

Competing for Lunch Money: The Food Industry's Presence in American Public Schools

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Abstract:

In recent years, the menus of public school cafeterias have changed. American children are choosing to eat name brand, processed foods from vending machines and fast food restaurants instead of federally provided and nutritionally balanced school lunches. The multi-billion dollar marketing strategies of major food companies undeniable fuel this phenomenon. In this article, we examine the significant impact of the food industry's presence in American public schools. On one hand, the sale of "competitive" foods in schools proves to be a successful business tactic for food advertisers and schools alike. However, an increase of processed foods consumed in schools can be linked to the modern dilemma of childhood obesity and the declining health of American youth. Some argue that we are witnessing a healthy, market economy at work and children's eating habits are the responsibility of family and friends at home. Others more strongly believe that stricter government regulation and more consistent health education may be necessary to correct this problem.

Nowadays, the scariest thing about school lunches is no longer mystery meats and soggy vegetables. Even as the United States Department of Agriculture continually strives to improve the quality and nutrition of food served to students in public schools, its efforts are being challenged. Major food companies are capitalizing on adolescent appetites by introducing junk foods into schools; students, not surprisingly, prefer to eat these over "school lunch." In recent decades, the sale of "competitive" food and food products in American public schools poses direct competition to the USDA's federally regulated school lunches, while ultimately putting the health of American school children at risk. Increasingly, children are buying their lunches from vending machines and trading in their milk for soda while rates

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of childhood obesity skyrocket. How have processed convenience and fast foods been allowed to infiltrate public school cafeterias and hedge out the more nutritious federal lunches? Who is responsible for American children's diets? Most importantly, what can be done to protect the health of American youth?

In order to better understand the impact that the food industry has in school cafeterias, it is necessary to examine the battle line drawn between competitive foods and school meals provided by the USDA's National School Lunch Program.

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program that operates in over 83 percent of all public and non-profit private schools across the United States.¹ Administered by the USDA, the program provides schools with approved foods and cash subsidies in order to feed students during school days. In return, schools must only serve meals that meet federal nutrition requirements, and must offer reduced-price or free meals to children whose families live at or below the poverty level.² The program formally began in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act. The act aimed to "safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children" and to encourage the domestic consumption of surplus agricultural goods.³ In its first year, the NSLP provided meals to 7.1 million children.⁴ In 2011, the USDA reported that it provided "nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day."⁵ Since the NSLP began, more than 224 billion school lunches have been served.⁶

In 1946, the ideal school lunch meal included 1/2 pint of whole milk, a protein-rich food (2 ounces of meat, poultry, cheese, or fish, 1/2 cup of cooked peas, beans, or soybeans, 4 tablespoons of peanut butter, or 1 egg), 3/4 cup of vegetables or fruits, 1 "portion" of bread, and 2 teaspoons of butter or fortified margarine.⁷ The USDA has since modified its nutritional requirements, eliminating butter altogether as a nutritional pillar and advocating more poultry, fruits, vegetables, and nuts.⁸

The USDA most recently updated its school meals' nutritional standards in 2010 under the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act. Compared to lunch in 1946, NSLP lunches in 2013 must serve 9th through 12th graders at least 1 cup of fruit and 1 cup of vegetables, at least 2 ounces of grains (preferably whole grains), at least 2 ounces of meat or meat alternatives, and one cup of low-fat or fat-free milk per student per day.⁹

Dietary guidelines also specify recommended calorie, sodium, and fat intake for each school age group.¹⁰

Ever since the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, both legislators and the USDA agree that school lunches can help children develop healthy eating habits that will last them a lifetime.¹¹ Numerous studies conducted around the country have shown that students who participate in school meal programs consume better diets than those who do not eat school lunch.¹² In 2003, Philip Gleason, senior nutrition researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, and Carol W. Sutor, a nutritional consultant, published the results of their analysis of the dietary intake of 1,680 children who consumed at least one school meal over a 48-hour period.¹³ Gleason and Sutor compared the amounts of vitamins and minerals that these children consumed with the corresponding 1989 Recommended Daily Allowances levels.¹⁴ They discovered that eating school lunch did in fact increase a child's intake of essential vitamins including vitamins A, B6, B12, calcium, iron, and zinc.¹⁵ While school lunch participants were consuming (not surprisingly) more fat and protein than non-participants, participants had comparatively lower intake of added sugars.¹⁶

Over the past few decades, despite the strides that government officials, nutritionists, educators, and parents have made towards providing healthy school lunches, the health of American school children is deteriorating. However, government-regulated cafeteria chicken is not to blame. Gleason and Sutor suggest that an increased intake of soft drinks and sugared fruit drinks “may be contributing to excess energy intake and decreased intake of essential nutrient in the United States.”¹⁷ They recommend:

“Over the past few decades, ...the health of American school children is deteriorating”

As schools claim to serve their students healthier meals, they should also assess their overall eating environments. In addition to improving the nutritional quality of school lunches, schools should evaluate à la carte items in their cafeterias, and foods available elsewhere in school, as in vending machines. These foods may also influence the quality of children's diets.¹⁸

The USDA's National School Lunch Program is in fact being hedged out of school cafeterias by competitive, name-brand food companies. "Competitive foods" – products from fast food chains, pre-packaged and processed snacks, soft drinks, and candy – are appearing in public schools in a number of ways.¹⁹ A survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2000 found that more than 20 percent of schools sell brand-name fast food such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell on their premises.²⁰ In the same year, the School Health Policies and Programs study revealed that 43 percent of elementary schools, 74 percent of middle schools, and 98 percent of high schools sell competitive foods in vending machines, snack bars, and school stores.²¹ In her article, "Trading Nutrition for Education," Deborah Crooks, a specialist in nutrition and food security, profiles an elementary school located in Bridges county Kentucky that operates one such store. The small "snack room" in the school houses shelf upon shelf of candy, chips, crackers, and granola bars, with a soft drink vending machine just outside the door.²² Students at Bridges Elementary have free access to the store to purchase snacks every afternoon.²³ Schools like Bridges Elementary highlight the two sides of the issue at hand. Not only are processed, competitive foods present in public schools, but students have easy access to them.

The story of how and why food companies have infiltrated public school cafeterias and "snack rooms" so effectively largely centers on advertising. The amount of money that packaged food producers spend annually on advertising is staggering. In 2012, the Federal Trade Commission published a report reviewing the marketing expenditures and activities of 48 major American food companies.²⁴ The FTC found that in 2009, food companies spent around \$9.6 billion marketing their products to consumers.²⁵ In that year, PepsiCo alone spent \$1.7 billion in advertising, generating \$108 billion in retail food sales.²⁶ The FTC also discovered that these companies allocated \$1.8 billion for advertising directed solely at children and teens (ages 2 to 17).²⁷ It appears that some American food companies are simply marketing machines.

Selling food to children is big business. In 2000, Quaker Oats spent \$15 million for a 5- month campaign marketing solely Cap'n Crunch cereal.²⁸ American children, from 2-year-olds to 18- year-olds, control significant amounts of money and have increasing influence on purchase decisions.²⁹ In Food Politics, Marion Nestle, a professor in nutrition, food studies, and public health at NYU, highlights studies showing

that by the late '90s, American children aged 7 to 12 controlled \$8.9 billion in spending money, and teenagers spent approximately \$119 billion per year.³⁰ Numbers like these lead soft drink and fast food companies to “unapologetically” name 8- to 12-year-olds in their marketing demographics.³¹

The most common food advertising methods are the most visible: television commercials, magazine ads, product placement in movies and television shows, licensing popular characters to appear on food labels and cereal boxes.³²

However, the food industry has also devised methods to reach children where they are most vulnerable to influence: in school. In the words of Marion Nestle, school children are an “unparalleled marketing opportunity” for they are a captive audience for food companies.³³ 95 percent of Americans aged 5 to 17 years old are enrolled in school for at least 6 hours a day, 180 days out of the year.³⁴ Mary Story, Karen Kaphingst, and Simone French, specialists in epidemiology and community health, write in regards to schools, “No other institution has as much continuous and intensive contact with children during their first two decades of life.”³⁵

Food companies have capitalized on this opportunity by sponsoring educational programs and materials (such as textbook covers, posters, and instructional materials), and by advertising in school gymnasiums and on scoreboards.³⁶ Food companies also promote their products through fundraisers, and through incentive programs such as Box Tops for Education or the Pizza Hut Book-It program that present their products as rewards for academic performance.³⁷

Food companies can then provide easy access for the foods they advertise. As discussed, a vast majority of American public elementary, middle, and high schools sell competitive foods in school cafeterias as à la carte items, in vending machines and school stores, and at snack bars. By expanding into schools, food companies are aiming to fully saturate the everyday lives of their consumers with their products. Susan Linn and Courtney L. Novosat – leaders of the national coalition, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood – explain in “Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century,” that “Corporations are trying to establish a situation where kids are exposed to their brand in as many different places as possible throughout the course of the day

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or the week, or almost anywhere they turn in the course of their daily rituals.³⁸ Companies hope to establish brand recognition and loyalty to their products. The key to ensuring many years of revenue and job security is monopolizing the tastes of each new generation of consumers as early as possible.

Studies have shown that very young children can already distinguish between advertised brands and establish preferences for them. Researchers at Stanford University tested the effectiveness of brand recognition among 3- to 5-year-olds.³⁹ 63 children were presented with two identical McDonald's meals of chicken nuggets, french fries, milk, and carrots, with one meal presented in McDonald's branded wrapping and one in unbranded wrapping.⁴⁰ The participants favored the taste of the food presented in the McDonald's packaging, revealing that the influence of market brand preferences "trumps sensory input."⁴¹ Thus, enticed young customers are more likely to become life-long consumers.

On the other side, schools themselves find several advantages to allowing food companies to take over their cafeterias. As Marion Nestle explains, "Schools no longer have to deal with the consequences of serving foods that kids don't like or with any other aspect of the complicated, messy, and expensive food business."⁴² Some schools sign contracts with large food corporations such as Marriott, Aramark, and Daka that run the school's food service operations entirely.⁴³ These companies end up selling heavily advertised and popular fast foods to students to generate profits.⁴⁴ Whereas a school might make only 27 cents per federal meal per student, a meal from Taco Bell could be sold for \$2 or \$3.⁴⁵ A 2005 report from the Government Accountability Office revealed that the top 30 percent of high schools in the country generate over \$125,000 apiece each year just from competitive food sales.⁴⁶

Schools can also increase their revenues by negotiating contracts with major soft drink corporations. These "pouring rights" grant companies such as Coca-Cola and PepsiCo exclusive rights to sell their products in vending machines and at events on school property, furthering brand recognition.⁴⁷ In return, schools receive substantial lump-sum payments and additional payments over a number of years based on sales.⁴⁸

All of this additional revenue is usually pumped back into the school to support extracurricular activities such as field trips and music

programs, and to buy sports equipment.⁴⁹

In some instances, though, schools have no choice but to rely on the sale of snack foods and soft drinks in order to make up for low education budgets in some states. Bridges Elementary School, located in a low-income, high-poverty county, is an example of how snack food sales are the “inevitable response to decades of inadequate funding for schools.”⁵⁰ Bridges Elementary’s budget is highly subsidized by the sale of brand name snack foods in their school store. Snack food sales generate an extra \$7,000 to \$8,000 a year for the school.⁵¹ These revenues provide basic office and teaching supplies, books, instructional materials, and computers – all with the aim of providing students with the same high standard of education that students in wealthier schools receive.⁵²

On paper, then, selling and advertising brand name and competitive foods in schools seems like “just good business.” Food companies profit and provide public schools with incentives to encourage the relationship. However, numerous studies across varying academic disciplines have shown that the true cost of allowing the food industry to infiltrate American public schools may be the lives of American children.

The presence of brand-name, high-calorie, and low-nutrient processed foods in American public schools seriously implicates the health of the nation’s adolescents. In the United States, there is an epidemic of deteriorating health and increasing weight of school-aged children.⁵³ A vast majority of adolescents are simply not eating properly or are eating too much of the wrong types of food. A survey conducted by the CDC in 2000 revealed that American adolescents regularly consume foods that are high in calories, sugars, fat, and sodium in the place of foods that are lower in calories, and higher in fiber, calcium, and overall nutritional value.⁵⁴ The same CDC survey also revealed that over half of American children eat less than one serving of fruits and vegetables a day.⁵⁵ Such a diet is, of course, not advisable.

The lacking nutritional value of American children’s diets coupled with excessive calorie intake has led to the rise of food-related health risks in American children. One of the most prevalent dietary issue today is childhood obesity, and the number of children classified as “obese” has steadily been increasing over the past couple decades. In *The End of Food*, Paul

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Roberts notes that in 1960, “almost no” children were medically classified as obese, but by 2000, the number grew to one in seven.^{56‡} Of course, obesity in children is not exclusively linked with poor nutrition and overeating. In addition to their diets, obesity in children can stem from other factors such as lack of exercise, and the effect of low versus high socioeconomic status of their households. Obesity is also only one of several health problems that poor dietary habits can cause. Children who excessively consume high-calorie, processed foods may suffer from high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and “adult”-onset diabetes.⁵⁷ Throughout adolescence, specifically, poor diet has also been linked to deficiencies in cognitive development as well as behavioral problems.⁵⁸ Obese youth are also more likely to be obese as adults, putting themselves at risk for more severe cardiovascular and chronic diseases later in life.⁵⁹ Among 5- to 17-year-olds, 70 percent of youth who are obese already exhibit at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease.⁶⁰

Linn and Novosat assert that the escalation of childhood obesity in recent decades mirrors the increase in food marketing that is targeted directly at children.⁶¹ Other scholars have also noted that the coinciding of these two trends is not accidental. A school’s nutritional environment – including the food that schools provide and the health education offered in the curriculum – shapes the weight status of many students.⁶² However, schools that endorse balanced diets and regular exercise in the classroom and then allow students to consume only chips and soft drinks at lunch inherently contradict themselves. Schools cannot ignore the fact that when competitive foods are available, children will buy them. In his popular documentary *Supersize Me*, Morgan Spurlock investigates school cafeterias to see what American school children are actually eating. In Naperville, Illinois, Spurlock observes a middle school with a lunch menu controlled by a major food services corporation. Instead of being served full meals, students were able to select food items à la carte for individual purchase.⁶³ Left to their own devices, however, most students bought only snack foods, such as a plate of french fries or cookies. One student purchased a lunch consisting of only potato chips, a Twix bar, and a bottle of Gatorade.⁶⁴ These foods do not fall anywhere within the dietary regulations put forth by the USDA.

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The products that food companies and schools are pushing onto adolescents are high calorie, low-nutrient, “top of the pyramid” processed foods. Compare, for example, the nutritional content of a USDA-provided lunch and food provided by a name-brand food company. On a given day, an average high school student could buy a federal school lunch of baked chicken, carrots, and mashed potatoes with a whole-wheat roll.⁶⁵ All together, the meal adds up to 426 calories, 8.5 grams of sugar, 14 grams of fat, and around 1,000 milligrams of sodium.⁶⁶ If the student drinks a carton of 1 percent milk, that adds another 100 calories, 11 grams of sugar, 3 grams of fat, and 125 milligrams of sodium.⁶⁷ However, let us assume that the school is also selling Papa John’s pizza by the slice à la carte and provides vending machines stocked full of Coca-Cola products. If a student buys one slice of pepperoni pizza along with a 12-ounce can of Coke, the student has already surpassed the school lunch’s calorie, sugar, and fat count at 470 calories, 43 grams, and 14 grams respectively.^{68, 69} If the student decides to eat two slices instead of just one, and has enough money left over for an Otis Spunkmeyer chocolate chip cookie from the snack bar, the total meal packs 910 calories, 55 grams of sugar, 31.5 grams of fat, and 1,870 milligrams of sodium.⁷⁰

What is important to note, and has been stressed by both proponents and opponents of competitive food sales in schools, is that children consume a significant portion of their total calorie intake outside of school.⁷¹ From this, one could argue that the snacking and eating habits that a child learns at home and from family contribute just as much or even more to his or her overall health and weight. As such, competitive foods in schools are not solely to blame. On the other hand, a school food environment that endorses snacking and convenience foods reinforces eating habits that children carry on outside of school. Providing competitive foods in schools in fact indoctrinates adolescents to America’s fast food and soft drink culture. Food and soft drink companies can argue that by marketing in schools, they are breeding cognizant consumers and giving young people “an accurate picture of our society.”⁷² But, giving children the “option” between snack foods and more nutritiously sound, federally provided foods is setting children up for failure.⁷³ In truth, considering how much time and resources food companies spend marketing to children outside of school, making certain products available in schools is essentially the last step in the marketing process. Realistically, a student is already sold on a product by the time he or she approaches a vending machine.

In sum, school lunches have become important to more people than just the students who eat them. The food industry has been undeniably successful in tapping directly into their adolescent consumer base. Targeting children while they are in school provides food companies with almost limitless opportunities to build brand recognition and loyalty with students. Unfortunately, as increasing numbers of competitive foods are finding their ways into school cafeterias, the efforts made by the federal government to provide nutritious and affordable meals to students are becoming obsolete. Consequently, the health of American children continuously suffers. There is no doubt that continuing to allow the food industry to market to children in schools – both through advertising and providing products to be sold – will have severely detrimental effects on the health of America’s future generation. The issue of competitive foods being sold in public schools is one that should be taken seriously by legislators, educators, and parents alike. Nutrition scholars and health advocates recognize the need for stricter regulation of the food being served in schools. Leviton writes, “Changing the school food environment, that is, the price, promotion, and availability of foods has been found effective in changing children’s choices of food during the school day.”⁷⁴

There is no doubt that continuing to allow the food industry to market to children in schools... will have severely detrimental effects on the health of America’s future generation.

In recent years, the federal government and state governments have passed legislation aimed at improving the nutrition of American school children. Some bills require schools to develop wellness policies that involve proper nutrition education and a minimum requirement for daily physical activity for each student.⁷⁵ More importantly, 2005 saw states such as Arizona, Kentucky, and West Virginia pass legislation that closely regulates all foods, both federal and outside, being sold in schools.⁷⁶ The Arizona Department of Education now prohibits the sale of foods “of minimal nutritional value” during the school day in elementary, and middle schools.⁷⁷ The same law also formally forbids school administrators from signing contracts with food and beverage companies to sell “unhealthy” products on campuses.⁷⁸

At the federal level, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 includes “significant improvements that will help promote children with healthier and more nutritious food options” including addressing

non-federal foods sold in schools.⁷⁹ Section 208 of the act gives the USDA authority to set nutritional standards for all foods regularly sold in schools, including in vending machines, school stores, and as à la carte items in cafeterias.⁸⁰

Some argue, though, that the onus for regulating what children eat in school should not fall solely upon schools themselves. Some scholars believe that schools cannot hope to solve the issue by themselves. In analyzing adolescent dietary practices, Jane Petrillo and Pamela Meyers, two health professors at Kennesaw State University, recommend that guiding the eating and food-purchasing practices of America's youth is the collective responsibility of parents and guardians, educators, and the community.⁸¹ In the best of all worlds, Linn and Novosat feel that marketing brands of foods directly at children should be prohibited altogether.⁸² When more than one third of American children and adolescents are overweight or obese, the moral, ethical, and social justification for marketing low-nutrient, energy-dense foods to children is questionable.⁸³

Arguably, tackling the food industry and dismantling its marketing practices towards children in their entirety is a formidable task that certainly could not be conquered overnight. Gradual efforts have to be considered and smaller victories taken in strides. For the time being, there is something to be said for parents simply wanting to send their children to school and having them return well-fed and healthy.

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31 *Ibid.*, 178.

32 *Ibid.*, 187.

33 *Ibid.*, 188.

34 Story and others, 110

35 Story and others, 110

36 Linn and Novosat, 147.

37 *Ibid.*, 143

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‡‡ Roberts explains that by 1990, the term "obese" has come to replace "overweight", while

“overweight” defines a person who, though not officially obese, has a body mass index that is “too high for good health” (89). The CDC currently defines “obese” as “having excess body fat”. “Overweight” is defined as “having excess body weight for a particular height from fat, muscle, bone, water, or a combination of these factors”.

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