

The Historical Perspective

Lunchtime: How the School Lunch Program Began

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The breakfast and lunch programs in public schools have become the subject of heightened political debate. On one side, high-profile advocates such as Michelle Obama have called for higher nutritional standards. “We owe it to the children who aren’t reaching their potential because they’re not getting the nutrition they need during the day,” argues the first lady. On the opposing side, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin has complained that restricted school lunch menus are another example of the “nanny state run amok,” an excessive intervention into how parents raise their children. Though this debate continues to make headlines, the issues at stake are not new. In New York City, the effort to provide relief for childhood hunger and questions over how best to feed undernourished children go back well over 100 years.

Throughout the nineteenth century in New York, child hunger was inseparable from the larger problems of urban poverty. Both private charities and the city government provided food assistance to the poor as part of broader relief programs, often in the form of temporary grants for food and fuel. On the rare occasions that food was provided on a standalone basis, it was often through government-sponsored soup kitchens, like

one constructed with money from the New York City Common Council in 1806. When relief was targeted specifically at hungry and malnourished children, it was administered through the family. Child care, most reformers thought, should be under the purview of parents. Since it is the “responsibility of the family” to meet “the personal needs of children,” wrote Edward T. Devine, head of New York’s Charity Organization Society, most people “prefer to see the relief of children remain an integral part of the general relief system,” which focused on family-based, rather than individual support.

Yet by the turn of the twentieth century, it appeared that relief to the family was not effective in keeping hungry children fed. To tackle the issue, some charities began to experiment with new programs. The Children’s Aid Society, for example, served lunches to the children who attended their industrial schools as early as the 1890s. “They are so poor,” one journalist said of these children, “that they are but half clad, and in many cases depend on the school lunches for meals.” Other organizations offered “penny lunches,” a program made popular in cities like Milwaukee and Chicago in which hot soup and coffee were provided to children

who lived in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. In most cases, however, children were forced to rely on what they received at home, which was too often inadequate. As reformer Robert Hunter lamented in 1904, “There must be thousands—very likely sixty or seventy thousand children—in New York City alone who often arrive at school hungry and unfitted to do well the work required. ... This curse which poverty lays upon innocent children is an awful one.”

Indeed, as investigation upon investigation showed, children were still showing signs of undernourishment. In 1906, a group calling itself the Committee on

In keeping with the goal of providing highly nutritious meals, cafeteria workers were often professionally trained in the field of home economics. Here, two workers dressed in uniforms serve a group of schoolchildren. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.



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Physical Welfare of School Children organized an investigation of 1,400 schoolchildren to check for “physical defects” and malnourishment. The group concluded that many of the shocking number of defects they found—from poor eyesight to enlarged glands—could be traced to an unsatisfactory diet. Around the same time, a well-publicized news story began to circulate, claiming that a New York City schoolgirl told her teacher she “hated” God because, “He makes us hungry—and mamma hadn’t any bread for our breakfast!” Dramatic evidence like this did much to ignite interest in providing more sustained and far-reaching food relief for children.

Responding to the discord, then-New York City superintendent of schools William H. Maxwell called together a committee of

Boys pose for a photograph during their lunch period. While the National School Lunch Program was generally popular, images like these, which showed children happy and healthy after a meal, helped promote the program as an important solution in alleviating child hunger. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

well-known social reformers in 1909 to experiment with a lunch program in two of the city’s poorest public schools. Committee member Lillian Wald, head of Henry Street Settlement on the city’s Lower East Side, heralded the decision by commenting that, “The need of the school lunch has been again recognized; it is not a revolutionary measure ... but rather an evolution of the measures adopted for child nurture to the end of securing the highest efficiency of the responsible adult citizen.” The committee lost no time in introducing a three-cent lunch at PS 21 on

Mott Street and PS 51 on Forty-fourth and Tenth Avenue. Within 18 months, the committee agreed that the introduction of its nourishing midday meal, “calculated so you get the proper number of calories without your bothering about it,” had helped improve the academic performance of the majority of students served. “Armed with facts and figures,” as one newspaper report on the program’s success put it, “the committee is ready to prove its case. And they will doubtless ask, ‘What are you going to do about it?’”

What was done was, in fact, limited. The School Lunch Committee was rewarded for its effort with an expansion of the program to other public schools, but not to all. Some funding came from the city’s Board of Education, but more came from the sale of lunches and from either monetary or in-kind donations from voluntary organizations. PS 63 on the Lower East Side, for example, provided lunches with the help of the school’s Wednesday Neighborhood Club, while the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor provided hot lunches at 49 public schools throughout the city, estimating that it had served nearly two million portions in just one year. Not until the 1919–20 school year did the Board of Education take full fiscal responsibility for all programs in Manhattan and the Bronx. Finally, in 1921, school lunches became available in all the city’s boroughs. In doing so, New York joined several other school districts across the country—such as Philadelphia, Boston, and Cleveland—that provided lunches to children.

By most indications, the program was a success. Mabel Kittredge, who had chaired the School Lunch Committee, boasted in 1926 that through school lunch programs, not only did children receive required nutrients, but also that “a spirit of service and real democracy is developed.” Less than a decade later, an investigation into the impact of school lunches on one thousand New York City public school children showed similar results, noting “differences in growth due to economic and social conditions were evidently

erased by the school lunch.” In other words, school lunches were credited with creating physical parity between the poor and the better-off, which the investigators believed would translate to better academic performance overall. By 1935, the federal government involved itself in the program, providing surplus commodities to school lunch programs as part of the New Deal’s Federal Emergency Relief Administration. And in 1946, federal funding for school lunches became standard when Congress established the National School Lunch Program.

Even in its earliest versions, school lunch programs were subject to criticism. For some, the food lacked variety and fresh options. For others, school lunch was considered an unsettling form of welfare that spotlighted the needy and was, therefore, undemocratic. Still others worried that lunches at school took authority away from parents, who might have had different ideas about what constituted a healthy meal. Today, over a century later, debate continues about the proper role of government in feeding school children. But with 30 million children now receiving subsidized meals through the National School Lunch Program and 13 states now experimenting with serving dinner at school, the use of school-based meals as a tool to fight childhood hunger seems unlikely to disappear. As one school lunch program advocate has said, “hunger is,” after all, “bipartisan.” ■



Milk has long been a staple of the school lunch. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.