

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Farm Raised? Genetically Engineered? Locally Grown?

# just cause

MAKE SOME GOOD NEWS

July/August 2009

## FOOD OR FAUX?

Are there pesticides, petroleum and poverty in your food?

## LOWERING YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

From recipes to appliances, we'll get you green!

## WHERE DOES FOOD COME FROM?

### PLUS:

Urban Farming  
School Lunches  
Eating Disorders

**JUST Shopping:**  
Books, Gadgets, Fashion  
and more!

**ALONZO MOURNING**  
More Than JUST a Ball Player

**THE TIME IS NOW**  
For Clean Business

**COMMON'S UNCOMMON**  
Commitment to Kids



## Putting the Food Back into School Food

By Jennifer McGuigan

*“Why do you eat that stuff? There’s no food in your food.”  
~ Joan Cusack as Constance Dobler in “Say Anything”*

Here’s the uncomfortable truth about too many school meals: There’s not much *food* in the food – or at least, not much nourishment in it. Many school kitchens don’t even have the equipment or staff capable of preparing and cooking fresh food from scratch. Subsequently, a lot of school meals consist of precooked, prepackaged, processed food that is simply reheated on site. Chicken nuggets and oven fries, anyone?

Even salad bars can be problematic, since they may be loaded with high calorie “toppings” and fat-laden dressings. Plus, the produce is often shipped in from thousands of miles away and grown using pesticides, making it bad for the environment *and* the people who eat it. On top of all this, vending machines full of junk food and soda are all too common in school hallways.

The result is classrooms filled with kids with burgeoning body weight and shrinking attention spans. We’re fattening up our youth while we dumb them down, feeding them poor-quality food that is high in chemicals and empty calories, and low in wholesome ingredients that nourish their minds and bodies. Our kids are overweight, increasingly at risk for diseases like diabetes, and falling behind the world in terms of test scores.

In short, American school cafeterias are microcosms of the country’s food habits at large. And as with so many things, one of the main culprits is the almighty dollar.

### **Food Costs Money**

“It all comes down to money,” says Dr. Susan Rubin, founder of Better School Food ([www.betterschoolfood.org](http://www.betterschoolfood.org)), a parents’ advocacy group that works to raise awareness about the connection between food and children’s health, behavior, and learning. “We require school food to either break even or create a profit. And the only way we can do that in this country is to serve bad food. We live in a country where a ‘happy meal’ is cheaper than a healthy meal.”

In 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act (NSLA). Twenty years later, Congress passed the Child Nutrition Act, which increased funds for meals served to needy students. In 1969, at the White House Conference on Hunger, President Richard Nixon established free and reduced-price lunches for kids who need them.

Today, the basic government reimbursement rates for schools are \$2.57 per free lunch; \$2.17 per reduced-price lunch; and \$0.24 per paid lunch. Rubin says that approximately ninety-nine cents of the cost of each meal actually goes toward food; the rest pays for overhead expenses.

How much money would it take to improve the quality of school food? The magic number often thrown around is \$5.00 per meal.

Chef, restaurateur, and food advocate Alice Waters says that \$5 per meal would be enough to serve nutritious, quality food to our country's 30 million school students. In her February 2009 *New York Times* op-ed piece (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/opinion/20waters.html>), she put the overall price tag for improved school lunch at roughly \$27 billion a year (versus the \$9 billion spent in 2007), plus a one-time investment in real kitchens so schools can actually cook, not just reheat and serve.

This may seem like a lot of money, but Rubin points out that we can “pay now or pay later.” By spending more money on food to nourish our kids, she says, we’ll improve not only their health, but also their ability to focus and concentrate, which translates into better classroom behavior and test scores. “We all pay for it when kids are sick and fat,” Rubin says.

### **Beyond the Cafeteria**

Of course, money is only part of the story, albeit a big part. Solutions to the problems of school food are close at hand, if we only know where to look.

First of all, we need to shift the way we think about food, says Anupama Joshi of Farm to School ([www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)). If we want to make a real difference in the way kids eat at school – and at home – change must happen in the cafeteria *and* the classroom.

“Unless you have that going – that education aspect – along with what you’re serving in the cafeteria, there’s a disconnect,” Joshi explains. That’s why Farm to School helps kids understand where their food comes from and how their food choices impact their bodies, the environment, and their communities.

Farm to School bridges the gap between what’s growing on local farms and what’s sitting on school lunch trays by bringing wholesome food (everything from fruits and vegetables to nuts, honey, and meat) from farms to schools. With eight regional agencies and programs operating in 44 states and 2,000 school districts, Farm to School also incorporates experiential education opportunities such as planting school gardens, cooking demonstrations, and farm tours. Staff members provide free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy, media, and marketing activities.

Joshi emphasizes that every community is different, from the length of its growing season to the needs of individual schools. Thus, Farm to School programs are tailored to meet those local needs. While some programs connect local farmers and school districts, others turn the school itself into the farm by creating a school-based garden, an approach sometimes modeled after the Edible Schoolyard Project started by Alice Waters and promoted by the Chez Panisse Foundation ([www.chezpanissefoundation.org](http://www.chezpanissefoundation.org)).

### **The Time Is Now**

The next few months are a critical time for school meal programs because the current Child Nutrition Act expires in September 2009, and Congress is moving quickly to enact the next version.

In 2004, the National Farm to School Program was established as part of the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization. This created a seed grant fund for schools to set up farm to school programs. Although the program received a \$10 million authorization, the funds were never appropriated. But given the Obama's administration interest in healthful food, as evidenced by the much touted White House garden, and the tremendous growth and interest in farm to school programs across the country, the time is ripe to implement policies that include locally and regionally grown foods in national meal programs. "For the first time in a long time," says Rubin, "we have a President and First Lady who 'get it.'"

### **You Have the Power**

Rubin and Joshi agree that the best way to improve school food is to start small and find like-minded people (parents, students, teachers, administrators, farmers) who share a desire for change. "Don't give up," Rubin says. "One person *can* make a difference, especially in the connected world we live in."

### **Resources**

Although the news about school food can be as unappetizing as gloppy tuna noodle casserole, there *are* schools succeeding in making their meals yummy and healthy. Check out these resources to help you revamp your own school district's food.

- Dr. Rubin from **Better School Food** ([www.betterschoolfood.org](http://www.betterschoolfood.org)) says that she's available to brainstorm with parents and interested parties on how to improve food in their schools.
- **Farm to School's** website ([www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)) is chockfull of valuable resources to help you find – or start – a local Farm to School program.
- You can learn more about the Child Nutrition Act in "**Nourishing the Nation One Tray at a Time: Farm to School Initiatives in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization**" ([www.farmtoschool.org/files/publications\\_192.pdf](http://www.farmtoschool.org/files/publications_192.pdf)).
- Anupama Joshi recently co-authored "**Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Impacts and Evaluation**," (<http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/bearingfruit.htm>) which contains resources and tools to incorporate when assessing a farm to school program.
- The **Chez Panisse Foundation** ([www.chezpanissefoundation.org](http://www.chezpanissefoundation.org)) believes that food education and access to fresh, healthy food must become part of the public school experience.
- **Slow Food USA** ([www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org)) has an initiative called **Slow Foods in Schools** ([http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/details/in\\_schools/](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/details/in_schools/)) that provides meaningful, hands-on food experiences and education to K-12 students.

- **Chef Ann Cooper**, known as the “Renegade Lunch Lady,” is leading a **School Food Revolution** ([www.chefann.com](http://www.chefann.com)).
- “**Food, Inc.**” is a new documentary about our nation’s commercial food system, including how it impacts school food. Its website ([www.foodincmovie.com](http://www.foodincmovie.com)) includes helpful information and an interactive featured called the “Hungry for Change Cafeteria” (<http://www.foodincmovie.com/hungry-for-change-cafeteria.php>).
- If you live in the U.K., check out celebrity chef **Jamie Oliver’s** work to improve school dinners: <http://www.jamieoliver.com/school-dinners>.