. 2) Act of 1980, Thatcher’s major privatization reform as Prime Minister, did the most to dismantle the service and send it into entropy, mainly by removing the requirement that all schools serve meals. The Act left only two compulsory tasks for LEAs: (a) provide some kind of food for students with parents on welfare and (b) have a place for students to eat lunches brought from home. In the wake of the 1980 Act, kitchens closed, jobs were lost, and free meals took on special stigma, for often only poor children were given meals. The Social Security Act 1986 further converted the free meals system, adding the price of school dinners (lunches) to welfare checks rather than directly giving the meals, giving families a choice of whether to direct the money to school dinners; this re-
sulted in hundreds of thousands of children not taking a daily meal. Further dismantling the service, the Local Government Act of 1988 instituted “compulsory competitive tendering,” which forced LEAs to put the meals service up to the lowest bidder, the intention being to show the inefficiencies of public services compared to private industry. The quality of meals—especially given that nutritional requirements had been completely removed—declined precipitously as private caterers, who replaced unionized employees of local governments (succession in policy ecology terms), sought to maximize profit.

The school food service environment stayed much the same for years, but was thrown into tumult in February 2005, when a reality television program, Jamie’s School Dinners (Gilbert, 2005), starring celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, aired on Channel 4. Though numerous organizations were already working to make school dinners healthier (see Morgan & Sonnino, 2008; School Meals Review Panel, 2005), it was Oliver’s efforts to convince the dinner ladies in the Greenwich borough of London to stop selling turkey twizzlers and chips (french fries) that created a massive public outcry for improvements in school dinners (see Kang, this volume, for similar South Korean public outcry over food quality). In March 2005, Oliver was granted a meeting with Prime Minister Blair, who promised £15 million for the establishment of the School Food Trust, a quasi-governmental group charged with guiding changes in nutrition and other areas of school food service. In April 2005, the Labour government exceeded these expectations, promising £280 million (roughly US$440 million) of new inputs—£220 million for fresh ingredients and £60 million for the School Food Trust.

The School Food Trust

The School Food Trust is a “quango,” a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization, meaning a group to which the government has devolved some of its powers; it operates in concert with British government departments, with funding from the government, but it has its own mission and responsibilities. Despite its tenuous connection to government, the Trust became a target for political criticism, mainly because it was the public, organizational face for insisting on tough reforms in school food provision sparked by Jamie Oliver’s exposé.

The School Food Trust’s mission has been to facilitate the reforms called for by a number of governmental actions, including the School Meals Review Panel’s (2005) report, which followed from the Jamie Oliver-inspired public concern. This role has spawned a multifaceted approach to increasing meal “take up” (the number of children consuming meals); addressing the “deskilling” of cafeteria staff; enabling compliance with food- and nutrition-based
standards; conducting research to show the need for and efficacy of improving school meals; and communicating the standards, their research, and best practices to all stakeholders. This last task was no easy feat, for the actors that are their stakeholders are diverse and many, including the general public, schoolchildren, parents, teachers and administrators, catering managers and front-line dinner ladies, policymakers, LEAs, and food manufacturers.

The Trust created a raft of interventions aimed at making progress on these various niches and roles they filled. In working with caterers and cooks, the Trust provided cooking skills training through their School FEAST (Food Excellence and Skills Training) network. They also worked with caterers to develop menus that comply with new nutrient-based nutritional requirements and worked to support software development for this purpose, as well. The Trust website (http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk) provided numerous case studies of best practices from around England. The Million School Meals program was a main thrust in trying to increase take up of meals (the main metric used in both public and governmental debates). The program’s resources “include everything from marketing support to recipes, posters and curriculum packs, plus guidance for encouraging pupils to stay on site at lunchtime, and creating your own packed lunch policy” (http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/schools/projects/million-meals-resources). The Trust also provided branded advertising (promotions were done with Disney’s High School Musical 3 and Disney-Pixar’s Ratatouille, for example) to help cafeterias market their food service.

Even with all of these services devoted to them, food service workers were initially the group of actors most resistant to reform, according to School Food Trust staff with whom I spoke. Caterers and dinner ladies took a great deal of blame in the wake of the Jamie Oliver campaign, and meal take up plummeted after the show, causing many of these workers to fear for their livelihoods. Some of the workers with whom I spoke five years after Oliver’s show were ultimately glad for the changes to the food, but “Jamie Oliver” was still a dirty word to many; the School Food Trust was initially resisted as a part of Oliver’s mission. The Trust’s relationships with dinner ladies and their professional organization, the Local Area Caterers Association, has become far more cooperative in recent years, however, after long years of assisting frontline workers in good faith.

Working with students to encourage healthier eating was a strong stream of the School Food Trust’s work, as well. The Trust created curriculum materials, a cooking skills program (Let’s Get Cooking!), and online resources like games and informational brochures for children and their parents. They also sponsored programs to send chefs into U.K. schools and introduced competi-
tive charitable programs to pledge money for school meals in high-hunger nations in other regions of the world.

Research was another major area the Trust focused on, using it as a means of backing up claims made about the importance of school food to the academic and social missions of schools. As the director of the research division told me,

And if you know the background to the area [of research] then none of the [previous] data were very convincing, or what there is convincing really comes from developing countries and almost nothing from either the U.S. or Australia or Canada where you could say there’s really strong, clear evidence that if children are eating better at school, for example, they’ll do better on their exams or they’ll behave better in the classroom. So our job was to sort of take forward that very broad agenda.

One of the more rigorous studies to accomplish this “broad agenda” was a controlled experiment to evaluate on-task behavior for schools that implemented changes to their food and their dining environments (see School Food Trust, 2009b, 2009c). The Trust found, among other things, that students in schools that had made changes were three times as likely to be on-task as students in control schools. Other research tracked the take up of meals nationally, procurement trends, nutritional standard compliance and the attitudes of various stakeholders (for a summary, see http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/research/the-trusts-research).

The communications division of the Trust was responsible for monitoring and responding to the media coverage of school meals, a tall order given its frequency and level of scrutiny, particularly post-Jamie’s School Dinners. The Trust was a frequent contributor of comments for journalists, and this gave it a high profile as avatar of the “nanny state” among conservatives, as a group that was trying to “preach” to parents about packed lunches and trying to “take away” beloved, culturally prized foods. Conservatives saw the School Food Trust as a high profile holdover from the Labour government that installed it, and the strong libertarian segments of the English public have long been distrustful of the food bans and regulations the Trust championed.

Even with detractors, the Trust has shown promising results over its existence. Take up of school meals increased, up 2.1 percentage points in 2010 from 2009 (Nelson et al., 2010). Not only are students eating, but they are eating healthier options, with the amounts of fruits and vegetables consumed going up since 2005 (School Food Trust, 2009a). As a high level director told me, there were other important changes, too, including a wider variety of foods for students and a sense that cafeteria staff are not as marginalized. Educators now, he said, “recognize that there’s a contribution, that the...cooks and
the dining room staff make to children’s well-being in a number of different ways.” He also noted an important change in the effort and attention being put into food and child health from educational leaders:

We just did some telephoning around very briefly over the last couple of days to talk with...about twenty local authorities who had said that they thought they would be compliant with the standards. Five years ago if you’d rung up those same twenty local authorities, you’d have been lucky if you’d had a conversation with five of them, I would think, about the quality and provision of food in schools. (...) They wouldn’t have been able to answer that question at all and I think now probably three-quarters of them can, and with some depth, and with feeling. So I think there’s been a sort of sea change in the ways in which not only schools, but also local authority caterers, are engaged in this, and the private caterers as well.

Part of this new attention has sprung from successful research, described above, that has shown some promising connections between school food and academic and social success. The Trust’s work has demonstrated that reform can have broad impact, an appealing fact for administrators in the competitive context of school choice in England.

In the two school cafeterias I visited in March 2010, the changes were visible. Very few frozen and processed products were used; instead, the kitchens made food from scratch, using fresh meat, fresh vegetables, and low fat and low sugar recipes. The dinner ladies—one of whom conscripted me as a cook for the day—peeled, chopped, seasoned, fried, and baked rather than simply opening boxes and reheating. Some of the food was very good (some, admittedly, was not), but regardless the food was not processed and it was fresh and many students and teachers ate it gladly, all for a mere £2 (about US$3) for a full price meal—a bargain in comparison to the rest of London. These are norms for most schools in England as of this writing, and the proof of positive change was in the pudding, quite literally.

Despite these very promising results, after the May 2010 elections brought the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition to power, the Trust’s position as the face of school food reform made it a prime target for predation. Within weeks, the Coalition cut the Trust’s budget by more than £1 million. Plans that Labour and the Trust had made to extend free school meals to 500,000 more students were scrapped. The new Education Minister, Michael Gove, announced that academies, the Coalition’s unregulated, community-run schools (somewhat like charter schools in the United States)—which they hoped would be the new model for thousands of schools—would not be required to meet the nutritional regulations. The coalition government also shifted the School Lunch Grant, an £80 million-per-year fund specifically set up to help schools meet the direct costs of school meals, to instead be a gen-
eral grant that schools can decide to do anything they want with; given the constant financial crisis of schools, many will no longer focus these funds on meal services. Finally, in late September 2010 (as I first drafted this article), the School Food Trust was put on a list of quangos to be abolished by the new government. As it is also a charity, the Trust can continue by raising its own funds, which it plans to do, but with few government connections and the threat of no regulations left to enforce, this seems a difficult conversion at best; to do this, they plan to begin offering services for fees (School Food Trust, 2010). Five years and hundreds of millions of pounds spent on reform to school food has been seemingly unraveled in about six months.

Case Two: The United States:
The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

Overview of School Food in the United States

England and the United States have very similar histories of school meals provision. Early meals were similarly provided by social progress groups throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Levine, 2008). Finally, after decades of advocacy, these groups were able to convince the U.S. government to get involved in and increase inputs for school food. Like England, this occurred during the postwar Keynesian welfare revolution, specifically with the United States’ passage of the Richard Russell National School Lunch Act in 1946.

Also like England, concern for malnourished youth unfit to be soldiers was a mainspring for federal action (Levine, 2008). President Franklin Roosevelt’s National Nutrition Conference for Defense in 1941, for example, discussed the issue, and it led to the first federal nutritional guidelines. Indeed, the National School Lunch Act itself describes military readiness as a main purpose:

It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by ... providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs. (§2; emphasis added)

The ordering of these priorities was no accident, for, at the time, the threat to peace from unfit soldiers was freshly in mind.

Creating and passing the National School Lunch Act was not easy, and its implementation has been similarly difficult. Political fights erupted over its
states’ rights implications, with southern states concerned that the federal government was overreaching and would use school meals as a way to interrupt segregation traditions and laws. Even after the law was passed, the spread of free school meals was slow, and there were definite racial and social class patterns to who was not getting fed. Further, the program had been put under the control of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and it has been mired in agriculture politics ever since. The USDA has supplemented tight school food service budgets by installing a surplus commodities program that provides, according to the USDA, 15 to 20% of the food given to students, but this leaves the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) with ambiguous priorities; is it a program to help farmers or to help children, or can it do both? The late 1960s saw widespread public concern over hunger across the United States, and school food was a primary policy lever for fixing this malady (see Poppendieck, 2010). The National School Breakfast Program emerged in 1968 in response to this pressure, and conservative President Nixon presided over the largest expansion of that and the NSLP in their histories (see also Sandler, this volume).

Also just as in England, the 1980s saw repeated attempts to eviscerate the program (predation in ecology terms). President Reagan’s USDA became infamous for trying to count ketchup as a serving of vegetables, mainly as a way to cut costs. While the worst of the cuts were avoided during the tenures of Reagan and Bush, Sr.—partly because of gaffes like “ketchup is a vegetable”—conservatives still pushed through the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which slashed subsidies for full price meals, raised price limits for reduced price meals, lowered eligibility for free and reduced meals, and made the eligibility process more difficult. This resulted in rather dramatic entropy, for 2700 schools dropped out of the program, more than one quarter of full price students dropped out, and many fewer students were eating reduced and free meals. Perhaps most damagingly, though, the NSLP has increasingly come to be seen as a welfare program after the 1980s discursive attacks on the program (Poppendieck, 2010, p. 73). The U.S. public’s antipathy for taxes, too, has since kept the program on razor margins—an extreme form of prolonged conservation.

Recent U.S. concerns with school lunches have grown out of a decline in the quality of food served because of the cost cutting measures required of school nutrition personnel. School cafeterias have on average one dollar per plate to buy ingredients after labor and other costs have been subtracted (School Nutrition Association, 2008), so highly processed food is prevalent. Fast food brands and fast food fare are also widespread (School Nutrition Association, 2009). Numerous groups have thus taken up food reform efforts
(e.g., Cooper & Holmes, 2006; Kalafa, 2007; Waters, 2008), and Jamie Oliver also came to the United States to reiterate the lessons of his previous reality series, this time in his Emmy award-winning Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution (Seacrest & Smith, 2010). This has provided public attention that groups, like the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, have used to further their agendas for school food.

**The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine**

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) was founded in 1985 as a group of physicians and laypersons committed to ending the use of animals in scientific research and to promoting the health benefits of vegan and vegetarian diets. The overarching concern for animal rights and diets that reflect that concern has led the PCRM to focus significant resources and policy attention on school food (see also DeLeon, this volume). While not as big as some other organizations involved in school food in the United States, like the School Nutrition Association (SNA), the PCRM has nevertheless attracted much attention for its efforts, largely due to high profile endorsements of its initiatives (detailed below). PCRM provides an interesting contrast to the other two cases in this chapter because it is a group wholly outside the government, is dependent on donations, and is trying to accomplish legislative change.

PCRM has two major strands of its work focused on school meals, both of which fall under the umbrella of its Healthy School Lunches campaign (http://www.healthyschoollunches.org). The first major strand is outreach to child nutrition professionals across the United States. The aim is to increase the number of “plant-based” options in schools, meaning vegetarian and vegan entrées and alternatives to milk. As the nutritionist associated with the program told me, “what we do is just help schools navigate the...menu planning system by the USDA and situate that with the vegetarian and vegan needs.” Largely this involves visiting nutrition directors—who would normally contact them—consulting with them on products, recipes, and other practices that can help meet the needs of vegan and vegetarian students and reduce dependence on animal products. For many food service directors, the nutritionist said, the concern is meeting USDA nutritional guidelines, especially for protein, keeping things within cost, and making sure that children will eat the food. Much of PCRM’s work is showing directors how they can meet these challenges.

This year we’ve worked with school districts and gotten them to put a vegetarian item [on the menu] and the sales have been great and the kids have been receptive. So it’s
more just telling them what’s out there, reassuring them that it’ll be fine and the kids will enjoy it and it’ll really be a good thing overall.

Another challenge for her is reassuring directors that

it’s not just a vegetarian that will benefit from this. Any student, no matter what their eating pattern, is going to benefit from having a meal that is lower in fat, higher in fiber, and full of fruits and vegetables and whole grains. It really is a healthy eating pattern overall.

There is a pervasive sense when talking with PCRM staff that they do not want to be pigeonholed as a fringe group. Their approach is to focus on universal health benefits rather than moral imperatives of animal liberation, and they focus on eating more plants rather than eating no meat or cheese.

A healthy portion of their work with child nutrition professionals is also outreach, targeting those who would not necessarily know to come to PCRM for consultation. These interventions include, for example, developing curriculum, marketing materials, and sample menus and bulk recipes that nutrition directors can use. One of their biggest outreach events each year is a dinner at the SNA’s Annual National Convention. I attended in 2009, and it was a gala affair. A gourmet vegan dinner was served in a ballroom, and they had advertised the event in advance for all the thousands who registered for the convention. During the lavish three-course meal—which was clearly meant to show that vegan didn’t mean boring, tasteless food—the PCRM’s director and the nutritionist noted above gave research-based presentations meant to convince attendees of the benefits of a plant-based diet, the drawbacks of a meat and cheese-intensive diet, and some tips for how to incorporate more vegan and vegetarian foods that kids will eat but that will not break the budget.

The PCRM, much like the School Food Trust, also conducts research to help support its messages. It publishes School Lunch Report Cards (http://www.healthyschoollunches.org/reports/index.cfm) that score sampled districts on meeting or exceeding USDA guidelines, obesity and disease prevention efforts, nutrition education, and the extent to which vegan and vegetarian options are present daily. They also present Golden Carrot Awards annually to food service professionals for similar accomplishments, thereby building case studies of successful practice that other districts might follow.

The second major strand of the PCRM’s work on school lunches is legislative activism. In the most recent five-year renewal cycle for the Child Nutrition Act—one of the major pieces of legislation, along with the Farm Bill (see, e.g., Imhoff, 2007), that lays out the rules of and funding for school nutrition—PCRM developed and advocated for an amendment called the Healthy School Meals Act of 2010 (H.R. 4870; see http://www.healthyschoollunches.
They got Colorado Representative Jared Polis, a vegetarian himself, to sponsor the bill, and they worked to secure more co-sponsors; as of June 2010, 65 representatives had co-sponsored.

As the PCRM’s policy manager spearheading the effort told me, there are four main components to the Act. The first calls for a USDA “pilot project” to “research and develop plant-based options—plant-based protein products—that will pretty much take center of the plate entrée space, instead of your meat-based option.” The research would focus on discovering the products that are “easiest to use, easiest to prepare by the schools, and with all the nutritional components that they’re looking for. So basically research finding out what schools will use and like, and what kids will like.” As she told me, focusing on such research projects usually proves less controversial than funding changes before research is done; they got the idea from those who advocated for more whole grains in the NSLP.

For the second component of the Act, those plant-based products found to be effective in the research would be added to the commodities list, and that’s important because, commodities...are offered at a cheaper rate to the schools than the regular food that they purchase. So by putting it on the commodities list, it’s more affordable and easy to identify by the schools.

Being on the commodities list would make it possible to find meat alternatives and to provide them without the relatively high out-of-pocket costs they now incur for tight budgets.

The third component of the Act adds a further incentive for schools to offer a vegetarian option every day: a 25% credit to each participating school’s USDA commodity dollars. If 20% of all schools participated, this incentive could cost $46.6 million annually. To contextualize, 63.9% of districts offer a vegetarian option “on a consistent basis”—not necessarily every day—at “any” of their schools now, and only 20.5% offer a vegan option (School Nutrition Association, 2009).

Costs like this incentive are a political concern amidst the extant conditions of economic recession, but the most controversial aspect of the Act is the fourth, the mandate to provide milk alternatives (like water, juice, or soy drinks) and to make meals served with these reimbursable. Currently, a meal is considered complete and thus schools are paid back for them only if cow’s milk is provided, and schools are required to provide alternatives only if students provide a doctor’s note for allergies or other health concerns. Vegan meals, in other words, lose money for the school—a powerful disincentive. Much of the opposition from legislators PCRM has met with has been to this milk issue. As the policy director explained,
There has been some resistance, perhaps, from—I wouldn’t say ‘resistance’ but ‘reluctance’—to sign on from people in dairy states [laughing] because they think their constituents won’t support it or it might, you know, encroach upon their market somehow, then they don’t want to support something. For example, Wisconsin, there’s a lot of cheese. Things like that.

PCRM, she says, doesn’t see reimbursing milk alternatives as taking away market share; “we see it as providing an additional option.”

Much of the traction the PCRM had gotten on the bill, in getting it included in the House of Representatives-passed version of the Child Nutrition Act and getting a great deal of grassroots action through petitions and letters to representatives, came from some very high profile advertising and endorsements. One of the first was a Washington, DC, subway ad that featured a young African-American girl asking, “President Obama’s daughters get healthy school lunches. Why don’t I?” (see Kilpatrick & McCann, 2009). The ad got national attention in the United States because presidential children are often considered “off limits” in political debate. Still, the ads netted many new volunteers to the PCRM’s cause because of its visibility. PCRM also has gotten publicity from high profile celebrity endorsements, including actors Hugh Jackman, Scarlett Johanssen, and Tobey Maguire, along with Jillian Michaels of The Biggest Loser reality TV series, former professional basketball star John Salley, and comedian Sarah Silverman. Aided by these endorsements, PCRM has gotten about 125,000 signatures on their petition supporting the Healthy School Meals Act according to the policy manager, and they have gotten more than $8.5 million in contributions and donations (http://www.pcrm.org/magazine/gm10winter/2009fiscal.html).

Despite PCRM’s successes in getting the Act passed in the House version of the Child Nutrition Act, the garnering of celebrity endorsements, and a great deal of grassroots financial and advocacy support, the fate of their Healthy School Meals Act is uncertain. It looks, at the time of this writing (the fall of 2010), that the much smaller Senate version of the reauthorization might be passed instead, meaning the PCRM’s amendment will not be passed. It may be the victim of a tight legislative schedule, an unwillingness to extend budget deficits, and conservatives’ antipathy toward programs, like the NSLP, that are perceived solely as welfare. The PCRM’s nutritional policy manager had a realistic attitude, though:

There’s so many bills for school lunch improvement, basically—I don’t know the price tag on all of them—but it’s like impossible for all of them to make it in and get funded. So there’s going to have to be a lot of decision, and it’s going to come down to who has the loudest voice on it, and the other politics of how these things work.
I asked what she would do if the bill did in fact fail, and, rather than feeling defeated or down (though she will be disappointed), she said that they’ll just try again later, maybe for the next Farm Bill.

Case Three: Australia: Healthy Kids

Overview of School Food in Australia

Unlike the other two nations discussed here, Australia’s school food history is decidedly local, without significant federal involvement (a high level of adaptive decentralization) and without a program of free school meals for the poor. Rather, Australia’s school food ecology centers on the school canteen or “tuck shop,” often a small room with sparse cooking equipment that serves sandwiches, fruit, candy, drinks, and other quick-service, often highly processed foods to those children with cash to pay for them.

Indeed, Australia’s school canteens have traditionally operated as profit-making ventures, set up and usually run by each individual school’s parents and citizens group (P&C; like parents and teachers associations [PTA] in the United States) to fund school materials and activities. Though some canteens are now managed by private contractors, the large majority have highly local boundaries; they are supervised by a canteen manager (usually relatively low paid) hired by the individual school’s P&C and staffed by parent volunteers, usually mothers. As women have increasingly moved into the paid workforce, though, frequent concern has been expressed in the media over the inability to find parent volunteers (e.g., Sunday Telegraph, June 24, 2010, “Schools lose food struggle”), and numerous canteens have moved toward entropy, having to close or restrict hours.

Their profit-making status means that the school canteen does not serve as a means of feeding a school’s or community’s poor children. While the meal services in England and the United States have historically had social welfare as a manifest mission, Australian school canteens have acted only as an aid to what is otherwise parents’ responsibility for feeding their children at school. Huge numbers of school canteens are not even open every day; they may be open only on special occasions or just certain days each week, depending on what schedule is profitable. Poor and hungry children typically fend for themselves, though some schools give poor children money to spend at the canteen or provide a sandwich to children who came without lunch.

Health concerns and the inspection of school canteens has historically been a state-level rather than federal responsibility, just like most other educational issues in Australia. The federal government has only recently—since April 2008—begun a National Healthy School Canteens Project (http://www.
nhsc.com.au) to develop common nutritional and safety guidelines for school food. At the time of this writing, however, it looks as if these guidelines will not be compulsory. That means that the status quo of state-level organization responsibility will continue, with groups like Healthy Kids Association, the New South Wales school canteen group, leading reforms.

**Healthy Kids Association**

Like the School Food Trust and PCRM, Healthy Kids Association is largely a service organization, providing advice and consultation to schools that are interested in reforming their practices. Established in 1991 as the New South Wales School Canteen Association, Healthy Kids was formed in response to a perceived need among canteen managers for help in making canteens healthier. Since then Healthy Kids has grown into a nationally recognized organization focused on canteen reform. Like the School Food Trust in England, Healthy Kids is frequently called upon to comment in media stories about school food and it is a major voice in policy debates.

Healthy Kids has three major aspects to its work. The first is working directly with school canteen managers to help them meet the nutritional guidelines laid out for schools by the New South Wales state government in its Fresh Tastes @ School Strategy (New South Wales School Canteen Advisory Committee, 2006). The core of the state strategy is a “traffic light” food system—based on calories, fat, sodium, and fiber—that defines “red” foods that should be eaten only “occasionally,” “amber” (or, yellow) foods that one should “select carefully,” and “green” foods that should “fill the menu.” “Red” foods can be served only twice a term, and “red” drinks, like soft drinks and energy drinks, have been banned (though, according to Healthy Kids staff, noncompliance with such bans is rampant). Healthy Kids helps the school canteens meet the guidelines through a once-a-term magazine and their website, but they also have school site visits that they perform for member schools. As the director described it,

> We'll go into a school and we'll do a complete review of their canteen, and provide them with a report and recommendations and a whole lot of other relevant operational and food information....And there are some schools that we work with that we might spend you know 80 or 100 hours in, actually in hands-on work.

This work involves advice on business practices—ensuring profitability—just as much as nutrition.

The second major aspect of Healthy Kids’s work is providing services to food manufacturers. Healthy Kids’s industry team works with manufacturers to help them meet the Fresh Tastes guidelines as well as Healthy Kids’s even
stricter nutritional standards, and they help manufacturers understand the needs of canteens. As a member of the industry team told me,

what we do is look at the NIPs [nutrition information panels], taste test, labeling, and then work with the company and advise them about the barriers in canteens, like the price and the, you know, how usable they are and storable their product is.

These efforts center on the “amber” range of foods. This generally means moving products barely “red” into the “amber” range, for “green” ratings are hard to get and manufacturers of solidly “red” foods find little use in trying to move into the school canteen market anymore. In many ways, then, Healthy Kids helps manufacturers reformulate already highly processed foods, but costs and storage and preparation are important elements that Healthy Kids can shed light on from a canteen’s perspective, too. This process of working with manufacturers, according to one Healthy Kids representative, has helped manufacturers move away from many of the bad practices of years ago.

There is a great deal of interface between these first two major aspects of Healthy Kids’s work, services for the school canteen and manufacturers. One of their biggest projects is the publication of a Buyer’s Guide each year. Manufacturers who are registered members can have their “green” and “amber” products listed in this guide, and schools across Australia—even though Healthy Kids is specifically a New South Wales organization—get a copy. This is an advertising opportunity for industry, of course, but it is also meant as an aid for busy canteen managers, for Healthy Kids has a certification program that ensures canteens of the “green” or “amber” status of the products without their having to read the labels (a service for which manufacturers must pay). Healthy Kids also runs an annual “food expo” trade show that serves the dual purpose of giving manufacturers an opportunity to promote their registered products and providing canteen managers a day of professional development. Healthy Kids also is a contractor for several canteens themselves, which they run as test cases, trying out products and practices that they can then share with members, whether manufacturers or canteen managers.

A third line of work for Healthy Kids is conducting nutrition education programs, focusing the organization on the public health mission of canteens and schools generally. One obvious example is their website, which has comprehensive resources for nutrition information and links to government reports, classroom resources, and marketing materials. They also administer a program called Crunch&Sip in which registered schools provide a snack break for fruits and salad vegetables along with water during the school day. They provide materials to support schools in implementing such programs. They also have worked with a group of “outback GPs”—rural doctors—to bring nutri-
tion education and cooking knowledge to remote, often highly indigenous communities.

One thing Healthy Kids does not do explicitly is advocacy. They have instead, the director told me, a philosophy “to work collaboratively.”

There are many advocacy bodies who try to effect change through brickbat rather than “OK, where’s the middle ground here? What might we do? How can we change what’s happening here?” And so that’s quite an interesting position to be in because it’s about balancing credibility and professionalism in the face of organizations who think you’re only credible if you’re demonizing the food industry...Our philosophy is to try to work cooperatively with all.

Healthy Kids thus treads a fine line between politics and service expertise, trying to be conscious of the multiple stakeholders they are chartered to serve. They cannot be seen to be against public interests, government interests, industry interests, or school canteens’ interests. This is a difficult task given the volatile political nature of school food, but they have been in many regards successful; they are highly regarded nationally and sought out by the government for advice and by the media for commentary, perhaps much more so than any of their other state-level peers.

What The Cases Together Show Us

Each of the three countries outlined and each of the three organizations profiled—School Food Trust, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, and Healthy Kids Association—are different in crucial ways. Each confronts a history and a sociopolitical reality that are unique from the others, and each has adapted strategies and tactics to fit their unique ecology. Still, there are also clear, common lessons that a synthesis of these cases can teach reformers everywhere. I turn to just some of these many possible lessons in this section.

Each Ecology Requires Its Own Unique Reforms

That organizations would have to adapt to satisfy their context might sound obvious, yet the ways in which this happens can provide insight into the complexities of reform. For instance, all three countries evince a strong ideology that food should be made appealing to students so that they will purchase it; in other words, people in these countries generally believe strongly in student choice in neoliberal, market-based terms. (Not all countries have this discourse as a guiding feature; in South Africa’s township feeding scheme discussed in the Introduction, for example, the offerings are almost always a variation of corn-based gruel, and neither students nor parents expect to be given a choice.) Each reform effort above has had to negotiate this student
choice discourse. The School Food Trust had to factor in student appeal because of the monolithic accountability requirement of “meal take up,” and the Trust has thus worked on cafeteria environment and food freshness and appearance. PCRM has had to counter concerns that vegetarian food is unappealing and won’t be cost effective, requiring that they fund research to establish what vegetarian foods are appealing so they can get those on the commodity list. Healthy Kids, finally, has had to consider profitability in an era of dwindling days the canteen is open and ease of preparation in a context of dwindling parent volunteers, and this has led them to work with manufacturers and schools alike to find foods that kids want to buy. Other issues demonstrate that ecologies influence tactics, too. Profit expectations, the relative deference to religious food cultures, tolerance for governments banning foods, relative concern for children in poverty, and many more issues hold tremendous sway over the approaches and strategies that reform organizations use.

Multiple Actors and Levels of Politics Must Be Navigated Simultaneously
From the federal to the local, school food reform efforts must navigate several different terrains simultaneously. Each organization’s reforms has required the cooperation of school food service personnel, students, administrators, teachers, communities, government and industry. Each of these actors has differing interests, sometimes amenable to cooperation but sometimes competing. “Junk” food is a clear case in point. While governments feel pressures from communities in all these countries to restrict food of minimal nutritional value, kids love it and buy it. Their buying it is good for manufacturers and for those educators who get a percentage of the profits from it. Nutritionists and other public health officials, on the other hand, have good reason to worry about the mass profusion of such foods. Reform-oriented organizations are forced to deal with the politics of all of these levels. Healthy Kids, for instance, works with the state government (both the health and education ministries), local schools, federal panels, the media, and manufacturers, all at the same time, and they work carefully to balance these competing political environs.

All Ecologies Have Entrenched Interests and Traditions Resistant to Change
Food politics often involve deeply held and competing beliefs that must be negotiated carefully and with tact—beliefs about the role of government, about food, about poverty, race, and gender, and more. At an individual level, actors must be won to the causes of food reform. Children and adults alike resist
campaigns to limit the foods they love but that aren’t good for them. They also resist campaigns that seem to say, “Your food choices aren’t good (or good enough),” whether in nutritional terms or in cultural ones. The reform organizations in this chapter have had to tread carefully with their arguments, trying not to offend key constituencies in these ways.

More than personal interests are involved, though; institutional and economic interests are also at stake. In highly developed Western countries, food manufacturing, for instance, is a massive industry. In the United States alone, the larger food system involves around 20% of the total workforce and about one trillion dollars (Belasco, 2008, p. 20), and, as discussed in the Introduction to this book, schools make up tens of billions of dollars of this market. Even with this amount of money available, there is more competition than ever for food dollars, and manufacturers thus fight hard to resist bans of their products (Nestle, 2007). Nutrition directors fight against unfunded mandates from government (one of the chief concerns PCRM heard about its Healthy Meals Act). Administrators, too, resist changes to vending or canteen offerings that reduce profits for their schools. All of these interests stand in the way of reform organizations. The School Food Trust, for instance, has had to work to overcome resistance from catering groups, the public, cafeteria staff, and the government to make progress on their mission.

**Bans Are Out of Favor, so Organizations Avoid Them When Possible**

Marion Nestle’s (2007) *Food Politics* shows well what can happen when governments, even with solid health information to back them, urge people to “eat less.” Agriculture and manufacturing groups—not to mention their governmental allies—resist such messages vociferously. This is perhaps especially true in the United States, where libertarianism and a deference to business interests is perhaps stronger than in the UK or Australia. This is why the PCRM has advocated for increasing plant-based options rather than restricting meat and milk.

In Australia and England, in contrast, each of the government-led reform efforts has included the restriction or banning of certain food items, particularly soft drinks. (Some school districts in the United States have done this, too, but this has not happened at the federal level.) Increasingly, though, the language of the School Food Trust and Healthy Kids materials mirrors the notions of “limiting” rather than banning. The traffic light system that Healthy Kids works with, for instance, does not prohibit red foods; it merely says they can be served only occasionally (twice per term—eight times a year). Loose enforcement, though—a clear sign of the reticence of governments to ban products—has kept many of the “banned” foods on the menu in dining halls.
halls and canteens in both countries. This was a constant source of work and frustration for both the School Food Trust and Healthy Kids.

**Funding for Food Reform Is Often Tenuous**

Most groups involved in school food reform, including those listed here, have tenuous funding situations. They must work hard to stay solvent. Being outside the government (or at least only loosely affiliated, sometimes working in symbiosis), school food reform groups are less able to guarantee their own funding and, thus, their long-term survival. Success, sensibility, and hard work, furthermore, does not ensure survival. This is true of both organizations, like the School Food Trust, and legislation efforts, like PCRM’s Healthy Meals Act, where their efforts are entropying or coming to no fruition. For Healthy Kids, their future is currently more stable, but this may have more to do with being a membership-based organization that also provides paid services. They make their own money, and not just from the goodwill of like-minded members of the public (like PCRM must). Even Healthy Kids, though, must work to ensure it stays relevant to its members. As the School Food Trust moves toward paid services, they will face the same pressures.

**Money Is Almost Always the Core Issue**

Not only is the survival of reform organizations themselves dependent on funding, but the progress of particular reforms often center on money. The varied profit requirements of food service programs often require that they operate on razor thin margins, so any changes to the program must be proven cost-effective. Also, because of the massive numbers of children being fed, particularly in the United States and England, small improvements to meal services require substantial increases in public funding. As just one example, a mere six cents increase in per-meal reimbursement rates for U.S. schools in the recent reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act (alongside some other minor changes) was going to require a $4.5 billion increase in allocations over the next five years. Making more substantial improvements to school food, seen in the context of recessions, constant economic crisis, and widespread antipathy toward taxes and government, is thus politically difficult. Those who would reform school food, then, must either scale back their ambitions or they must find the money (and other inputs) to realize their ideas.

**There Is a Strong Focus on Assisting Frontline Staff**

All the reform organizations in this study rightly focused on helping those who have to implement feeding programs, the cafeteria staff and food service
directors. Though their relationships with frontline workers has not been without tensions (particularly for the School Food Trust), these are the people—because of the relative autonomy (or, adaptive decentralization) of local kitchens in deciding menus and procurement—who must be won over to school food reform. The PCRM works with child nutrition professionals in individual schools and districts to help them include plant-based options and to figure out ways to order them cost effectively. The School Food Trust trains cooks on how to prepare scratch food, a challenge given the deskilling wrought by the reheat-and-eat culture of the previous decades. And both the School Food Trust and Healthy Kids work directly with canteen managers and schools in meeting the government guidelines for nutrition. All of these professional development activities are vital, for without assistance many child nutrition providers would be capable of little more than the status quo; reform, on the other hand, requires new ways of thinking and acting.

Marketing Is Key

All of the reform organizations mentioned here have as one of their main focuses the promotion of their own agendas as well as the promotion of healthier eating in schools (however each defines that). Each focuses on those tasks quite well. For all, media exposure, whether traditional or online social media, was used as a tool to get their messages to their constituents and audiences. The PCRM, for example, got media exposure for their issues from their advertising and celebrity endorsements, but they also leveraged online technology well for fundraising. Hosting live events are clearly important, as well, for Healthy Kids runs a food expo to suit the needs of both canteen workers and manufacturers, PCRM puts on the dinner for attendees at the School Nutrition Association conference, and the School Food Trust has participated widely in cook trainings and conferences. Each organization also makes materials available on nutrition, ideas for cafeteria staff and directors, and materials to urge students to eat at the school (like the School Food Trust’s High School Musical 3 posters lauding the benefits of school dinners). Such coordination and saturation of messages keeps school food on the public radar and increases sales, a requisite for all the food service programs they work with. All three countries, moreover, are advertising-heavy environments, with particularly intensive marketing to children and teens; without marketing of its own, school meals could get drowned out in the din of commercial products.
Research Is Key

Each of the reform organizations covered here had as a challenge the need to communicate the importance of school food reform to the public, policymakers, some school administrators, food service professionals, and students. One means of argumentation they all chose was research, though of varying kinds. Healthy Kids began running their own canteens, partly as a means of testing out their reform ideas; this gave them more credibility, they felt, in working with other canteens because they could talk from experience rather than just “ivory tower” knowledge. PCRM, on the other hand, made USDA research on best practices a cornerstone of the Healthy School Meals Act, partly as a means of reassuring politicians and school nutrition directors that their plant-based options were feasible within the constraints of the program. The School Food Trust conducted its own research on links between school food and student performance, largely as a means of justifying the time, attention, and money being spent on reforms. Overall, each organization was seeking legitimation of their own ideas as a means of encouraging support and funding.

Working with Industry Is Complicated but Crucial

There is a strong sense among all three reform groups that no stakeholder is solely to blame for the state of school food and, following from that understanding, that no one sector can fix it or can be fixed so that all the problems will go away. Even the most arguably radical of the groups, PCRM, took a highly collaborative approach, wanting to work with those who disagree with them to see how they could overcome difficulties. They carefully crafted their approach, too, seeking out ways to make reform easy and profitable; for example, they worked closely with the USDA and food service directors on developing the Healthy School Meals Act, getting their ideas, advice, and best practices for how to make the act passable. More strident groups might have instead asked for regulation and mandates, no matter the impact on frontline staff. Overall, these three groups tended to look for the complexities of their cultures’ food ecologies, and they believed that it would take work from all the various sectors—industry, government, food service, schools, and individuals—to turn around school feeding. Vilification of industry was generally eschewed, though industry did get its share of what criticism it deserved from these groups. PCRM, for example, urged manufacturers of vegetarian products to lower their prices—most of which are set artificially high for middle-class, health conscious shoppers—so that schools can better afford them. Healthy Kids and the School Food Trust also work with manufacturers on how to
reformulate their products to meet nutrition reforms’ pressures on schools. Many manufacturers have responded well, partly because it is in their financial interests to do so.

Conclusion

In sum, food reformers in the United States, Australia, and England exist in ecologies that are ever-changing but also tied to their histories. They are subject to multiple policies (health, agriculture, procurement, education, and more), but they often deal with ambiguous or nonexistent enforcement mechanisms. Each also works with multiple actors at multiple levels, and each is confronted with cultures that are at times amenable to change and at other times are fiercely resistant to healthier or more just eating practices. Because of these complexities they face every day, food reform organizations’ survival and success are always in question. There is much that we can learn from them about food reform, including the practices they have implemented, the solutions they’ve proposed, and even the barriers and failures they’ve encountered along the way. Looking across these contexts in that way can give other reformers insight into new means of creating progressive food reform in their own contexts.

Note

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