



Guest Column: The National School Lunch Program - time for a makeover

Today's system means chicken nuggets, tater tots, chocolate milk with high fructose corn syrup and even popsicles can be called 'meals'

*By Chef Ann Cooper, the Renegade Lunch Lady
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I believe that the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is in need of a complete overhaul.

The inception of the program was predicated on the fact that there were malnourished children all across the country that couldn't learn or think.

As these same children grew into adulthood, they became a national security liability, because many of them were too malnourished to become an active part of our armed forces.

Along the decades, the government has set about to assure that nutritious food was being served, and the program came to feed over 30 million children a day with a price tag of over \$8.5 billion a year.

Another function of the program was promoting large scale agriculture and what resulted was a system at odds, supporting large scale farmers, who often produced food that when consumed as the majority of a daily diet is not necessarily healthy and promoting children's health.

To my mind, there is a clear case of conflict of interest in supporting agribusiness companies producing cheap corn, soy, pork and chicken and also being responsible for our children's well-being.

In an effort to control the program as it got larger and larger, more and more regulations were put in place.

The system of controlling over 100,000 schools fell to the states who interpreted the federal guidelines, the adherence of which demanded that school districts spend up to a third of their payroll budget on paperwork, counting kids (to assure that no hungry child who didn't qualify was given free lunch) and number crunching.

The result of this system is that nutrition services departments find themselves and their teams spending an inordinate amount of time striving to follow guidelines as opposed to feeding children.

We're tasked with free and reduced forms, daily student meal counts, monthly reports by free, reduced and paid students, production reports, menus and recipes and nutritional analysis either by the day or week.

The nutritional analysis of what we feed our children has led to a system where chicken nuggets, tater tots, chocolate milk with high fructose corn syrup and canned fruit cocktail or, even in some cases, popsicles are an acceptable meal.

Nutrient analysis allows the governing bodies an easy way to access whether a school district is complying with the guidelines, but is a system where the importance of numbers has replaced the importance of food.

This is a system that demands milk at every meal, yet takes no account of the millions of children who are lactose intolerant.

This is a system that demands a minimum of calories, but not a maximum, which makes no sense in a country where over 30 percent of the children are over-weight or obese.

This extremely flawed system results in agribusiness companies formulating Products (often mistaken as food) that fit the numbers, but has no real relationship to food as we know it, or at least should know it.

As for my team and I, we'd like to be spending all of our time and money feeding children delicious healthy food and educating them on where their food comes from and how it's produced. To make this happen, the NSLP truly needs a makeover!

I believe that the following guidelines, if put into place, would help us focus on feeding children "real," healthy and delicious food:

- Make meals, both breakfast and lunch universal, a system where every child is fed every day. This would alleviate the need for free and reduced applications and tracking.

- Replace the current system of tracking menus by nutrients, to one where the guidelines are based on healthy, delicious balanced meals. These meals should be made up in large part of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, whole grains and include plant based protein.
- Replace the definition of nutritious food, which the system is based on; to one that defines and is based on real FOOD (see full definition below).
- Raise the federal reimbursement rate to \$4.00 - \$5.00 based on the cost of living of the area and dedicate a minimum of \$1.75 to be spent on food. Additionally, dedicate at least \$1.00 be spent on fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and whole grains with a priority placed on procuring regionally produced food.
- Dedicate resources to building and or rebuilding kitchens in school districts to accommodate scratch cooking.
- Dedicate resources to set-up a training program to teach school food service workers to cook from scratch.
- Set-up a National Chefs Corp which allows culinary students to work off student loans by working in K-12 schools.
- Institute hands-on experiential learning in the form of cooking and gardening classes that become a mandatory part of the educational system.
- Dedicate resources to a National marketing campaign to help change children's relationship to food, so that healthy/delicious school food – becomes cool food.
- Underscore the importance of eating healthy food by instituting questions on the SAT tests that highlight sustainable food and agriculture.

This may seem like an incredible task given the size of the system and the immensity of the challenges – but I did say it was a makeover that was needed.

However, the alternative is unthinkable. The CDC has stated that of the children born in the year 2000, one out of every three Caucasians and one out of every two African Americans and Hispanics will contract diabetes in their lifetime – the result: the first generation in our country's history to die at a younger age than their parents.

With the first African American family in the White House, with the achievement and life-expectancy gap (based on the have and the have-nots) ever-widening.

I believe that this is the social justice issue of our time, and that we have a moral imperative to take on this seemingly Herculean task.

In the end, if successful, we will assure the health of all children for generations to come and we just might save the planet in the bargain.

Chef Ann Cooper, the Renegade Lunch Lady, is on a mission to transform cafeterias into culinary classrooms for students — one school lunch at a time.