

**FREE LUNCH AFTER ALL?
AN HISTORICAL REVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION
OF SCHOOL MEALS IN NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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ABSTRACT:

The Department of Defense is the only government entity serving more meals daily than New York City public schools, which operates a meal program with a rich history of both progress and regress. This story of New York City school meals is one that shows both local action and inputs of the federal government. A landmark policy change in 2017 announced all 1.1 million schoolchildren enrolled in New York City public schools would receive free lunches. Prior to the 2017 decision, there existed a history of charity, corruption, legislation, and ingenuity. This paper traces the history of school meals in New York City public schools, and highlights the path to the *Lunch Is At No Charge For All NYC Students* (New York City Department of Education, 2017) announcement.

Keywords: New York City, school meals, New York City Board of Education, United States Department of Agriculture.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF FREE LUNCHES

The chancellor of New York City public schools chose a basement cafeteria in Hell's Kitchen to announce all 1.1 million enrolled students would receive free lunches effective September 7th, 2017 (New York City Department of Education, 2017). The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) and associated policy initiatives predated and made possible this announcement, which Chancellor Fariña praised as being “about equity” (New York City Department of Education, 2017). Policies in the 20th and 21st Centuries affecting the New York City school Meal Program have targeted obesity, eligibility, stigma, and equity.

The signing of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) in 2010 represented Federal legislation affecting school nutrition programs, including the New York City School Meal Program. Implemented in 2012, the HHFKA increased funding, simplified automatic enrollment, and authorized schools the option to provide meals without charge to all students if 40% of the student body qualified for free meals. These changes were intended to increase participation, remove stigmas with free and reduced price lunches, and make it easier for schools to offer meals to all students (Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, 2010.)

In the policy pages of the HHFKA, goals were identified to “reduce America's childhood obesity epidemic and reduce health risks for America's children by helping schools produce balanced meals (Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, 2010). Regardless of the era, successful school meal programs must satisfy multiple stakeholders including children, parents, schools, health authorities, politicians, and the food industry (Ralston, Newman, Clauson, Guthrie, & Buzby, 2008). According to A. R. Ruis, history suggests that a failure to prioritize children's well-being over all else will continue to be the “greatest producer of ill health” (2017, p. 165). The story of school lunch programs in New York City is one that has been constantly changing, and is fraught with conflict, innovation, and stagnation. This paper describes a condensed history of the New York public school lunchroom.

INTRODUCTION OF MEALS IN SCHOOLS

The Salvation Army offered free breakfasts to Manhattan schoolchildren beginning in 1905, with an immediate problem of providing menu items that the diverse mix of poor immigrant children of various ethnic and religious backgrounds would eat. Unable to resolve this problem and thus, unable to give breakfasts away, the Salvation Army discontinued the service. However, in spite of these sociocultural issues, other charitable organizations continued with community-based solutions to address food insecurity of New York City schoolchildren (Ruis, 2015).

Shortly before Thanksgiving in 1908, Mabel Hyde Kittredge, a home economist, provided free soup and bread to Manhattan schoolchildren from an elementary school in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. Her volunteer organization, the School Lunch Committee (SLC) was composed of home economists, educators, physicians, and philanthropists who wanted to improve the health and educational prospects of Manhattan's poorest schoolchildren (Ruis, 2017). The SLC undertook the work of feeding schoolchildren in the first decade of the twentieth century, a time when enrollments in New York City public schools doubled, and overcrowding was the norm. Double-occupancy classrooms, or those which housed two grades of schoolchildren instead of one were common, and only 42% of students were able to pass the eighth grade.

Meals of approximately 450 calories consisted of soup, salad or vegetable, with bread, and were tailored to the ethnic make-up of students at individual schools. In 1908, the same year as the inception of the SLC, the Board of Education (Board) surveyed the health of children and

couldn't agree if the responsibility for feeding school children belonged to parents or the Board (Meckel, 2013). Teachers, administrators, social workers, and the SLC disagreed with the Board's conclusion, and continued providing lunches.

During the remainder of 1908, the SLC served 19,000 meals, providing compelling evidence for expansion. Their goals were to provide the meals at no cost to the students and the Board, to provide social services for children most in need, and teach classes for mothers in childcare, especially those with malnourished children (Ruis, 2015). The SLC wished to provide more than supplemental feeding by addressing broader social and public health needs. The organization grew in popularity with parents and administrators, and began serving lunches at PS 21 in the Little Italy neighborhood of New York City in 1909. An Italian chef was hired to serve this population of 2,100 students. During that year, 143 of the children who were diagnosed as malnourished in PS 51 and PS 21 regularly took lunches provided by the SLC. After three months, medical examinations showed the children who took SLC meals gained three times as much weight as children who had not participated in the meal program. During that year, the SLC incurred a deficit of \$425 to provide the meals, and supplanted this with charitable donations. The SLC theorized increasing participation would ensure the program remain self-sustaining, and the per-child cost of preparing meals would decrease (Ruis, 2017).

Between 1910 and 1915, SLC continued adding elementary schools with PS 92 used as a commissary kitchen to prepare more than 80,000 lunches per year for the eight schools it served. Nutrition science guided menu planning, but the diverse palate of immigrants still had to be satisfied. Hoping to expand to meet requests by additional schools, the SLC proposed a transfer of control to the Board (Ruis, 2015).

In 1919, after years of negotiations, the SLC ceded control of their pilot program to the Board, despite lack of Board consensus to take control due to discord about potential legal issues and reluctance to put the responsibility of social welfare on the Board. In spite of this, the school district Superintendent was able to solicit charitable donations to continue the SLC's work and outfit kitchens in sixty schools with the equipment needed to prepare school lunches.

In 1919, the Board's control of lunch programs grew despite constant debates of state responsibility and funding (Ruis, 2015). Despite the progress of the lunch program, the Board of Estimate, a powerful government agency in New York City, took issue and demanded kitchen laborers' salaries be covered by the Board, knowing this nontrivial sum could never be reached ("Penny Lunches' in Schools Halted by a Technicality," 1919.; Ruis, 2015). In order to avoid paying for labor, the lunch program was dismantled in favor of a concessionaire system that forfeited all control from the purview of the Board. It was not control the Board was after, it was profit as it kept 50% of concessionaires' earnings and dubbed a "profit driven enterprise" (Ruis, 2017, p. 79).

Relinquishing control to concessionaires not only saw the end of lunches tailored to ethnic populations, but also a pivot toward foods that scored higher on popularity indices and conformed to the "American Diet" (Diner, 2009). Dwindling popularity for the standard, cyclic meals that did not consider students' ethnicities caused participation in school provided lunches to decline.

STATE OF THE LUNCH PLATE IN THE 1920'S

In 1925, the Board was providing lunches in only twenty-eight schools, fewer than half the number the SLC had controlled a decade earlier (Ruis, 2017). Not happy with the quality of the school lunches, Kittredge joined members of the City's medical, educational, and charitable organizations to found the School Lunch Inquiry Committee (SLIC) whose goal was to pressure

the Board to return to healthy and demographically targeted meals similar to the SLC successes. In 1927, the Board asked for an additional \$10,000 to their budget and agreed to phase out all concessionaire contracts.

During the 1928-1929 school year, the Board repaired equipment, and increased publicly funded lunch programs, eliminating concessionaire service in select schools. In addition, they also established and enforced nutrition standards for all publically funded programs. These changes were indicative of the public-private partnership that existed in the school lunch service that was susceptible to political corruption and private advocacy. Compared to other large cities in the United States, New York City lagged behind in development of the school lunch program and lost distinctive characteristics when the Board turned away from the palate-responsive ideology of the SLC. In school lunches, reformers saw a way to reach greater numbers with their charitable efforts. (Ruis, 2017).

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND SCHOOL FOOD

The 1930's began with the federal government increasing involvement and support for school lunches, due to the Great Depression. Homelessness, unemployment, and hunger were rampant. Private charities, churches, and state pensions (or old-age pensions) formed the country's safety net, and were faltering to provide adequate assistance for those in need (Poppendieck, 2011).

The Great Depression led to the federal government's unprecedented response, which included federal support to school meal programs. While the 1920's saw investment in labor saving technologies on the country's farms, the 1930's and 1940's saw regulation of the agricultural market as a mechanism to protect farmers from producing crops which required greater costs to grow, process and transport that could be gained at market (Poppendieck, 2011).

Because pre-World-War II agricultural efforts created surplus commodities, members of Congress required these to be purchased by the government and diverted to feed hungry schoolchildren (Boucher, 1999). These surpluses were available locally and typically sent without warning to school districts. Schools often lacked adequate refrigeration, and the food arrived at schools unfit to eat and rotted without temperature protection. This waste caused an uproar, but planted a proverbial seed for the use of surplus agricultural subsidies. Due to these challenges, Congress halted agricultural distributions in 1943 (Poppendieck, 2011).

The incorporation of school meals into national agricultural policy gave state and local governments the authority to purchase surplus US-grown crops for use in school lunches from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In addition, it also designated the amount of commodities reserved for each entity. This policy, made formal in the National School Lunch Act of 1946 (NSLA) met similar criticism which Kittredge had faced in the early 1900's: the nourishment of schoolchildren was not the responsibility of the federal government, but that of the state or family. It was argued in short, that the NSLA was neither about hunger nor malnourishment but about agricultural economics and price protection, and the preparation of schoolchildren for military service (Poppendieck, 2011).

WINNING ANOTHER WAR: FOOD WASTE

In 1963, the New York schools' enrollment was 1,053,700 students, and of those, 437,000 participated in the school lunch program with nearly half of participants qualifying for free lunches. The remaining lunches were priced between \$0.40 - \$0.70 each with the former as reduced price, and the latter as full price (Benjamin, 1963). Both government contributions and student participation increased, but the number of students paying full price for meals decreased

as nearly half of the participants qualified for free lunches (Benjamin, 1963; Poppendieck, 2011). The increase in government support and participation gave rise to problems associated with nutritional quality and food waste (Poppendieck, 2011). Reports from the 1960's surfaced detailing inadequate or inedible food surfaced with increasing frequency. The New York Times restaurant critic, Mimi Sheraton, said of the school meals in 1976: "Standard items are tough, sodden hamburgers that are pasty and usually biting salty; limply breaded fried chicken; gray, pulpy fish...and salty hot dogs, often tinged with a gray-green pallor" (Poppendieck, 2011).

In response to outcry over the wasted food, New York City schools borrowed strategies from other school districts and introduced "fast-fortified foods". Items included homemade soups, salad bars, and items that proved to be much more popular: tacos, pizza, cheeseburgers, French fries, and milkshakes (Sheraton, 1978). Although these more popular foods would be less likely to be wasted, they were nutritionally lacking (Sheraton, 1977). Elizabeth Cagan, chief administrator of the office of school foodservices, said that the foods would be "nutritionally enriched with unbleached flour, whole milk, fresh produce, and vitamin supplements" (Sheraton, 1977).

FROM MALNOURISHED TO OBESE

Haskins (2005) showed that physical activity declined precipitously from 1970 through the end of the century, and the percentage of overweight school children quadrupled from 1960 to 2002. Ronald Reagan, upon taking office in 1980, promised to "downsize" government, and started with cuts to the NSLP. Reagan's argument was that the NSLP funded lunches for students who could pay for them, and cutting federal funding for school lunches would help save taxpayer dollars (St Pierre & Puma, 1992). According to Levine (2010), the cuts disproportionately affected black schoolchildren, and that it was impossible to distinguish the children who truly deserved free meals.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton declared that no more cuts to the NSLP would be made, and announced that USDA would "improve the nutritional quality of the lunches, reducing the amount of fat and salt, and increase fruits and vegetables" (Burros, 1993). Joel Klein became chancellor of New York's public schools in 2002 and commissioned a review of the finances of the school system. This marketing campaign was named "Child First Initiative" and goals included: stopping "hemorrhaging money" and trying to "make school food cool" by adding a logo, tag line, "Feed Your Mind", and colorful lunchroom signs. The Office of School Food and Nutrition Services was also given a new name: SchoolFood (Poppendieck, 2011). Further initiatives in the 2000's included a new foodservice director and an executive chef hired from private industry to revamp menus.

Under the guidance of Executive Chef Jorge Collazo, menu items changed in response to Klein's marketing campaign. Collazo took advantage of the market power of SchoolFood, and demanded product reformulations such as removal of high fructose corn syrup and preservatives from dairy, elimination of artificial ingredients from other menu items, and when possible, New York State grown produce be served.

CONCLUSION

The NSLP has been tasked with satisfying multiple stakeholders for greater than a century (Ralston, et. al., 2008). It has constantly been changing, with the most recent legislation, the HRFKA, requiring more whole grains as well as fruits and vegetables and less sodium to achieve goals of combating malnourishment and obesity. New York City SchoolFood serves a quantity of meals second only to the Department of Defense, and has been both an exemplar, and a laggard throughout its history. The September 7th announcement of free meals for all school

children put New York City onto a list of other cities offering the same. It is clear that the meals served in New York City public schools, as well as throughout the country, are not without cost or effort, but the work of lawmakers, parents, school administrators, and countless advocates through the years.

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BIOGRAPHY

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