



MILK MONEY

From pepperoni pizza and hamburgers to chicken fingers and French fries, lunch at your average American school could be on the menu of a fast-food restaurant. VegNews writer **MARLA ROSE** uncovers how lobbyists are dictating what our children eat when we send them off to school, and what we can do to fuel America's future with healthy options.

Pepperoni pizza, hot dogs, Buffalo chicken wraps, and meatloaf with gravy could easily make the list of “no-no” foods spewed by a cardiologist—along with a prescription for heart medication and warnings about a lifetime of ailments. Even the carnivores among us can recognize that these nutritionally void foods are the causes of many ailments plaguing our country, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and obesity.



But in addition to clogging the arteries of millions of adult Americans each year, these foods are clogging something even more precious: the hearts of our children. Across the country, our kids are being fed dangerously unhealthy food while big corporations are cashing in.

Staggeringly, these fat-laden foods are just a sampling of a typical lunch offering on any given day at many public schools across America. Most likely, your kids are eating these foods, too, playing their role in the financial bottom line responsible for making sure that the next generation winds up just as sick as the one before. Big Food’s agenda—manipulating our children as a way to make big money—might be difficult to digest, but it’s as American as apple pie.

Substandard meals are a dismal reminder that American schools—similar to so many other national institutions—are heavily influenced by lobbyists who care more about dollar signs than the health of our students. Add clandestine business negotiations and marketing that strategically targets impressionable young minds, and there are real reasons to fear that students’ nutrition is being pushed aside in favor of political maneuvering.

Master marketers

Today, public schools sell branded fast food such as the nutritionally void Domino’s, Chick-fil-A, and McDonald’s. This corporate sway and impeccable advertising calls directly to the taste buds of hungry kids who are short on time and under immense peer pressure. But the problem doesn’t end there. Food service in American schools is a complex series of governmental and corporate partnerships that buttress agribusiness. In other words, every time your favorite seventh-grader buys a McMuffin, Big Ag gets a kickback.

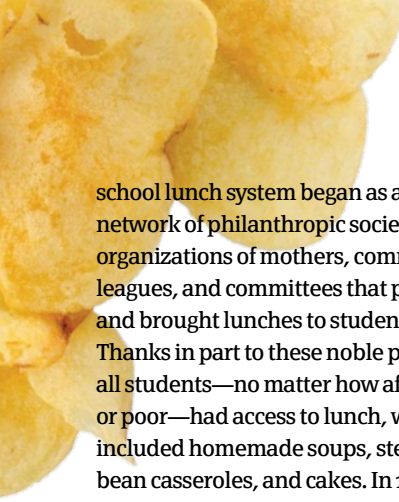
The influence of this industry runs far beyond what’s for lunch. In an average American classroom or cafeteria, for example, it’s not uncommon for bright posters to line the walls, ostensibly to “educate” students about nutrition—but how reliable and unbiased is the messaging? Common posters include those provided by the heavily corporatized US Department of Agriculture, promoting dairy and touting that milk is “building strong bones.” Others encourage children to “Launch Your Day with Breakfast,” featuring an excited girl flying far above the cafeteria table, eagerly clutching a carton of milk.

Inquiring minds want to learn, and students are the perfect prey for advertisers. According to the Federal Trade Commission, food and beverage companies spent \$149 million on marketing in schools in 2009, a number that is only increasing. Considering the food culture in which kids are immersed, it comes as no surprise that in 2012, the number of obese children was double what it was in 1980, while the obese adolescent population is four times the number it was back then.

When it comes to force-feeding advertising campaigns to students, the irony is astounding. While schools scramble for funds and teachers are expected to reach into their own pockets for classroom expenses, administrations increasingly rely on free “educational” material offered by special-interest groups. As a result, cafeterias across the country act as a hub where well-funded lobbies, political patronage, and federal departments intersect. Something smells fishy—and for once it’s not a McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish.

The birth of the lunch lady

This “new normal” of using our students as bait for a mechanized system has not always been on the menu. Similar to European countries, the American



school lunch system began as a loose network of philanthropic societies, organizations of mothers, community leagues, and committees that purchased and brought lunches to students. Thanks in part to these noble programs, all students—no matter how affluent or poor—had access to lunch, which included homemade soups, stews, bean casseroles, and cakes. In 1894, a Philadelphia school began selling penny lunches, which helped kick-start the long, expensive process of transferring food operation responsibilities from charitable organizations to municipal education boards.

The Great Depression of the 1930s gave rise to mass unemployment in America, which led to a growing population that could not afford to eat. Hungry Americans turned to their government for help, which in turn looked to farmers to supply food for the needy. Suddenly, the nation had a glut of food due to reduced incomes and spending, which caused agricultural prices to decline to the point where farmers—many of whom had also been economically devastated by the Dust Bowl—were struggling. Simultaneously, children from poor families were becoming malnourished, a new problem that led to the creation of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation (FSCC) in 1933. In order to help floundering farmers and starving children, the FSCC served surplus foods such as wheat, dairy, and pork as part of school lunches. This gave farmers a steady, reliable income from the government while guaranteeing students a hot meal at school. A win-win, or was it?

Two years later, the Works Progress Administration, under President Franklin Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal program,

began hiring thousands of people—primarily women—as bakers, cooks, clerks, menu developers, sanitation workers, and supervisors to help with the demanding endeavor of ensuring that schools were properly equipped to feed students. And thus, the lunch lady was born.

Mandated food rationing during World War II reduced school meal surpluses from 454 million pounds in 1942 to 93 million in 1944, but the wartime cuts and scrambling were short-lived. When World War II ended in 1945, President Harry Truman and the 79th Congress signed the National School Lunch Act into law, a monumental achievement resulting in the formation of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

Upon signing the legislation, Truman said, "In the National School Lunch Act, Congress has contributed immeasurably both to the welfare of our farmers and the health of our children." The NSLP had good intentions when it attempted to make free or low-cost lunches available to all participating schools: meals were created on-site in cafeteria kitchens, and included items such as cooked cereal grains, salted meats, creamed vegetables, stewed fruit, and whatever else the home economics-trained lunchroom managers could devise. But when it came to the long-term sustainability of the goals set forth by the NSLP, Truman's sentiments wound up being little more than famous last words.

Faster food

Throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, the quality of cafeteria food became less and less of a priority. Any remnants of a commitment to children's health and well-being quickly dwindled as funding continued to drop—along with the care that, decades earlier, had been at the forefront of the movement to nourish students.

In the late 1970s, school administrators turned to the private sector to keep cafeteria meals affordable. Federal school lunches were still comprised of "familiar" foods, frequently consisting of hamburgers, fish sticks, cheese pizzas, and fruit pies created in school kitchens. This familiarity changed radically when Congress gave the USDA 90 days to cut \$1 billion from child nutrition funding to reduce spending without compromising nutrition. The turnover needed to be quick and efficient.

Almost overnight, meals cooked on-premises shifted to pre-made lunches from large food suppliers. When more budget cuts forced a 25-percent decrease to 1982's Federal School Lunch Program, the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service clambered to implement funding reductions while maintaining nutritional standards. Once again, costs decreased, along with any hope of good nutrition, taste, or much satisfaction.

Today, with a population that has grown to nearly 31 million students receiving NSLP lunches in more than 100,000 schools, it's easy to see why economies of scale and standardization have replaced so many of the less-efficient school cafeteria-created meals many adults remember. Introducing processed food into schools has resulted in an environment in which Frito-Lay is allowed to serve 5 million students 30 varieties of chips. Similarly, Tyson Foods—with more than 10 brands feeding into the NSLP—can have brand representation with everything from Jimmy Dean pancakes and sausages to State Fair corn dogs.

Milk money

There are few better examples of the entrenched power of animal agribusiness

CORPORATE CUISINE

Walk into many American school cafeterias, and there's a good chance you'll see fast food on the menu. Here are some of the corporate brands found on lunch trays today at K-12 schools.



than how the dairy industry has permeated the NSLP. Despite the fact that as many as one-third of US school-aged children are lactose intolerant or have dairy allergies, soy milk is considered the only acceptable nutritional equivalent to cow's milk. Access to dairy-free milk has been denied due to a marketing division of the USDA known as Dairy Management, Inc. (DMI). Dedicated to promoting US dairy products funded by the fees accrued through checkoff programs—which pools resources from dairy producers to develop new markets, strengthen existing markets, and conduct

collaboration with McDonald's has added up to 80 percent more milk to coffees, while the addition of three new cheeseburger varieties has resulted in six million more pounds of cheese sold.

Big Dairy is a dangerously powerful industry. Because of DMI's deep-pocketed lobby, many schools require a doctor's note in order to receive soy milk. If avoidance of dairy is not deemed medically necessary, schools are not required to offer an alternative.

The special treatment of the dairy industry doesn't stop there. With a \$50

required with each meal. After all, milk does a bottom line good.

The politics of tomato paste

All hope is not lost, however, as there are campaigns to improve school lunches at the institutional level. A Michelle Obama initiative called the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) has raised the nutritional profile of school lunches with efforts such as increasing the amount of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains served; reducing sodium and saturated fat; and allowing only low-fat or non-fat dairy

A slice of pizza with 10 grams of fat, five grams of saturated fat, 25 milligrams of cholesterol, 650 milligrams of sodium, and just two grams of dietary fiber could be considered a complete vegetable serving.

research and promotions—DMI serves as a financial kitty while working to develop menu items at schools and fast-food restaurants that increase the amount of dairy on people's plates.

Overseeing more than 20 boards—including the egg, lamb, beef, dairy, pork, watermelon, raspberry, soybean, and peanut industries—these checkoff programs are responsible for popular advertising campaigns such as "Got Milk?," "Pork: The Other White Meat," and "Beef. It's What's for Dinner." These popularized programs provide \$557 million for promoting meat, dairy, and egg sales (compared with \$51 million for fruit and vegetables), and for each dollar invested in a checkoff, many more come back through increased sales. By partnering with Domino's Pizza, for example, the dairy industry has developed pizzas that use up to 40 percent more cheese. A

million annual budget from the checkoff program and the ability to evade bans imposed on other sugary drinks, the dairy industry has successfully lobbied to keep chocolate milk and other sweetened milks in school cafeterias. And according to the numbers, they know what they're doing, as sales of plain milk have dropped 35 percent when flavored milks are served in its place.

During the 2013–2014 school year, more than \$20 million in taxpayer dollars went into the USDA's dairy purchases for the NSLP to increase milk's public prominence after numerous reports showed that milk consumption was decreasing. In order to save their industry, groups such as the International Dairy Foods Association and the National Milk Producers Federation have turned to government assistance for subsidies that go to child nutrition programs, making sure that milk is

milk (notably, dairy-free milk is still far off the radar).

The First Lady's proposal has been met with resistance not only from unimpressed students disappointed by changing menus but also cafeteria professionals as well. According to Micheline Piekarski, director of food and nutrition services at Oak Park & River Forest High School in Chicago, the new federal standards brought complications that were challenging to decipher and implement, even for a 25-year veteran. "I had a mother call me who wanted a vegan burger for her sons at lunch," Piekarski says, "and I found a vendor with a veggie burger who could supply it. It took weeks of going back and forth with the supplier and waiting for responses to determine if all the ingredients were vegan. Then I found out that it wasn't clear if the protein content aligned with the two-ounce (government) requirement."



Free Money

By the end of 1946, the National School Lunch Program had approximately 7.1 million participants and cost \$70 million. During the 2012 fiscal year, more than 31.6 million students participated, which came at a cost of \$11.6 billion. Here's where some of that money went.

\$500 million

paid to 62 meat and dairy companies, which sell its products to the USDA, which then sells food to schools at a discounted rate

→ Tyson Foods
\$89 million

← Pilgrim's Pride Corporation
\$70 million

→ Cherry Meat Packers Co.
\$56 million

← Central Valley Meat Co.
\$43 million

→ American Beef Packers
\$42 million

← Jennie-O Turkey Store
\$31 million

Piekarski's problem—and the issue for many others in her position—is that serving a meal that's not in alignment with HHFKA requirements could backfire if she were to be audited. Every component of each meal has to meet the nutrition benchmarks, and if they don't, the USDA will not reimburse the school. So many people don't even try.

The HHFKA was also met with resistance from food suppliers such as frozen food giant Schwan Food Company, which manufactures a reported 70 percent of pizza served in US schools. Prior to HHFKA, pepperoni pizza counted as a whole reimbursable meal due to a contentious loophole regarding tomato paste. According to these standards, a slice of pizza with

serving healthy foods and supporting schools with additional funding and technical assistance."

With schools annually purchasing more than \$450 million worth of pizza alone, the industry was not giving up without a fight. Schwan, along with more than a dozen food companies—including huge competitors such as ConAgra—created a counter-lobbying organization called the Coalition for Sustainable School Meals to fight the new HHFKA's tightening of the tomato paste loophole. Lobbyists found both Democratic and Republican lawmakers to petition on their behalf, including Senator Amy Klobuchar from Schwan's home state of Minnesota.

The pizza lobbyists won. Thanks to Congress passing a revised agriculture

"If children aren't learning how to eat healthfully at home, and the plate at school looks like the plate at home, where do we break the cycle?"

10 grams of fat, five grams of saturated fat, 25 milligrams of cholesterol, 650 milligrams of sodium, and just two grams of dietary fiber could be considered a complete vegetable serving. But under HHFKA guidelines, two tablespoons of tomato paste on pizza was not considered a half-cup vegetable serving, and pizza would no longer be a reimbursable NSLP meal.

This change created an expensive revenue problem for food purveyors seeking lucrative school lunchroom contracts, explains Margo Wootan, director of Nutrition Policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)—a health advocacy organization that strongly supported the HHFKA bill. Turns out it was a move in the right direction. "CSPI coordinates the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity, which led the effort to pass the HHFKA," Wootan says. "We strongly supported the bill, which got junk food out of school vending machines, improved school meals by updating the standards, and increased accountability and compliance measures. That's led to more schools

appropriations bill in 2011 in response to the stricter HHFKA guidelines, pizza is now considered a vegetable—and, once again, a reimbursable food by the United States government.

Slow change

In addition to the advantages of getting industry interests out of our school meals, there are clear benefits to emphasizing foods that are abundant in plant nutrients. Obesity has doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents during the past 30 years, putting young people at an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, several types of cancer, and social isolation.

"Look at what is on a typical lunch tray: chicken nuggets, milk, nachos, and other unhealthful products," says Susan Levin, director of nutrition education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "Most school meals exceed recommendations for total fat, saturated fat, and sodium, and are woefully devoid of fiber. If children aren't learning how to eat healthfully at home, and the plate at school looks like the plate at home, where



do we break the cycle?"

One way is to change the way students think about food. That was the impetus for Amie Hamlin, executive director of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF), to create the Cool School Food pilot program—which develops, tests, and implements plant-based, whole-food recipes in school cafeterias. Even though their efforts have indeed “changed the culture of the school,” Hamlin says, this positive step has been met with frustrating resistance from administrators. When the CHSF helped the first two public, non-charter schools in the country adopt 100-percent plant-based menus—a feat Hamlin says she “never imagined” would happen—the organization had to use the word “vegetarian” rather than “vegan” due to administrative red tape.

“It would take an Act of Congress, literally, to change the fact that milk must be offered,” Hamlin explains. “It is a myth, however, that it must be served. We only promote vegan entrées, and we are always working to see more included.”

Doing her best to make sure that no child is without access to healthy meals, another pioneer creating a new culture in schools is Antonia Demas, PhD, with the Food Studies Institute (FSI), a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to improving the health of children through a model of “food-based solutions.” Since earning her degree at Cornell University to lend scientific credence to the importance of food literacy, Demas has been working in classrooms with a curriculum she created called Food is Elementary (FiE)—a plant-based, hands-on program that educates school children (and the adults working with them) about nutritious food.

In Demas’ classes, children are introduced to a variety of plant foods. FiE students prepare and eat meals such as pasta fagioli—inspired by their lesson on Italy—and couscous and African stew from their unit on North Africa. Demas has observed that once any initial reticence is behind them, students can blossom into surprisingly passionate foodies.

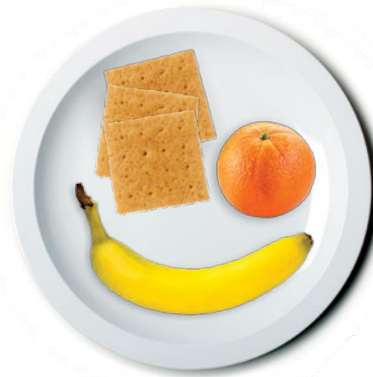
“Once students start eating and cooking,” Demas says, “that’s all they want to do. It’s irrational to assume that

Lunch Line

Since its post-World War II origins, school lunches have gone through a shift in attitudes regarding the definition of “good nutrition.” Sadly, this definition hasn’t changed much during the past 30 years or so. Here’s what young people could expect on their lunch plates 100 years ago compared to what students are eating today.

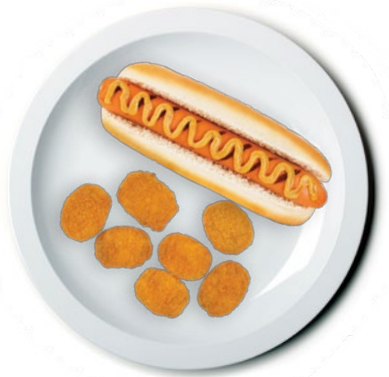
100 years ago

Hot sandwiches, baked sweet potatoes, oranges, bananas, graham crackers, rice pudding



Today

Fish nuggets, chicken tenders, hot dogs, pepperoni pizza, hamburgers, mashed potatoes with gravy, chocolate milk



kids will eat unfamiliar foods without positive sensory-based education about those foods.”

Ripping off the mustache

There are seemingly insurmountable obstacles standing in the way of better school lunches, including federal subsidies, slow-to-change taste preferences, corporate machinations, and limitations in access depending on affluence (inner-city schools are generally not the ones with abundant salad bars and organic gardens). But there are signs of hope that school lunches can improve, as reformers are using innovation, determination, and a relentless commitment to affect change that will transform the health of our nation’s youth.

The first step is to stop accepting what corporations are literally banking on—our willful ignorance with a side of fried complacency. In order for school lunches to improve, we need a multipronged approach, and it starts with taking the focus off corporations and putting it back on the individuals who are the real victims in this corporate takeover of cafeteria

Football Fumble

Dairy checkoff-funded groups have partnered with the National Football League (NFL), which brings its players to schools to coax children into drinking milk through its “Fuel Up to Play 60” and “It Starts with Breakfast” campaigns. Created by the National Dairy Council and mega-dairy Dean Foods, these programs encourage participation in the School Breakfast program, which is part of the NSLP, with the aim of getting students to drink more milk. All 32 NFL teams participate in the program, and more than 1,300 school visits from football players have taken place since the program launched in 2007.

trays: our children, who are most certainly hungry for more. **VN**

Marla Rose (veganstreet.com) is a writer, event planner, and mother in the Chicago area who makes pretty darn good lunches without obligatory cartons of milk.