

Running head: School Lunch

## **School Lunch**

By

Michael Gallagher

University of Mississippi

Submitted June 26, 2006

### **Introduction**

One of my students does not eat vegetables. He told me this in a matter-of-fact way in response to my question as to why he was putting French fries on his hamburger, rather than the lettuce and tomato offered by the cafeteria at Holly Springs High School. I told him that there must be some type of vegetable that he ate, and asked him to think about it for a moment. He silently contemplated for about thirty seconds, looked up at me and said “Grapes.”

The interdependence of nutrition and learning is fundamental and has been recognized since the mid-nineteenth century. Students who do not receive proper nutrition, not to mention those who fail to understand the distinctions between food groups, will always be at an academic disadvantage. Yet despite the operation of school lunch programs in the U.S. for nearly one hundred years, it remains possible for a student not to eat a single vegetable (potatoes excluded) throughout a full week of school lunches. Thus, questions rightly about the appropriateness and efficacy of the programs implemented to enhance student nutrition remain.

### **Nutrition and Learning**

The idea that what we eat has an effect on our ability to learn and to perform well in school is intuitive. Everyone student or former student can recall days when he missed breakfast, and maybe lunch as well, and could feel his performance flagging. For many students, however, poor nutrition is not an isolated occurrence, and for these students, school lunch and breakfast programs help to bridge that gap and put them in a position to become active learners.

Nutrition problems have been linked in a number of ways to students' performance. Low protein intake has been associated with low performance on achievement tests, and iron deficiencies, suffered by nearly a quarter of all poor children in the U.S. have been shown to negatively influence attention span, concentration, and IQ. Malnutrition also reduces the body's ability to fight infection, thus causing students to miss more school. Overall, the effects of malnutrition on the learning student are pervasive, to the extent that mild malnutrition can often lead to irreparable losses in learning potential (Troccoli, 1993; USGAO, 2003).

### **School Lunch – From the Beginnings to the Present**

The link between poverty, malnutrition, and education first became popular in Europe during the nineteenth century. School lunch programs had been in existence, in one form or another, since the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, school feeding programs, as they were known, had spread throughout many of the major European cities, starting in Munich and spreading to Paris, London, Oslo and the rest of the continent. These programs often began as privately funded initiatives before being taken over by the local school boards and other authorities (Gunderson, 1971).

Despite their many differences, they shared the common goal enumerated here in the Provision of Meals Act passed in 1905 by the British Parliament:

When the local education authority . . . resolve that any of the children in attendance at any public elementary school within their area are unable by reason of lack of food to take full advantage of the education provided them, the local education authority shall take such steps as they think fit to provide for such children . . . such food as the local education authority may consider requisite to enable the said children to take full advantage of the education provided for them. (British Parliamentary Papers, 1905)

Early programs in the United States followed this same pattern of development, sparked by Robert Hunter's turn of the century book *Poverty*, in which he states: "learning is difficult because hungry stomachs and languid bodies and thin blood are not able to feed the brain. The lack of learning among so many poor children is certainly due, to an important extent, to this cause" (1904). As the programs expanded first private, then local and state funding ceased to be adequate to support the cost of providing school lunches. At this point, the Federal Government stepped in.

The first Federal assistance for school lunch programs appeared during the Great Depression, and was aimed at encouraging the consumption of surplus agricultural products to keep prices high while at the same time helping schools to provide low-cost, nutritional meals to the masses of children who were afflicted with poverty. By 1942, over six million students were benefiting from such programs each year (Gunderson, 1971).

In 1946, the Richard B. Russell School Lunch Act was passed, "to provide assistance to the States in the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of

school lunch programs (House Office of Legislative Counsel, 2002, p. 74). This law provided a stability that had been previously lacking in school lunch programs and also was the first, at the Federal level, to require nutritional standards. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 soon followed, which included the first Federal funding for school breakfast programs (House Office of Legislative Counsel, 2002).

This bill identified the widespread nutritional problems rampant in society and touted the National School Lunch Program as the solution to the problem of malnourishment, for seven reasons. First, the meal must contain one third of the nutrition needed by each child per day, and contain the components of a balanced meal. The price of a meal is within the ability to pay of most students, and those students who cannot pay are provided with meals at reduced price or completely free of charge. The menu provide flexibility while adhering to nutritional standards and also permits students to expand their food experiences and help them choose more balanced meals. Participation in the program leads to good food habits, and the lunchroom can be used as a classroom to study nutrition and other subjects essential to societal welfare (House Office of Legislative Counsel, 2002; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003; Mississippi Child Nutrition Programs, 2000).

These are the principals that have carried over to the modern school lunch in Mississippi and throughout the nation. Presently, over 28 million students across the country are fed through such programs. Every district in Mississippi serves both breakfast and lunch, and over one third of all students participate in the breakfast program (Mississippi Child Nutrition Programs, 2000).

### **Changing Nutritional Problems and the Current Situation**

When the idea of a school lunch program was born, the main form of malnutrition was under-nutrition. Children simply were not receiving enough food. Proof of the success of early school lunch programs was measured in the weight gain of students receiving the lunches – the more weight was gained, the more successful the programs (Gunderson, 1971).

Needless to say, the field of nutrition has changed substantially over the last fifty years. Malnutrition is no longer only a question of not having enough food, but rather of not having enough food of a high enough quality. Poverty plays a role here as well for two reasons. First, more nutritious foods are often more expensive, and thus out of range of many low income families. Recent research demonstrates that “on a per calorie basis, diets composed of whole grains, fish, and fresh vegetables and fruit are far more expensive than refined grains, added sugars and added fats” (Researcher Links Rising Tide, 2004).

Second, more subtle and equally destructive, is the lack of social capital in poverty stricken families. It is this social capital that is instrumental in planning a healthful diet, purchasing and preparing nutritional food, and attending to all other aspects of nutrition, but these skills and the time and energy to implement them, are too often lacking among those who need them most.

Today, over fifteen percent of students are overweight; among low income students, the percentage is significantly higher. The obesity epidemic threatens the nation with heart disease, type II diabetes and any number of related health problems, such that

obesity is now credited with 300,000 deaths per year. School lunch programs have been working to meet this new challenge head on, but they face several difficulties (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

First, they face severe budgetary constraints, which lead to poor nutrition for the same reasons that poverty in families leads to poor nutrition. Canned vegetables are much cheaper than fresh ones, and much easier to prepare, but the mushy, flavorless, sometimes barely identifiable slop that is canned vegetables is also much less attractive to students. For food to be healthy, it must not only be nutritionally good to eat, but it must also be attractive enough to be eaten (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Schools also fear that substituting more healthy alternatives will cause paying children to refrain from buying school lunch, leading to a loss of funding. In addition, they face competition from non-lunch food items sold in schools, especially from vending machines (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003; Mississippi Child Nutrition Programs, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

The need for nutritionally balanced meals is as strong today as it was one hundred years ago. Despite the illustrious history of today's school lunch programs, they still suffer from many problems. Partially, schools have failed to catch up with the changing definition of nutrition – for example, white bread is treated the same as wheat or pita bread in Mississippi menu requirements. Some problems have been identified but unsolved, such as the fat content in school meals, which remains significantly above the

nutritionally optimal target set by the Federal government. Additionally, there are insufficient funds to make a more healthy meal a reality and there is insufficient time to teach students the value and importance of good nutritional habits (Mississippi Child Nutrition Programs, 2000).

The future health of students who do not know the difference between fruits and vegetables can only be dim. Urgent action and increased funding are needed to turn students into people who understand, appreciate, and value healthy food. Providing such food in schools is imperative to the health of future generations.

#### References

- Gunderson, G. (1971). *The National School Lunch Program: Background and development*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- House Office of Legislative Counsel (2002). *A Compilation of Federal Education Laws, Volume VI*. Washington, DC: U.S. House Office of Legislative Counsel.  
Retrieved on June 24, 2006, from  
[http://www.house.gov/ed\\_workforce/publications/edcomps/vol6nutrition.pdf](http://www.house.gov/ed_workforce/publications/edcomps/vol6nutrition.pdf)
- Hunter, Robert (1965). *Poverty: Social Conscience in the Progressive Era*. New York: Harper and Row. (Original work published in 1904)
- Mississippi Child Nutrition Programs. (2000). *Policy and procedures manual* (revised ed). Jackson, MS: Office of Child Nutrition. Retrieved June 24, 2006, from  
<http://www.cn.mde.k12.ms.us/resources/pnp/p&pmanual.pdf>

Researcher Links Rising Tide Of Obesity To Food Prices. (2004, Jan 5) Science Daily.

Retrieved June 24, 2006 from

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/01/040105071229.htm>

Troccoli, Karen. B. (1993). *Eat to Learn, Learn to Eat: the Link Between Nutrition and Learning in Children*. Washington, DC: National Health/Education Consortium.

ED 363 400.

United States General Accounting Office. (2003). *School lunch program: Efforts needed to improve nutrition and encourage healthy eating*. Report to congressional requesters. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office.

Retrieved June 25, 2005, from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03506.pdf>

A Bill to Amend the Education Act of 1902, Provision of Meals Act of 1905, British Parliamentary Papers, 1905 (132)