



# SCHOOL LUNCH

Changing trends on the cafeteria tray

*The **First Lady, celebrity chefs,** and now **“angry moms”** have rebelled against the quality of school food and demanded reform. Here’s what parents need to know.*

By Janet Carlson

**A**merican children today have shorter life expectancies than their parents. That shocking bit of news stems from the fact that childhood obesity is at an all-time high; among children and teens, nearly one in three is overweight or obese, putting them at far higher risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancers, and other illnesses. Without ignoring the importance of physical activity, a growing army of food activists points to school food as a significant factor. The average kid will eat 3,000 meals at school.



For years, experts like Michael Pollan, the food writer and food industry journalist, and Alice Waters, the California chef who famously overhauled Berkeley schools menus, have been pointing to lunch food as both inadequate and indeed unhealthy. First Lady Michelle Obama took on the cause in 2009 when she put determined foot to shovel on the White House lawn to plant an organic garden for local schoolchildren to tend and enjoy and also launched the “**Let’s Move**” initiative to tame the childhood obesity epidemic “within a generation.” Lately, more and more wellness experts, celebrities, and parents are adding their voices to a chorus of protest around the country, clamoring for better food and better food education in schools – not only because of obesity but also because of allergies, attention deficit disorder, and other conditions that have seen a dramatic rise in recent years and may be linked to diet.

One of those regular parents is filmmaker Amy Kalafa, author of the new book, *Lunch Wars: How To Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for our Children’s Health* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2011.) Kalafa, a Connecticut-based mom and nutrition counselor, made the documentary *Two Angry Moms* in 2008 after she traveled the country investigating school cafeteria lunches to spread



the word that if you are what you eat, then our children risk becoming junkyards, because of what's on their lunch trays.

The impassioned activists call for sweeping change based on worthy ideals. "We need to increase the food IQ of every family out there," Kalafa says. But the kind of change that might reverse gloomy health trends can seem more easily demanded than accomplished, not only because of school budgets and strict government regulations regarding the School Lunch Program, but also because of the challenges inherent in institutional food preparation and the fact that most kids really like the processed foods they've grown up with – the chicken nuggets, sugary soft drinks, Hot Pockets, and Nutri-Grain bars that keep them hooked on sugar and fat.

On January 25, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released updated nutrition standards for school meals, the first in more than fifteen years. Jessica Donze Black, project director for the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project, stated: "This means children will see more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains on their cafeteria trays. Meals also will include more low-fat and non-fat dairy products, and less fat and sodium, and calorie levels will be appropriate for different age groups." The additional costs implicit in these updated standards will strain already tight local budgets. But given that 98 percent of all TV ads seen by children are for foods high in sugar, fat, or sodium, passing the added costs on to those advertisers as a TV-ad tax is one solution.

Healthier food may be a tougher sell, but Kalafa is undaunted. "Most kids are more flexible than we give them credit for." Chef Alice Waters says engaging children in the cooking and serving of food is what changes their eating habits. Today, with the proliferation of school gardens across the country, students are getting their hands in the dirt. And they're seeing more "real food" in the cafeteria – all fifty states now have operational Farm-to-School programs that connect farmers and schools with the objectives of serving healthier meals in schools and supporting local and regional farms.

Not surprisingly, many in the food service industry who face the challenges of cooking for, say, 5,000 children, point to some food reform goals as unrealistic. Deanne Brandstetter, Vice President of Nutrition and Wellness at



the Compass Group, a food service company, cites the example of a Connecticut school wellness policy that required only local produce from the surrounding area be served in the school. "That meant the children would be eating no fruits or vegetables in winter!"

But when did reality ever stop parents from wanting the best for their children? So you don't have time to start a coalition, rewrite your school's wellness policy, or lobby in Washington? It is possible to take small steps and meet with success and satisfaction, say most of the activists. Here, then, are some snippets and tidbits to inform, alarm, and inspire you to just say no to junk for lunch – for your kids, and for you. ■



# Small Steps Count:

## What You Can Do Right Now

### *Tips, Strategies, and Advice from the Activists*

Take time to make it from scratch at home. "We complain of not having enough time to cook, but Americans spend more time watching cooking on *The Food Network* than actually preparing their own meals," says Mark Hyman, M.D.



"Support our campaign to bring back plain milk at school," celebrity chef Jamie Oliver says. <http://www.jamies-foodrevolution.com/sugarymilk>. Ask your school to make a simple switch for better health by choosing plain milk and making the flavored varieties an occasional treat.



Give your children (and yourself) a multivitamin, fish oil, and vitamin D every day—regardless of recent controversy over supplements. "It will help build better brains and bodies," Hyman says.



Join a community-supported agricultural network to get a cheaper supply of fresh vegetables.



Support changes in zoning laws that prevent fast food and junk food outlets from operating next to schools.



