



BACK TO BASICS: PROMOTING HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD

Meeting Report

*Prepared for a Grantmakers In Health Strategy Session and Site Visit
Denver, Colorado*

With support from the Colorado Health Foundation, Grantmakers In Health convened the strategy session and site visit *Back to Basics: Promoting Healthy School Food*. This brief paper highlights some key issues that set the stage for the meeting and outlines main aspects of the discussion.

I wasn't surprised when I saw that they were giving chicken patty...again! ... I think I'm not the only one who wants some variety... The only good part about this lunch was the peach... The beans were soggy and wet; no one likes soggy and wet beans. Hopefully next year, the lunch will change...

-Gabriella, Public School Student
(The Young Women's Leadership School 2010)

Although childhood obesity has attracted increasing visibility over the past decade, the reversal of current trends still eludes us. Testing promising interventions, producing evidence on what works, and spreading effective solutions are among the challenges we face as a nation, and as funders, as we struggle to prevent the daunting health, economic, and social consequences of inaction for today's children.

While the causes of obesity are complex, unhealthy eating habits clearly play a role. Improving school food is, thus, a natural, practical step toward reducing childhood obesity and promoting a healthier future for our children. Schools are obvious partners, but they face numerous challenges when it comes to improving food offerings, including financial limitations, time constraints, and competing demands.

By examining the current system and identifying points of opportunity, foundations can provide valuable support in the push for school meal reform. *Back to Basics: Promoting Healthy School Food* aimed to address the following key questions about funders' role in this effort:

- What works when it comes to improving school food? What has not worked? What lessons have been learned? How does local, state, and federal policy fit in? How can policy change promote healthier school food?
- What do schools really need? How can foundations best support schools?
- What are some strategies for moving forward? What are first steps to take?

Why Focus on School Food?

Not all school food is unhealthy, but much of it is. As a result, there is widespread support for school meal reform. A 2010 survey commissioned by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation found that 63 percent of parents of school-age children identified the nutritional quality of local school food as "poor" or "only fair." Over 85 percent of surveyed parents said fresh fruits and vegetables should be offered every day, and more than half said unhealthy items, such as pizza, chicken nuggets, and hamburgers, should be served either once a week or not at all.

Schools also have an interest in the food students eat. Proper nutrition is linked to healthy development and growth, the ability to learn, and future economic attainment, while poor nutrition interferes with cognitive, behavioral, and social functioning (Arabella Advisors 2010; Story et al. 2006; Salinsky 2009).

Building on the momentum generated by parents and schools, this issue has moved into the national spotlight. A few of many recent examples include:

- *Let's Move!*, started by First Lady Michelle Obama, which aims to solve the childhood obesity epidemic within a generation. "Healthy Schools" is one focus of the campaign.
- The recent television show *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, which brought national attention to the need for school food reform by highlighting the poor food quality in one West Virginia district.
- The HealthierUS Schools Challenge, created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which establishes rigorous standards for promoting health in schools, including food quality. Over the 2010-11 school year, the USDA hopes to double the number of schools that meet the challenge.

Who Makes the Decisions?

Despite the growing attention to school food, real change does not come easily. Policies and practices vary from school to school, state to state, and at different levels of government. Untangling the pieces can be challenging.

At the federal level, the recently passed Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act governs the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). Both programs are administered by the Food and Nutrition Service within the USDA, but are implemented through a joint effort of federal, state, and local agencies. Roles vary based on states and districts, but are generally defined as follows (Salinsky 2009):

- The Food and Nutrition Service provides funding to states for school meals, coordinates policy, provides technical assistance, and oversees state work.
- State education agencies usually administer both the NSLP and the SBP through agreements with local school food authorities. They also manage the fiscal aspects of the program, monitor local performance and compliance with standards, and provide technical assistance.
- Local school food authorities, linked either to a specific school district or a group of districts, serve school meals, certify free and reduced-price meal eligibility, and maintain program data for reporting and reimbursement claims.

Each day, the NSLP serves around 30 million children and the SBP serves around 10 million. Both

of these programs have grown significantly over time; 20 years ago, 24 million school lunches and 4 million school breakfasts were served per day (USDA 2010a; USDA 2010b). Public or nonprofit private school districts that opt to participate in these programs receive cash reimbursements and agricultural commodities from the USDA. In return, the schools must offer free or reduced-price meals to children of low-income families.

The costs add up: for fiscal year 2008, the federal government spent \$2.4 billion on the SBP and \$9.3 billion on the NSLP. But, per meal, reimbursements are no more than \$1.48 for breakfast and \$2.72 for lunch (USDA 2010a; USDA 2010b). To supplement this funding, some states provide a small amount of additional support. Districts may also chip in, but after factoring in labor and equipment expenses, schools are left with much less than the total reimbursement amount to spend on food. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act includes a six cent reimbursement increase for lunches that meet new nutrition requirements, but this provision will not take effect for several years.

Food service programs are typically expected to be self supported. To remain within their limited budgets, schools frequently use commodity foods as part of their meal program offerings. Commodity foods, also called USDA Foods, are donated by the federal government to schools that participate in the USDA meal programs. Some states decide which products to order, and some pass the decision along to the districts. “Bonus foods,” or foods that are available in excess, may also be offered.

How Healthy Is School Food?

My school recently devised a rule that requires all students who purchase a school lunch to take a fruit, whether or not they want it. It's a good idea to encourage kids to eat fruit, but it resulted in food fights since students were forced to take apples or oranges they didn't want to eat. One student actually collected everyone's unwanted oranges in a bag, snuck them onto the playground, and started pelting people! If the lunches were healthier, rather than slices of pizza, the kids would have fruits and vegetables incorporated within their meal.

- Liz, Public School Teacher
(Elliott 2010)

Healthy cooking requires time and money—two things that are hard to come by in most U.S. schools. As a result, many turn to processed foods. Since they require minimal preparation at the school, there is much less labor involved. The combination of convenience and lower cost can make it difficult to find affordable alternatives.

Even so, federally reimbursable school lunches are currently required to provide about one-third of students' recommended dietary allowance (RDA) for protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, iron, and calories, with no more than 30 percent of the calories coming from fat and less than 10 percent from saturated fat (Story et al. 2006). School breakfasts are required to provide one-fourth of students' RDA for the same nutrients (Story et al. 2006). This may sound promising, but these

requirements are based on the 1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, despite the release of new guidelines in 2000 and 2005. Multiplying the problem, even the outdated RDA standards are not consistently followed. Fortunately, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act directs the USDA to develop new school meal nutrition standards.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act also gives the USDA authority to regulate all foods sold on a school campus through the school day, including “competitive foods.” The term “competitive foods” covers products sold outside of federal school food programs, often consisting of vending, fundraiser, or à la carte items such as soda, salty snacks, and high-fat baked goods. To date, these foods have not been required to meet federal nutrition standards, and their sale tends to reduce students’ participation in school meal programs (FRAC 2009). Students of low-income families may be hardest hit; if they choose to eat less healthy competitive foods instead of the free or reduced-price school meals, they may not be able to make up the nutritional loss later (not to mention the money they spent) (FRAC 2009). But, competitive foods create a conundrum for schools; they generate money for poorly funded meal programs and may even be used for other parts of the school budget.

What Challenges Do Schools Face?

This is, perhaps, the most important question. Although schools certainly care about student health, their primary purpose is to provide education. Faced with immediate challenges like large class sizes and standardized test pressures, meals are not always schools’ top priority. Further complicating the situation, schools may run out of time to offer all meals on a conventional schedule or to give students sufficient time to eat. Long lines and crowded, noisy cafeterias are not conducive to healthy eating, and students simply may not eat more nutritious choices when less healthy competitive foods are available (Story et al. 2006). The stigma surrounding free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch also discourages some students from eating these meals. Adding to the list of challenges are the previously mentioned financial restraints surrounding school meal programs.

We can't bring food from home every day. So we are encouraged to say, "You know what? A pack of chips are only \$.25 and chips taste much better than school food so I'm going to buy that." If we were served rice with fresh vegetables, who would waste their money on a pack of chips? No one!

- Khadija and Aysha, Public School Students
(The Young Women’s Leadership School 2010)

What’s to Come?

We have a long way to go, but the creation of new school meal nutrition standards will be a very important step toward improving school food. The new nutrition standards will be based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and will be issued by the USDA for public comment in late 2010 or early 2011. Among the IOM committee’s recommendations is that efforts

to improve school food focus on meal requirements (specific foods or food groups) rather than nutrients (IOM 2009). Interestingly, the maximum caloric content recommended by the committee is only slightly higher than the current minimum. Detailed nutrition recommendations are outlined in Table 1.

Meal requirements like those proposed by the IOM may raise food and equipment costs and require training for staff. Without changes in funding, schools may find revenue generated from competitive foods or other sources even more necessary.

Table 1: Key Changes in School Lunch Requirements Recommended by the IOM

Dietary Item	Current Requirements	Recommendations
Fruits	Considered together as a fruit and vegetable group. No specifications for the type of vegetable	Required daily amount increased
Vegetables		-Two servings required daily, amount increased -Must include dark green, bright orange, legumes, starchy, and other vegetables each week
Grains/Breads	No requirement for whole grains	At least half must be whole grain-rich
Milk	Whole, reduced-fat, low-fat, fat-free milks (plain or flavored)	Fat-free (plain or flavored) and plain low-fat milk only
Calories	Must meet minimum level	Must be within minimum and maximum level
Sodium	None (decreased level recommended)	Gradually but markedly decrease sodium to specified level by 2020

Source: IOM 2009

Also at the federal level, USDA’s School Food Commodity Program has expanded to include more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and options with less sugar (USDA 2009). Changes have also been implemented at the state level. For example, cooking oils that contain trans fat have been banned in North Carolina, school milk must be one percent fat or less in Rhode Island, and the sugar content of breakfast cereals is limited in West Virginia (Salinsky 2009). In California, and in many other states, vending machine contents have been made healthier. District- and school-level regulations have also been implemented across the country, although results have been inconsistent.

Meeting Discussion

Back to Basics: Promoting Healthy School Food was an opportunity for different facets of the school food world to learn from each other, create new alliances, and identify steps for moving forward. Discussion was informed by presentations from Jane Brand of the Colorado Department of Education Nutrition Unit, Ann Cooper of the Boulder Valley School District, Kathy DelTonto of the Montrose School District, Kelly Dunkin of the Colorado Health Foundation, Glenn Gustafson

of Colorado Springs School District 11, Faith Mitchell of Grantmakers In Health, Wes Paxton of Adams City High School, Nicholas Saccaro of Revolution Foods, Cindy Venev of Adams City High School, Anne Warhover of the Colorado Health Foundation, Amy Winterfeld of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Of all the sectors represented at the meeting, the voices of those representing schools sent the strongest message; we can change, but we need support. Ann Cooper, who helped reform the Berkeley, California school district meal program, recommended that stakeholders take a realistic look at the school food environment. For example, while school meal programs are expected to be self-sustaining, this simply may not be possible as reforms are implemented.

Based on her experiences in both California and Colorado, Ms. Cooper identified five items all school food programs need to consider as they work to serve healthier meals:

- **Food** – Where does it come from? How do we get it? Can we be flexible when working with farmers? (Need to use what is available and in season.)
- **Finances** – How do we pay for it?
- **Facilities** – What equipment is needed?
- **Human Resources** – Is the kitchen appropriately staffed? Do the food service workers see themselves as chefs?
- **Marketing** – How do you get the kids to eat the new food?

At **Adams City High** (Commerce City, Colorado), the impact of healthy changes to the school menu was magnified by the following structural changes within the school:

- The meal program went universal-free, meaning all meals are provided free of charge to students. (Federal and state incentives are offered to help offset the cost.) This change has encouraged more students to eat meals at school.
- Breakfast is now offered daily in the classrooms, instead of in the cafeteria. As a result, participation has drastically increased.
- Students are no longer allowed to go off-site for lunch unless they have earned the privilege by achieving a predetermined grade point average.

The last bullet, marketing, is most easily forgotten but very important. As healthy changes are made, there may be an unavoidable and temporary reduction in participation. To reduce the financial blow, the Boulder District held Iron Chef Competitions to identify winning dishes for use in the school cafeteria and published a calendar highlighting recipes from the meal program.

Kathy DeTonto echoed the points made by Ann Cooper. In 2010 Ms. DeTonto opened up the Montrose District's school kitchens for a meal assessment funded by the Colorado Health Foundation and conducted by the nonprofit LiveWell Colorado. Commenting on the experience, she explained, "When they came to do the assessment, they looked at the results and said, 'The district is doing well, but how can we help them do better? Let's give them tools to help.' It wasn't

about finger pointing and who’s to blame. It was about getting together and doing the best for our kids.”

As a next step, Ms. DeTonto and her food service workers attended Culinary Boot Camp. Also funded by the Colorado Health Foundation, the Boot Camp is a weeklong course on cooking techniques, nutrition, menu development, commodities ordering, and math skills, led by professional chefs. Post-training, Ms. DeTonto eliminated chocolate milk and most processed foods from the district’s menu. (To date, seven Colorado districts have taken part in the assessments and 41 districts have attended the Boot Camps.)

Revolution Foods has taken a different approach to improving school food. As a private company, it provides healthy meals and nutrition education to participating schools. In most cases, the food is prepared at an off-site facility and shipped to schools in trucks equipped with refrigerated compartments and outlets for warming ovens. This model is particularly appealing to schools that do not have kitchen facilities; of the schools served in Colorado, most are unable to prepare food on-site. While no official study has been conducted, there is anecdotal evidence of improved student performance and behavior after the switch to Revolutions Foods’ healthy meals.

The Policy Front

To lessen the burden on individual school districts, policy reform can help shape an environment more conducive to healthy eating. During the meeting, Amy Winterfeld and Margo Wootan highlighted policy opportunities for foundations, including:

- weighing in during the comment period for the new school meal standards, and helping schools move toward these standards by providing related technical assistance, training, equipment, and support;
- helping educate potential, nontraditional partners on the benefits of good nutrition, in and out of school, and ways to integrate nutrition with their work;
- funding farm-to-school programs or the creation of a statewide farm-to-school coordinator position or producer database; and
- advocating for the incorporation (or further incorporation) of nutrition into statewide curricula and related tests.

Making changes can be even more difficult if the food service department is privatized. When **Colorado Springs School District 11** moved from privately to school-run cafeterias in order to gain more control over the quality of food served, it enabled the district to increase pay, hire a chef and nutritionist, and work with local providers again. But, there are still challenges facing the district; as in many schools, the lunch period is squeezed into 20 minutes, and there is little time for nutrition education due to the emphasis on standardized assessments.

Conclusion

Schools have grown increasingly open to changes to promote health, with more and more districts and states making improvements to their meal programs. Their efforts are reinforced by the new Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which although far from perfect, is much stronger than the Child Nutrition Act of 2004.

Whether tapping into the local school community or working toward state or federal policy change, a substantial agenda remains. As meeting participants agreed, foundations can help propel the movement forward.

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