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Remedial eating: Many school cafeterias need a nutritional makeover

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Break into almost any school lunch line and you might think you're in Candy Land. Trays filled with reheated frozen pizza or chicken nuggets, pale mushy fruit chunks punctuating clots of Jello, that fast-food staple greasy tater tots, and syrupy chocolate milk processed with fake chocolate and real sugar--lots of it.

Some once-green vegetable, boiled into surrendering nutrients, may lie limp for choosing, and maybe there's an actual apple to pluck out of a pail. But greens stand little chance against grease.

Although school food is largely supplied by U.S. Department of Agriculture programs, foods recommended by the USDA for human consumption--nutrient-bearing fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and fiber-rich foods--are almost entirely absent. In fact, a recent USDA study found that more than two-thirds of school lunches exceed its own standards for maximum total fat and saturated fat intake.

Non-nutrient fillers crowd out essential vitamins and minerals, which are not adequately replaced by fortification. Even that lunch staple chicken nuggets is a misnomer. Typically, chicken is less than 50 percent of the content; most is filler, although it all counts as one "meat serving."

About 70 percent of the nation's public and private schools K-12, encompassing more than 31 million children a day, participate in the nationally funded School Lunch Program. More than 17 million of them come from low-income families. A school lunch may be their only opportunity to consume necessary nutrients.

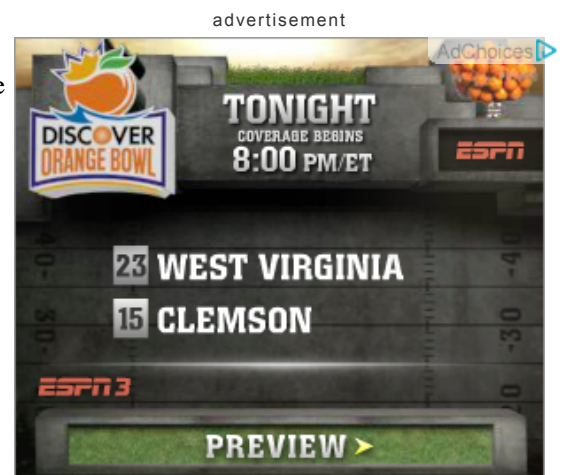
"Schools set an example in everything they do," says Marion Nestle, a professor of public health and nutrition at New York University. "Unhealthy food served in schools encourages kids to think that eating these foods is normal and to take in more calories than they need." What's more, sugar-filled foods follow students into the classroom: "If kids are jumping off the walls, they can't learn," she adds. "Kids need decent food to be able to sit still for lessons."

Around the U.S., a wild assortment of teachers, parents, chefs, nutritionists, and even physicians are fed up with school cafeteria offerings and see them feeding the epidemic of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and behavior problems increasingly affecting America's kids. Taking matters into their own hands, they're developing fresh ways to bring "decent food" into many of the nation's schools.

While there's no coordinated national initiative to change the school lunch menu, activists share a common goal--to decrease consumption of fats, sugars, sodium, and additives while introducing far more appealing, and far more real, food.

Say hello to salad bars, school gardens (the best known started by Chez Panisse doyenne Alice Waters in Berkeley, CA), famous chefs in school kitchens, and nutrition lessons embedded in chemistry classes. The cafeteria is even being retooled as a cooking classroom.

Nancy Easton is a former principal in New York City, home of the nation's largest school system. "Kids would bring Doritos and soda for breakfast and eat processed food in the cafeteria for lunch," she reports. "I saw firsthand the impact of poor diet on their



ability to learn; after lunch, they were unfocused and had a variety of behavior problems," she notes.

In 2005, Easton cofounded Wellness in the Schools (WITS), an organization that works with the city's Department of Education to remove processed foods from cafeterias and get students involved in lunch preparation. "If a kid is involved in preparing a meal, she'll get more excited about eating it," she says.

After attending a WITS parent presentation at his daughter's school, chef and restaurateur Bill Telepan signed on to help create healthy menus and connect other chefs to the program. Borrowing successful strategies from Teach for America, WITS now sends new culinary school graduates into school kitchens to create nutrient-dense dishes like vegetable chili while sticking to budget constraints.

Cooking techniques are explored in science labs, where preparation of salad dressing is part of a lesson on the chemistry of emulsions. Interested parents can attend evening demonstrations on how to prepare healthy food at home.

Lunch first entered the nation's schools in the 19th century to provide a free meal to children living in poverty. Federal funding was tied to helping ailing farms by buying surplus commodities. Today, school lunches are required to meet federal nutrition standards, but so much gets lost in interpretation of guidelines that a tray of hot dog, chocolate milk, and french fries passes as perfectly healthy.

Many foods are delivered precooked and need only reheating by unskilled staff. Foods not provided by federal programs are available for purchase. Most cater to appetites bred on fast food--salty pretzels coated in melted cheese, even direct imports from Taco Bell and Subway.

Some schools are starting with small but significant changes. Simply rescheduling recess before lunch gives students time to eat and move. Using whole-wheat hot dog buns gets needed fiber into food.

"Better food improves academic performance mostly by helping kids stay full longer, which keeps them focused longer," says Danielle Hollar, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Miami. "High-fiber foods release energy slowly, in contrast to high-sugar foods, which give a short burst of energy. Good proteins, as in lean meats and nuts, improve brain function. The kids feel better and have fewer bellyaches."

Hollar is testing the effects of an elementary school nutrition program known as Healthier Options for Public School, or HOPS. Involving 13,000 children at 23 schools in central Florida and Buffalo, New York, HOPS introduces high-fiber, whole grain, and low-sugar foods through the schools' existing supply chains. School gardens produce often-unfamiliar foods like sweet potatoes.

And kids learn about the value of good foods from in-school lesson plans and optional books and toys featuring characters like Hardy Heart, Sir Rebrum, and Calci M. Bone, the so-called Organ Wise Guys created independently with funding from the Kellogg Foundation. "Kids need to be educated about healthy food or they won't consume it," says Hollar.

Unlike most new lunch programs, HOPS assesses actual outcomes. Hollar finds that the program improves health and math and reading tests scores, the biggest changes registered among the poorest, most high-risk students.

LUNCH LOGIC

Although laws created school lunch programs, and President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010 to boost the reimbursement schools get for lunches, laws alone won't change what kids eat, insists Brian Wansink, director of the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University. Wansink, in fact, is less concerned about changing the foods served in cafeterias than about getting kids to eat the healthy foods that are already there but often hidden. He finds that "very small changes in lunchrooms can dramatically improve what children eat."

In one school, moving a salad bar a mere 10 feet so students had to walk around it tripled salad consumption. Placing apples in attractive jars dramatically improved their appeal. Moving chocolate milk behind healthier plain milk and giving healthy dishes tantalizing names-- "creamy corn" instead of just plain "corn"--are just some of his tricks.

"If you tell a school lunch director to start serving different food, she'll say, 'Hey, I've been here 25 years and you're telling me what to do?'" Wansink says. "But if we suggest two low-cost or no-cost changes each year, we can have a big impact very quickly, without disempowering anyone."

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