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The National School Lunch Program: History of the Past, Challenges of the Present, Solutions for the Future

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THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM:

History of the Past, Challenges of the Present, Solutions for the Future

by

Hilary Annie Smith

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

in

Nutrition and Food Sciences, Dietetics emphasis

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2006

The National School Lunch Program:

History of the Past, Challenges of the Present, Solutions for the Future

Key Phrases: *National School Lunch Program; history; challenges; recommendations*

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Abstract

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was initially designed to provide nutritious meals to hungry schoolchildren. Over time, it seems as though this focus has shifted to serving as a source of proper nutrition in a society of over-fed yet undernourished children. The stated purpose of the NSLP is to “safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food.” Currently, there are many challenges that the National School Lunch Program faces in meeting its goal of promoting healthful lifestyle practices among school-aged children. Three main challenges include the increase in the amount of competitive foods offered; increased soft drink consumption; and improper meal scheduling. These challenges undermine the goal of the NSLP by promoting less nutritious items that are high in calories, fat, sugar and sodium and very low in nutrients. Several programs have been put in place in the attempt to improve the school foodservice environment, many of which show promising results. Overall, there is still much room for improvement. It is up to nutrition professionals to involve themselves in nutrition policy development, implementation, and enforcement to ensure a healthier future for the nation’s schoolchildren.

Introduction

In July of 2003, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) published a paper stating their position on Child Nutrition Programs. Their position reads as follows:

“It is the position of the American Dietetic Association that all children and adolescents, regardless of age; gender; socioeconomic status; racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity; or health status, should have access to food and nutrition programs that ensure the availability of a safe and adequate food supply that promotes optimal physical, cognitive, and social growth and development. Appropriate food and nutrition programs include food assistance and meal programs, nutrition education initiatives, and nutrition screening and assessment followed by appropriate nutrition intervention and anticipatory guidance to promote optimal nutrition status (1).”

With this being the nutrition professions’ stance on nutrition in schools, it is appropriate to look at school foodservice programs and evaluate them to see if indeed these goals are being met. If these goals are not being met it is appropriate to evaluate what obstacles are hindering achievement and discuss possible solutions that may assist in eliminating these obstacles.

History of the School Lunch Program

The history of feeding hungry schoolchildren dates back to 1790 when a man known as Count Rumford was teaching and feeding hungry, vagrant children in Munich, Germany (2). In 1875, a Frenchman by the name of Victor Hugo started a program that provided funds for hot meals for the children who were attending a nearby school (2). In the United States, one of the first known child nutrition programs was the “Children’s Aid Society of New York”, a program initiated in 1853 with the purpose of serving meals to students who were attending the nearby vocational school (2). This idea of feeding hungry schoolchildren continued to spread throughout the country and these programs were usually made possible by private contributions. In 1946, as a result of a statement made by the surgeon general that “70 percent of the boys who had poor nutrition 10 to 12

years ago were rejected by the (World War II) draft" (reviewed in 3), Congress passed the National School Lunch Act of 1946 (2,3,4). This gave the school lunch program permanent status and the right to federal assistance. The purpose of this Act reads as follows:

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs (4)."

In order to receive the financial and commodity assistance, states had to: 1) serve meals that met the minimum nutritional requirements set by the Federal government; 2) serve meals without cost or at reduced cost to children who were unable to pay full price; 3) operate the program on a nonprofit basis; 4) utilize the commodities provided; and 5) maintain proper records of all receipts and expenditures (3,4). The National School Lunch Act paved the way for many other programs that support children's nutrition, including the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 that initiated the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and Special Milk Program (2,4).

Over time, the focus of the NSLP has shifted from providing meals to the hungry schoolchildren to serving as a source of proper nutrition in a society of over-fed yet undernourished children. In 1995 this shift in focus prompted an amendment to the National School Lunch Act of 1946 titled the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) (5). The SMI set nutritional standards of the meals that were to be provided by the NSLP and SBP. These standards required that:

- school lunches provide 1/3 of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, and vitamin C.

- school meals meet the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines by limiting total fat to 30% or less and saturated fat to less than 10%.
- school meals reduce the level of cholesterol, moderate the use of salt and sodium, and include more dietary fiber (5).

Currently these requirements are still in effect.

Current Challenges to the National School Lunch Program

With all of these nutritional standards in place, how is it that the schoolchildren of today are so improperly nourished? The following pages will attempt to answer this by discussing the research that addresses the current trends in school foodservice that are challenging the healthy aspects of the National School Lunch Program and other child nutrition programs.

Competitive Foods

By definition, competitive foods are “foods of minimal nutritional value (such as carbonated beverages, water ices, chewing gum, and certain candies) and/or all other foods offered for individual sale other than meals served through the United States Department of Agriculture’s school meal programs (6).” These foods can be sold as a la carte items, in vending machines, in school stores, as fundraising items, and are also used in classrooms for activities and rewards. In contrast to the foods served through the NSLP, these competitive foods are currently not required to meet any nutrition standards (6). This is where the problem of nutritional challenges to the NSLP lies. These competitive foods are usually high in calories, fat, sugar, and sodium and very low in nutrients. The sale of competitive foods often competes with the more nutritious school lunch program items ultimately undermining its goal to provide healthy meal options (7).

The increasing accessibility and availability of these items is a cause for concern regarding the health of the nation's schoolchildren.

In a study conducted by Pilant et al. (6), 20 middle schools both participating in the NSLP and SBP were randomly selected to determine the availability of foods and beverages to children during lunch. It was found that all 20 schools sold a total of 363 foods and beverages other than the regulated SBP and NSLP meals (6). Of these items no milk, fresh fruits, vegetables, yogurt, nor entrees were included (6). This study also addressed the idea that the layout of the foodservice facility was not conducive to promoting healthful choices, rather the opposite. They noted that in reference to beverage choices, milk was not displayed as prominently as other non-nutritious beverages such as iced tea and soft drinks (6). This was suspected as the factor leading to less than one-fourth of the students choosing milk. Interestingly, there was one unique finding, in only one school cafeteria, where no alternate beverages were permitted or sold, almost all students drank milk (6).

In February of 2005, the American Dietetic Association published a study showing the influences that competitive foods had on energy and nutrient intakes of children who were participating in the NSLP (8). The sample group consisted of 488 sixth-graders whose plate waste was weighed and the data was used to assess the energy and nutrient consumption from items that were chosen and consumed. Results showed that one-third of the children purchased competitive food items. Among that group 44% selected fruit aides, sports drinks, soda, or iced teas; 46% selected corn or potato chips, nuts, beef jerky, or popcorn; and 38% selected cakes, cookies, doughnuts, ice cream, yogurt, or granola (8). In the group of children who did not choose competitive foods, the portions of school lunch items that were chosen provided significantly higher

amounts of energy and other macronutrients. It was also discovered that this group wasted significantly less food in comparison to the children who bought competitive foods (8). In reference to vitamins and minerals, the groups who consumed competitive foods consumed a lesser quantity of all of the nutrients that were measured (vitamin A, vitamin C, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folate, calcium, and iron) (8). Table 3 (adapted from 8) shows the comparison of nutrient consumption with regards to the US Department of Agriculture standards.

Table 3. Lunchtime nutrient consumption by sixth-grade students (N=743) who purchased competitive food (CF) or did not purchase competitive food (NoCF) compared with US Department of Agriculture standards^a

Nutrients	School Lunch and Competitive Food Items					
	Amount Consumed			Amount Provided		
	NoCF (n=493)	CF (n=250)				
	Total	From CF items		NoCF (n=493)	CF (n=250)	
Energy (kcal)	530.0±8.9	634.0±14.9*	234±10.0		← % RDA ^b →	27.4*
Protein (g)	23.3±0.4	20.2±0.6*	2.0±0.1			56.2*
Vitamin A (RE) ^c	112.7	77.0	0.0			12.8*
Vitamin C (mg)	11.1	10.2	0.0			22.6
Calcium (mg)	351.9	309.7	10.0			23.8*
Iron (mg)	3.1	3.0	0.4			37.1
Total fat (g)	18.9±0.4	24.9±0.7*	9.6±0.6		← % energy →	35.5*
Saturated fat (g)	6.0±0.1	7.3±0.2*	2.4±0.2			10.3

^aMeans, standard error for energy, nutrients and protein; medians are reported for vitamins and minerals because the distributions were severely skewed to the left.
^bRE=retinol equivalent.
^cRDA=Recommended Daily Allowance.
^dAnalysis of variance on means indicate significant differences between the means. P<0.05

Although the group of children who did not purchase competitive foods consumed more vitamins and minerals than their counterpart, they ultimately did not meet the one-third of RDA requirement (8). It was proposed that the low intake of micronutrients could be attributed to the increased waste of fruits and vegetables amongst both groups.

Soft Drinks

The debate concerning soft drink consumption in schools has been ongoing for quite some time. This conflict of interest over offering soft drinks in schools results from

the potential health consequences stemming from excessive soft drink consumption verses the financial gains received by schools for signing contracts with large soft drink retailers.

It is proposed that consumption of soft drinks (usually high in calories and sugar and low in nutrients) could lead to potential health problems such as childhood overweight, obesity, due to additional calories in the diet and increased calcium deficiency due to displacement of milk (9,10,11,12). Data from the Nationwide Food Consumption Survey showed that the prevalence of soft drink consumption among youth ages 6 to 17 years increased 48% over a 20-year period (1978 to 1998) (9). A study published in September of 2002 examined the trends in beverage consumption in adolescent girls aged 12 to 19 and found that milk intakes decreased by 36% in contrast to the increased consumption of sodas and fruit drinks which nearly doubled (11). These findings are particularly alarming due to the increased need for calcium among this age group in order to build their lifelong calcium stores. With soft drink consumption displacing more nutrient dense beverage choices, there is an increased risk of vitamin and/or mineral deficiency symptoms later in life.

In reference to childhood obesity, Ludwig et al. (10) found that for each additional serving of sugar-sweetened drinks consumed in schoolchildren, both body mass index (BMI) and frequency of obesity increased. This increase in weight was attributed to the consumption of these beverages adding additional (non-nutrient) calories to the diet rather than displacing them (10).

Schools play a huge role in the problem of excessive soft drink consumption especially when they sign contracts such as "Pouring Rights". "Pouring Rights" are contracts between school districts and soft drink companies for exclusive rights to sell

only their brand of soft drink in exchange for a percentage of the profits (13,14). The following example puts the problem of “Pouring Rights” in perspective:

“In 1998, Colorado Springs School District 11 became one of the first school districts to sign into a “Pouring Rights” contract. The contract granted “Pouring Rights” to Coca-cola in exchange for \$8.4 million over 10 years. The stipulations of this contract required the district consume 70,000 cases of Coke in order to receive the money. Because students were not consuming amounts that would reach the set goal of 70,000 cases, the district administrator required that school officials place the soda-vending machines in more conspicuous locations. He also instructed principals to give students unlimited access to the machines and allow students to drink the soft drinks in class. (15)”

This example brings to light the problems that can result from schools signing “Pouring Rights” contracts. School officials are led to promote consumption of these types of beverages that ultimately lead to displaced nutrients and poor nutrition. Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH, wrote in her July 2000 Public Health Report: “These contracts, intended to elicit brand loyalty among young children who have a lifetime of purchases ahead of them, are especially questionable because they place schools in the position of ‘pushing’ soft drink consumption. ‘Pouring Rights’ contracts deserve attention from public health professionals concerned about the nutritional quality of children’s diets (13).”

Lunchtime Scheduling

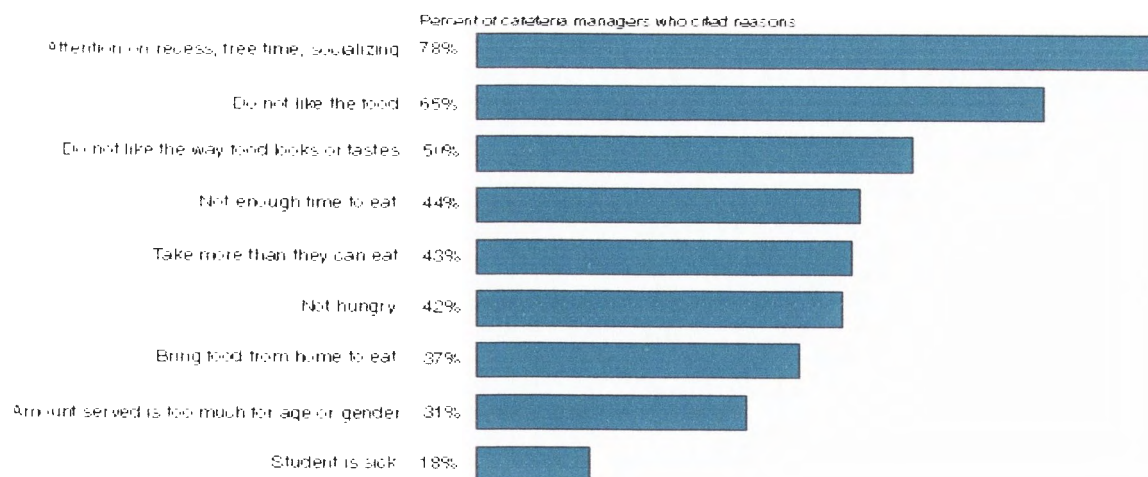
A third issue challenging the nutrition integrity of school lunch is lunchtime scheduling. Factors involving meal scheduling include, school lunch start time, lunch duration, and placement of recess. Many school districts simply do not allow enough time for children to consume an adequate amount of food (16) and some school districts place recess directly after lunch which leads to less concentration on eating and increased plate waste (18).

Bergman et al. (16) conducted a study to determine the impact the length of the lunch period had on nutrient consumption and plate waste in elementary school students. Two school lunch periods were analyzed, one with a 30 minute lunch period, the other with a 20-minute lunch period. Results from this study showed that when students had a longer lunch period, they consumed significantly more food and nutrients than when the lunch period was shorter (16). Also, with a longer lunch period, plate waste decreased from 44% to 27% (16). A study published in the 2002 Journal of the American Dietetic Association (17) determined the minimum amount of time needed for adequate consumption to be:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Wait Time (5-9 minutes)} \\ + \text{Consumption Time (9 minutes)} \\ + \text{Standard Deviation (5-7 minutes)} \\ + \text{Social Time (5-10 minutes)} \\ \hline 24-35 \text{ minutes} \\ \text{as an appropriate amount} \\ \text{of time for providing a} \\ \text{healthful school dining} \\ \text{environment} \end{array}$$

In a Food Assistance Research Brief published by the United States Department of Agriculture it was noted that meals scheduled before recess encouraged students to rush which in turn led to less consumption of nutrients (reviewed in 18). This article also discussed several reasons for plate waste as determined by cafeteria managers. Those reasons are represented in the Figure 2 (18):

Figure 2. Reasons for plate waste cited by cafeteria managers



Source: USDA's analysis of survey data, July 1995

2

Economic Research Service / USDA

The time of the day that lunch is held has also been investigated as a factor in the amount of food and nutrients consumed. Both early start times (before 10:30 am) and late start times (after 1:00 pm) have been cited as reasons leading to inadequate intake (reviewed in 18). With early start times children tend to be less hungry most likely because they have just eaten breakfast and with late start times children tend to snack on non-nutritious items, which may also result in less appetite when lunch time does occur.

Recommendations to Improve the School Foodservice Environment

There is a clear need to make changes in the school foodservice environment. All of the factors discussed contribute to poor nutrition and the health problems that are facing today's schoolchildren. Several programs have attempted to solve the problem of poor nutrition in schools. Two such programs are the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program and the Child Nutrition & WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. Several other recommendations for improvement have been suggested throughout the literature and will be mentioned in order to stimulate thought on how nutrition professionals can go about fighting these challenges and provide a healthy school foodservice environment.

The USDA Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program

Throughout the 2002-2003 school year the USDA provided fresh and dried fruits and fresh vegetables free to children in 107 elementary and secondary schools. This program was titled the "Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program" and was intended to determine its feasibility and success (19). Six million dollars was provided to the USDA in order to carry out this project (19). Results of this program reported that children consumed 93% of the servings offered (19) showing that if quality fruits and vegetables are presented to children they will eat them. Information obtained by the students suggested an improvement in their eating habits, a greater willingness to try different fruits and vegetables, or, at the very least, a greater consciousness about eating too much of what they called "junk foods" (19). The positive findings from this pilot program suggest that there is a chance of shifting the eating habits of children from consumption of "junk foods" to healthier choices such as fruits and vegetables, thus improving the overall nutrient content of children's diets.

The Child Nutrition & WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004

With growing concern about the lack of regulation on competitive foods, the legislature has mandated that all school districts that participate in the USDA Child Nutrition Program develop and implement a local wellness policy by the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year (20). The Child Nutrition & WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires that local school districts develop wellness policies that include goals for nutrition education and physical activity, nutrition guidelines for all foods available on campuses during the school day, develop a plan for measuring implementation, and involve parents, students, and representatives of the school in the development (20,21). This Act is definitely a step in the right direction toward a healthier school foodservice

environment. [For a sample wellness policy, please refer to <http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/>.] Development and enforcement of these policies presents a wonderful opportunity for nutrition professionals to be involved in the fight for healthy school environments.

Additional Recommendations

Several other recommendations for improving the school environment have been suggested throughout the literature. Many of these are to be addressed in the upcoming Wellness Policies that are required to be in effect beginning July 2006. These recommendations include: schedule lunch after recess; have longer lunch periods; promote nutrition education; expand the use of self-service; customize portion sizes; improve the quality, appearance, and acceptability of NSLP foods; encourage consumption of fruits, salads, and other vegetables served with meals; increase the amount of choices offered (especially fruits and vegetables); get students involved in menu planning; promote physical activity; allow children to be involved in planting and harvesting their own garden; set quality standards for all foods; put pressure on soft drink companies to develop healthier options; offer appetizing, healthful foods as a la carte items, in vending machines, and at snack bars; and attempt to change the negative stigma of school lunch (7,14,18,20,22,23,24). As with any recommendation, it is important that they be consistent with the nutrition messages that are being promoted in order to avoid mixed messages, which could lead to more confusion about what the proper choices are.

Conclusion

As the history of the National School Lunch Program shows, early school food programs were meant to provide nutritious food to children who, more than likely, had food insecurity. Over time, there has been a shift in focus for the NSLP from feeding

children whose food sources were scarce to now competing with the huge array of food items offered in schools today. Competitive foods, soft drinks, lunchtime scheduling, etc. ultimately undermine the nutritional goals set by the NSLP. The challenges that have been discussed are just a few of the many, ever increasing, challenges that the NSLP faces in achievement of its initial goal to provide safe, nutritious meals.

As nutrition professionals, it is our responsibility to stay abreast of the current trends that threaten the health of any population, especially the population involving school aged children. It is imperative that we work to resolve these challenges by involving ourselves in nutrition policy development, implementation, and enforcement as well as taking a political stand in the fight for what we know is right. It is up to us to protect schoolchildren from developing unhealthy habits that may lead to a lifetime of poor health. It is up to us to defend the nutritional goals of child nutrition programs (i.e. NSLP). Only then, may we start paving the way for a healthier, happier future.

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The National School Lunch Program Past, Present, and Future

Hilary Smith
February 23, 2006



Objectives:

- Review the history of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- Discuss current challenges NSLP is facing
- Look at programs that are being implemented and possible solutions for the future



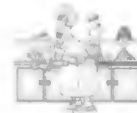
History:

- 1790 - Count Rumford - Germany
- 1875 - Victor Hugo - Germany
- 1853 - Children's Aid Society of New York - United States



The National School Lunch Act of 1946:

- Permanent Status
- Right to federal financial assistance
- Requirements
 - Meet minimum nutrient requirements
 - Meals at no cost or reduced cost
 - Operate on non-profit basis
 - Utilize provided commodities
 - Maintain proper records



Additional Legislation:

- Child Nutrition Act of 1966
 - School Breakfast Program
 - Special Milk Program
- School Meals Initiative of 1995
 - 1/3 RDA for protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, and vitamin C
 - Limit fat
 - Cholesterol, sodium, fiber



What's Happening?



Competitive Foods:

- Definition
 - Foods of minimum nutritional value
 - All other foods offered for individual sale
 - A la carte
 - Vending machines
 - School stores
- Current research
- **Not Regulated!?!**



Soft Drink/Vending Machines:

Figure 1. Milk consumption declining, especially for teenagers

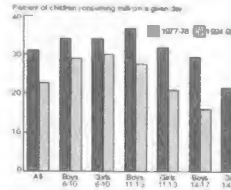
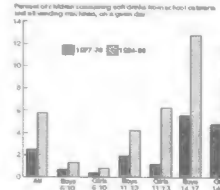


Figure 2. Soft drink consumption rising, especially for teenagers



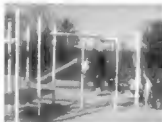
Pouring Rights:

- Definition
- Problem
- Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH
 - "These contracts, intended to elicit brand loyalty among young children who have a lifetime of purchases ahead of them, are especially questionable because they place schools in the position of 'pushing' soft drink consumption. 'Pouring Rights' contracts deserve attention from public health professionals concerned about the nutritional quality of children's diets." (Public Health Reports, 2000;115:308-319.)



Lunchtime Scheduling:

- Start Time
- Duration
 - 24 - 35 minutes
- Placement of recess
 - 78% of cafeteria managers cited "attention of recess, free time, socializing" as reason for plate waste



What can we do?

Possible Solutions for the Future



USDA Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program:

- Tested during 2002-2003 school year
- Results
 - Improved eating habits
 - Greater willingness to try different fruits and vegetables
 - Greater consciousness about "junk foods"
- Promising!



The Child Nutrition & WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004:

- Wellness Policies
 - 2006-2007 school year
 - Requirements
 - Nutrition education and physical activity
 - Nutrition guidelines for **all** foods
 - Plan for measuring implementation
 - Involve parents, students, and school representatives
- Step in the right direction
- Great Place for Nutrition Professionals to Be Involved!

Other Recommendations:

- Nutrition Education
- Self-service
- Portion sizes
- Student involvement
- Improve quality, appearance, and acceptability
- Change stigma
- Edible Schoolyards
- Put the pressure on soft drink companies
- Improve layout
- **BE CONSISTENT!**



FOOD, HEALTH, AND NUTRITION BY PROMOTING BALANCE

Conclusion:

- Things can change
- Stay current
- New Challenges always occurring
- **BE INVOLVED!**
 - Political Advocate

