

# Show 'n' tell nutrition at school

Just months after President Obama signed the Child Nutrition Act into law in 2010, Congress moved to strip away its reforms and cut its funding. Will it survive?

By **Jeanne Incantalupo Kuhner**

Childhood obesity has been called one of the nation's most serious health problems. The direct cost of treating obesity-related illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, renal failure, and hypertension, are an estimated \$117 billion annually (Haskins, Paxon, & Donahue, 2006, p. 1). Researchers and policy makers suggest enlisting schools in the fight, arguing that schools can spur physical activity and healthful eating. School cafeterias should reinforce classroom lessons about good nutritional choices.

Unfortunately, foods of lower nutritional value are more available than healthier snacks in our schools (Gostin & Pomeranz, 2009). Another study found a correlation between anger and systolic blood pressure in overweight children (Nichols, Rice, & Howell, 2011). It concluded that not only are the kids in the study getting fatter, they were getting angrier, too.

The backdrop of the nation's orientation toward what students eat at school is lengthy. Concern over what kids eat appeared as early as 1922 — with *Diet for the School Child* by Lucy Gillette (Library of Congress). Debates from the 2004 renewal of school food legislation centered around possibly eliminating vending machines in schools, an idea that met powerful opposition from the food lobby, including Kraft, General Mills, and the Food Manufacturers Association. But the results of those debates came as compromises, with incentives to encourage schools to buy fruit from local farmers. This compromise also required schools to develop a “wellness policy” and identify specific goals for nutrition and exercise standards, but provided no additional funding or specific mandates to develop these policies (Haskins, Paxon, & Donahue, 2006).

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*All photos courtesy The Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, Calif. The project advocates using food growth and preparation as teaching tools.*

But nutrition education and a wellness policy weren't enough to change the way students think and interact with food. "In school cafeterias, students learn how little we care about the way they nourish themselves . . . we've sold them to the lowest bidder" (Waters, 2005, p. 2). How can nutrition education be translated into practice if the food served at school is not nutritious? What examples are we giving students if we serve them poor-quality food, while we tell them to make better food choices? Such a disconnect between what students learn about food in the classroom and what we serve in the lunchroom undermines nutritional instruction. Unfortunately, with no oversight and no enforcement, the wellness policy has remained little more than a good idea on paper. Nonetheless, Congress has remained well aware that schools are in a unique position to affect child obesity.

There is, however, one positive example of a school taking its cafeteria and curriculum well beyond the wellness policy. The Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, Calif., transformed old blacktop into a thriving garden where students cultivate their own food. Students became involved in all levels of the harvest, including cooking in the kitchen-classroom. American chef and restaurateur Alice Waters, who founded the Edible Schoolyard, promotes the project as a "hopeful model" for health and education policy change (2005). She explains how health and academic education are inextricably intertwined in her program to create a sensory experience with long-lasting educational value:

Learning is supposed to be a pleasure, and a food-centered curriculum is a way to reach kids in a way that is truly pleasurable. At first, the kids may not quite believe that they are allowed to have so much fun outside in the garden. But before long, they all know what compost is. And all know what's ripe and



what's not ripe, and when. This is knowledge they have learned without realizing it from experiences like picking the raspberry patch clean every morning. While they are touching and smelling and tasting, so much information floods in — because they are using all of their senses. What better way to learn about geography than by combining 27 aromatic spices to make an Indian curry? (Waters, 2005, p 4).

If schools all over the country are growing and eating their own local, organic food, says Waters, "our domestic food culture would change as well, as people again grew up learning how to cook affordable, wholesome, and delicious food" (2005, p. 5).

### **Reforming school food**

The high rates of child obesity motivated many educators and parents, including First Lady and mother Michelle Obama, to advocate for new school food

reforms. These reforms are known as the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and were part of the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act (CNA). This legislation regulates the school lunch and breakfast, WIC, Child and Adult Care Food Programs, and

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other federal programs to provide food to children. The Act would not only expand school lunch programs, but also increase reimbursement rates and eliminate junk food from school lunch menus, while

increasing access to healthy food during the school day (Sweet, 2010; Bruce, 2010).

Support and opposition to school lunch reform were enormous and attracted much media attention. Supporters formed alliances, such as the NYC Alliance for CNA, and developed literature to educate people about the new legislation and what it would mean for New York City where many students receive free or reduced-price lunch. In an online flyer calling for government action, the alliance said its reasons for supporting reform included “ending child hunger and food insecurity, ensuring that all children have access to nutritious food, reducing childhood obesity while supporting regional farms and food economics, creating jobs, and protecting the environment.”

On July 1, 2010, lawmakers, researchers, and celebrities stood together in support of CNA when they addressed Congress. Celebrity chef and head judge on Bravo’s “Top Chef” program Tom Colicchio offered his ideas about how to improve school lunches, and spoke against the argument that all kids want to eat are burgers and fries. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack also spoke in favor of the bill, stating that any delayed action would not be “doing right by the kids” (Bruce, 2010).

#### **The opposition speaks**

But there was opposition as well. Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, called the \$8-billion plan “irresponsible” in the current fiscal environment (Bruce, 2010). Rector also said efforts to track the program’s spending were inefficient.

Former Alaska governor and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin also criticized the bill in a separate forum. In a speech at Plumstead Christian School in Chalfont, Pa., she called on parents to be the driving force for school food reform.

In defense of the bill, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), then the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, said, “We cannot ignore the fact that, for millions of children, the only meals that they count on are those they get at school or in child care” (Bruce, 2010), referring to the millions of children who receive free or reduced-price lunch at schools and educational centers.

But was unhealthy food really the only food available for these underprivileged kids? Gostin and Pomeranz (2009) and Delva, O’Malley and Johnston (2007) argued that, yes, students in low-socio-economic areas have less access to healthier snacks. Their recommendations included a call for lawmakers to re-evaluate and expand restrictions on “foods of minimal nutrition value” — soda and candy, for example — and to “prohibit sales of all beverages with





*Photos courtesy The Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, Calif. Based on the idea of an “edible education,” growing heirloom grains provides an opportunity for learning about early civilizations, while cooking includes lessons in math.*

caloric sweeteners, impose portion limits, and apply to all age levels, with age adjustments for container sizes (p. 72). But why didn't researchers call on parents to take action and only target the government? Didn't Sarah Palin have a point? In an interview on “The View” with Barbara Walters (Ignozzi, et al., 2010), President and Michelle Obama argued that since the government already regulates school food, government is responsible for changing it.

Those opposed to CNA presented research to support their arguments. The Center for Food & Nutrition Policy at Georgetown University stated that overweight children consumed about 14 ounces of carbonated beverages per day — only about two ounces more than kids of normal body weight — and concluded that soft drink consumption was not linked to obesity or poor diet quality (Forshee & Storey, 2001). This study, sponsored by the National Soft Drink Association, was consistently cited by opponents to CNA reform. Nestle (2001) critically evaluated Forshee and Storey's findings as well as other industry-sponsored research and found commonalities. She concluded that research sponsored by industry resulted in a higher probability that results would favor the industry. According to Nestle, research sponsored by the National Soft Drink Association would conclude that soft drink consumption was not linked to obesity because those results serve the best interest of the soft drink industry.

That same year, a team of Harvard researchers

found that 12-year-olds who drank soft drinks regularly were more likely to be overweight than those who didn't. During the two-year study, findings showed that the risk of obesity increased 1.6 times for each additional daily serving of sugar-sweetened soft drink consumed (Ludwig, Peterson, & Gortmaker, 2001). Conflicting research findings such as these fueled the debate in 2004 and again in 2010.

### **School cafeterias should reinforce classroom lessons about good nutritional choices.**

In 2010, the Center for Food & Nutrition Policy at Georgetown University again added research that fueled anti-CNA reform. ABC News reported on the study, which examined the long-term effects of school lunch programs. Its findings concluded that current school lunch programs were successful, and subsidized lunch seemed to encourage kids to attend school. But, it also noted that school lunch programs don't have a dramatic effect on diet and health from childhood into adulthood. Therefore, researchers concluded, eating well at school doesn't mean someone will eat well as an adult (ABC News, 2010). These findings conflicted with previous conclusions that obese kids are more likely to be obese adults.

## In conclusion

A lack of formalized food curriculum in the current system is teaching students they aren't important enough to feed well. Educators are aware of the power of the implicit curriculum and should know what it communicates. Providing students with more fresh fruit and produce, whole grains, and healthy protein promotes making healthy choices and can help them develop habits for a healthy lifestyle. Education has the power to help change the trend. Prioritizing health — demonstrated by what food is served in the school cafeteria and aligning it with nutrition instruction — is imperative for a societal shift against behaviors resulting in obesity. Investing in local farmers helps the local economy. Educators are responsible for teaching civic mindedness, and buying local is one way to accomplish this goal.

**We cannot ignore the fact that, for millions of children, the only meals that they count on are those they get at school or in child care.**

Receiving rare bipartisan approval, President Obama signed the CNA into law on Dec. 13, 2010. This victory was coupled with further reinforcement from research findings. In January 2011, *Educational Researcher* published an article calling for attention to school food because of its correlation to student health and academic performance. The data was collected in 2010, and the results aligned with the CNA initiatives (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). It was evident to many: Healthier food helps kids do better in school.

Sadly, the progress of healthy school food, promised in the 2010 CNA reform, was short-lived. In spring 2011, the House Appropriations Committee signed the Agriculture Appropriations Act (2011), which “directs the Agriculture Department to ditch the first new nutritional standards in 15 years proposed for school breakfasts and lunches because the lawmakers say meals containing more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy will cost an additional \$7 billion over five years — money they say the country can ill afford in difficult economic times” (Layton, 2011, p. 1). In a press release announcing the new legislation, House Appropriations Chairman Hal Rogers (R-Ky.) said, “This bill answers the call from Americans to reduce government spending while still providing for critical programs that keep American agriculture competitive in a global economy.” The bill also discusses antibiotic use on animals, tobacco, and the use of “soft” versus “hard” science as evidence for policy making.

Those who pledged their strong support to the original CNA reforms are hopeful. “Our hope is

that the Senate will reiterate their strong support for these policies rather than try to roll back important progress on obesity prevention,” said Margo Wootan, direction of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (Layton, 2011, p. 1). Unfortunately, the reiteration of Congressional support is yet to come. **K**

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