

HEALTHY SCHOOLS/HEALTHY COMMUNITIES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS

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Food for Kids – and Pigeons

The food environment at Gratts Elementary school in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles, as with many other low-income schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, leaves much to be desired. At Gratts, 97% of the students are Latino and 90% qualify for a free or reduced lunch. On any given day, the lunch menu at the school might consist of pizza, or a cheeseburger on a bun with French fries, and a fruit cup in heavy syrup. And while elementary school students are not allowed to have vending machines on the school grounds, just a few blocks away, at Belmont High School, you could, until recently, buy items like chips, a 20 ounce coke, or a candy bar.

But that's only part of the problem these children face when it comes to their food environment. Prior to this conference, some of the members of our school and community food assessment team had begun to document the food and physical activity resources in the immediate neighborhood around Gratts. Team members, including Belmont High School students, compiled information about food stores and food service places in the community such as store location, store type, restaurant health department grade, and restaurant type, among other information.

On one April afternoon, the food assessors encountered children leaving the Gratts' school grounds just as the buzzer had sounded, ending the school day. As the school children left the building, multiple mobile food vendors, selling a wide selection of sugary candy, chips, sodas, shaved ice, and chicharrones, greeted them. On the other side of the schoolyard there were hot dogs, more chips, chocolate covered frozen bananas, and other high sugar, high fat foods sold from carts and even from a first-floor apartment window. After the team members recorded these food options and made their way onto the next street, they witnessed several pigeons eating graham crackers and peanuts that someone had left for them— their food option. How ironic, team members commented, that the food fed to the pigeons might well have been a bit healthier – or at least not as objectionable -- as some of the choices available to the Gratts students.

Comment: FYI these are similar to fried pork rinds, but I think the most common ones sold on the street are made with a corn or flour dough.

For those elementary school students, the school lunch meal may well represent the only opportunity to have a more nutritious food choice. Even if the school lunch meal is problematic from a nutritional perspective, the choices outside the school cafeteria are often far worse, creating a *healthy food access dilemma*. This problem of the lack of access to healthy food environments, particularly in low-income communities, is often compounded by limited options for physical activity, such as lack of park and open space, reduced physical education activities, or unsafe streets for pedestrians or bicyclists. Unfortunately, an issue like obesity, associated with poor diet and lack of physical

activity, tends to be reduced to a question of *behavior and choice*. However, as our research and intervention strategies indicate, the problem more significantly needs to be focused on the question of *access and environment* – and the community mobilization and policies necessary to address it.

The National School Lunch Program is a good place to start. The origins of the program, in fact, were related to another nutrition-related crisis sixty years ago that presents some interesting parallels – and some significant differences – with today’s obesity and poor nutrition concerns. When the National School Lunch Act was passed in 1946, it was framed primarily as a nutrition-based program. During and shortly after World War II, the US Department of Agriculture had been instrumental in publicizing various studies documenting the health and education problems of military recruits; problems that were traced to Depression-era childhood dietary deficiencies. Of the first one million men called for induction in World War II, forty percent were rejected for general military service on medical grounds. The school lunch program was therefore conceived as serving national security needs as well as nutrition goals. The program’s mission was defined as safeguarding “the health and well-being of the Nation’s children” by “promoting health” and “preventing disease,” while also emphasizing the link between childhood and adult dietary patterns. “What children eat helps determine not only how healthy they are as children, but how healthy they will be as adults,” according to the program’s framing document.ⁱ

Today, however, the original mission of the school lunch program has become significantly compromised due to a number of institutional constraints and outside pressures. To begin with, most school food service departments are now required to generate sufficient revenues to cover costs or return whatever profits they enjoy to the school district’s general fund. Cost savings and bottom line considerations become paramount. For example, for each meal served in the cafeteria, schools obtain about 20% of their food through a federal commodities account that requires the Districts to only pay minimum transportation costs to obtain the food. Commodity purchases in turn may often substitute for fresh and locally sourced items. In addition, food services have increasingly contracted out services to organizations like Sodexo to run their entire school meal program, or have made arrangements with fast food chains like Pizza Hut and Taco Bell to operate on school grounds. In addition, kitchen facilities at individual school sites have been eliminated, further encouraging the use of pre-packaged and highly processed items. The amount of time available for lunch (as well as physical activity) has also been reduced, creating the need for an assembly line approach and quick meal options. And, perhaps most significantly, partly in response to the need to maintain or increase participation rates (revenues are primarily generated by a reimbursement from USDA per student meal), food service departments have increasingly turned to the fast food culture (branded items, fast food-style items like Chicken McNuggets, etc.) to attract students to the cafeteria for their school lunch.ⁱⁱ

Beyond the school cafeteria, individual schools and districts now sell, through vending machines and a la carte offerings, a wide range of junk food options (candy, sodas, cookies) to generate funds, often for extracurricular activities that have been cut back.

These “competitive foods” not only create problems with their sugar and caffeine fixes, but may also substitute for the school lunch. At the community level, schools in low-income neighborhoods experience the double bind of lack of access to fresh and healthy food choices and an overabundance of available fast food and junk food options, many located close to school grounds.

Community and school food environments (what’s available, how the food is marketed, how food choices are framed) have become in recent years the arena for community action and policy initiatives. Alternative school food programs were first developed in the mid-1990s through USDA initiatives in North Carolina and Florida designed to create greater access to the school food market for local farmers. That concept, connecting farmers to schools or *farm to school*, was extended in 1997 with the opening of a farmers’ market salad bar school lunch option in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District in California. Farm to school introduced two revolutionary concepts in the school food area. First, students would choose fresh and tasty fruits and vegetables, if available and given the option; and second, that the mission of school food services should focus primarily on the health and well-being of the children while establishing relationships with local and regional farmers.

The success of the Santa Monica program and the earlier USDA initiatives helped stimulate farm to school programs around the country. These varied state by state, by seasonal items, local farmer capacity and delivery infrastructure, and perhaps most importantly the ability of a school food service department to reorient itself in this new direction. Programs were developed in two dozen states and nearly a thousand school districts with preliminary research indicating that farm to school programs have in turn generated an increase in student consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. Based on this rapidly growing interest, new policy initiatives at the school district, state, and federal levels have also been introduced that strengthen opportunities for fresh and healthy access in schools.

School gardens are an additional aspect of farm to school that have important benefits, including an effective strategy for experiential learning, important physical activity benefits, and a source of fresh food, including items that children might not have been previously exposed to. Some school garden programs link directly to the farm to school program in the cafeteria, highlighting a “harvest of the month” including local and seasonal items. But, similar to farm to cafeteria programs, important barriers for school gardens also exist, including lack of green space, start-up costs (even if quite modest), and problems of maintenance and sustainability, including summer months when a school might not be in session. Perhaps most importantly, financially and resource strapped schools in low-income communities who are most lacking in open and recreational space, are particularly burdened by a lack of human and financial resources.

Furthermore, farm to school cafeteria and garden initiatives have been able to address only one aspect of the school food environment. Competitive foods, such as sodas and junk food in vending machines, have also become the focus of parent, student, and community mobilization in numerous school districts, cities, and states. In Los Angeles,

community groups such as the Healthy School Food Coalition first challenged the sale in vending machines of sugary beverages such as sodas leading to a dramatic vote in August 2002 of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) board to ban such drinks. Continuing mobilization by community and parent groups extended that policy, through an “Obesity Prevention” measure that was adopted unanimously by the LAUSD board in October 2003, that included anti-junk food criteria in vending machines and opportunities to pilot and ultimately institutionalize healthy food alternatives. In just two years, these types of anti-soda and junk food initiatives have been duplicated and extended in hundreds of school districts, cities, and states around the country. In doing so, the debate has been transformed to a matter of *how* rather than *whether* school food sources – inside and outside the cafeteria – could be reoriented through policy as well as institutional change.

Since 2002, the focus on school food as a policy matter has also extended to the federal level. A provision in the 2002 Farm Bill provided seed funding for fruit and vegetable pilot programs in several communities in states in the Midwest and New Mexico, including one in Des Moines, Iowa. The Des Moines School District used their pilot funds not only to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables, but to purchase them from local sources. In testimony before Congress, Ms. Teresa Nece, the Des Moines school food service director, detailed the results of her pilot program that was undertaken in one elementary, middle, and high school in her district. The program featured a selection of fruits, vegetables, and dried fruits made available each day to the students from local and regional farmers. Each elementary school class received a basket of fruit at the beginning of the day that was usually empty at day’s end. High school students could pick up their snack at the school cafeteria during passing periods, which, among other benefits, led to a decrease in school vending machine sales. This fresh produce initiative contrasted with the predominant school lunch entrees in the Des Moines schools that included three flavors of pizza, Chicken McNuggets, mini-corn dogs, fajitas, and tacos. And like the Los Angeles experience, students tried fruits and vegetables they had never tasted before.ⁱⁱⁱ

The passage of the 2002 farm to school pilot program and current farm to cafeteria legislation incorporated in the Child Nutrition reauthorization legislation have reflected the increasing organizing and mobilization at the community, regional, and national level. New community-based food organizations, including a number of groups in low-income communities, have sprouted in hundreds of communities. Community advocacy around such issues as lack of fresh food access have complemented the development of alternative community-based projects, such as CSAs (community supported agriculture), farmers’ markets, and community gardens.

Increasingly, these community food groups have focused on the school food environment, from the cafeteria, to the vending machines inside school grounds, to, ultimately, the food environment adjacent to the school. The growing community mobilization in turn has laid the groundwork for the development of such healthy and fresh food policies and programs as the Santa Monica farmers’ market salad bar or the Des Moines fruit basket.

To further that agenda, a framework for linking community mobilization, policy development, and research needs to be developed, an approach our Urban and Environmental Policy Institute recently initiated through a new collaborative called Project CAFE (or Community Action on Food Environments). Project CAFE partners include Latino and African-American community-based organizations, community health advocates or *promotoras*, parent and student groups, researchers, and physicians focused on the schools and surrounding neighborhoods in three South and Central Los Angeles communities. Using the methods of community food assessment as both a research and organizing tool, local residents and students identify research targets and help frame the most appropriate research instruments, whether surveys, focus groups, or visual representations regarding community and school food environments. Research is designed to inform action (or intervention strategies to use the language of the researcher), but action (in the form of organizing and mobilization) also establishes the framework for the research.

This action research model, or what Jason Coburn has called “street science” in a new book by that name, is at the same time an important tool in developing new forms of community power in the school food arena. The eventual goal of the Project CAFE approach, to establish community-based capacity to help change the food environment, is critical to an agenda around obesity. To reverse current trends around overweight and obesity requires not simply an individual’s change in eating patterns but action at the community scale where individual choice is reframed as a question of access. The rise of farm to school programs, the impressive popularity of farmers’ markets, and the willingness of students to challenge a fast food culture are all illustrations that such a community action model is not only feasible but best suited to community groups, students, researchers, and policymakers alike.

ⁱ The National School Lunch Program, Washington D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, FNS-78, revised December 1982; M.L. Wilson, “Nutrition and Defense,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, January 1947, Vol. 17, pp. 12-20.

ⁱⁱ School Lunch Program: Cafeteria Managers’ Views on Food Wasted by Students, U.S. General Accounting Office, Report to the Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities, House of Representatives, Washington D.C.: U.S. GAO, July 1996;

ⁱⁱⁱ Testimony of Ms. Teresa Nece, Des Moines, Iowa School Food Service Director at Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee Hearing on Child Nutrition Reauthorization, March 4, 2003.