Why Students Hate School Lunches

**By KATE MURPHY**SEPT. 26, 2015

MORE than 30 million children trundle through school cafeteria lines every day in the United States and thanks to the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/healthy-hunger-free-kids-act), which took effect in 2012, they are no longer served greasy pizza, salty French fries and sauced up chicken wings. Meals must now be lower in fat, calories and sodium and contain lean proteins, more fruits and vegetables and whole grains. And kids from coast to coast are wrinkling their noses.

Food and nutrition directors at school districts nationwide say that their trash cans are overflowing while their cash register receipts are diminishing as children either toss out the healthier meals or opt to brown-bag it. While no one argues that the solution is to scrap the law and go back to feeding children junk, there’s been a movement to relax a few of the guidelines as Congress considers whether to reauthorize the legislation, particularly mandates for 100 percent whole grains and extremely low sodium levels, so school meals will be a bit more palatable and reflective of culinary traditions.

“Other than mandating more fruits and vegetables, the new regulations haven’t really changed anything except force manufacturers to re-engineer products” so they meet the guidelines but not children’s taste expectations, said Bertrand Weber, director of culinary and nutrition services at the [Minneapolis Public Schools](http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/). “Now kids get whole grain doughnuts — whoop-de-do.”

And yet, cafeteria operators complain, the new regulations forbid them to serve a classic baguette, semolina pasta or jasmine rice, much less the butter and flavorful sauces that often go with them. Never mind that these are staples of diets in other cultures with far lower [rates of childhood and adult obesity](http://www.worldobesity.org/aboutobesity/world-map-obesity/) than in the United States.

Consider that in France, where the childhood obesity rate is the lowest in the Western world, a typical four-course school lunch (cucumber salad with vinaigrette, salmon lasagna with spinach, fondue with baguette for dipping and fruit compote for dessert) would probably not pass muster under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, because of the refined grains, fat, salt and calories. Nor would the weekly piece of dark chocolate cake.

By comparison, a typical federally approved school lunch in the United States is a “reformulated” Philly cheesesteak sandwich (low-fat, low-salt processed cheese and lean mystery meat on a whole grain bun) with steamed green beans, a potato wedge, canned peaches and an apple. Students often have less than 20 minutes to eat this before returning to class, while French children may have as long as two hours to eat and socialize.

Not surprisingly, American kids, whether pressed for time or just grossed out, leave much of their meals untouched; particularly neglected are the fruits and vegetables, which they are now forced to put on their trays before they can exit the cafeteria line.

The [School Nutrition Association](https://schoolnutrition.org/PressReleases/CostsofNutritionStandardsThreatenSchoolMealPrograms/) said that 70 percent of school meal programs had taken a significant financial hit since the new mandates went into effect. Cafeteria operators from Los Angeles to New York report discouraging amounts of food waste and declining participation. “We lost 15 percent of our revenue when we started putting the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act into place,” said Chris Burkhardt, director of child nutrition and wellness at the [Lakota Local School District](http://www.lakotaonline.com/) in southwestern Ohio. “I talk to P.T.O. and P.T.A. groups and ask how many serve only whole grains and low sodium foods at home and maybe one hand goes up,” adding that he’s not convinced that person was telling the truth.

To reduce waste and bring back students who have opted to pack a lunch or, in the case of high school students, go off campus for fast food, his district’s cafeterias have installed stir-fry stations with abundant vegetables so students can have meals made to order. And he’s added spice bars so kids can enliven the bland, low-salt fare.

In Minneapolis, Mr. Weber is phasing out processed food in favor of more scratch-made meals prepared in full on-site kitchens that are being installed in all his district’s 62 schools over a six-year period. He has also partnered with local chefs to sponsor “Junior Iron Chef Contests,” where students compete to come up with cafeteria recipes. There are also Minnesota Thursdays where everything on the menu is locally sourced.

For Ann Cooper, food services director at the [Boulder Valley School District](http://www.bvsd.k12.co.us/pages/home.aspx) in Colorado and a longtime proponent of farm-to-table cafeteria food as well as school gardens and cooking classes, this trend toward fresher food and student engagement is evidence that the federal legislation is working.

“We have to educate the kids about healthy eating,” she said. “If a kid wasn’t reading at grade level we would work harder to get them to read at grade level, but with food we’ve somehow abdicated that part of their education.”

The Department of Agriculture is urging Congress to reauthorize the act to give children and cafeteria operators enough time to adjust. But farm-fresh food, scratch cooking and nutrition education cost money that less affluent school districts like [Detroit Public Schools](http://detroitk12.org/) don’t have. The solution there was to take advantage of the [Community Eligibility Provision (C.E.P.)](http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision) in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which allows high-poverty districts to provide free meals to all students. That way they get more money from the government and don’t have to rely so much on sales to better-off students who have other options.

“I lost a million dollars that first year the regulations took place,” said Betti Wiggins, executive director of Detroit Public Schools’ Office of Nutrition. Now, thanks to C.E.P. as well as eliminating choices of entrees in lower grades and cycling her menus more often (12 days versus 20 days) to control inventory, her department is back in the black. And kids are starting to come around to reformulated entrees like three-bean vegetarian chili with cornbread and low-fat breaded chicken patties.

“This is an obesity crisis,’’ she said, “and we’ve gotten rid of health classes and P.E., so we’re back to the lunch lady and the tray.”

BUT many experts in taste preferences say starting at school age may be too late. Research indicates that the critical period for broadening the palate is the [first two years](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3927698/). “It’s harder to change preferences than to form them,” said Leann Birch, a development psychologist at the University of Georgia in Athens. “The reality is kids learn to eat what their parents eat, and if kids are getting something different at school, then it’s not surprising they aren’t eating it.”

In addition, by forbidding certain foods and coercively promoting others, some worry that the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act may perpetuate Americans’ uneasy, binge-prone relationship with food.

Karen Le Billon, visiting professor of environmental studies at Stanford and author of [“French Kids Eat Everything,”](http://karenlebillon.com/books/) said in France there was “no guilt or blame around food,” but rather “it’s more about moderation than deprivation.” Most French children and adults, she said, have no clue about the caloric content of foods, and the general attitude about fat, such as naturally found in nut butters, avocados or a creamy piece of cheese, is “it’s tasty so why not eat it?” — particularly when it promotes feelings of satiety so you won’t snack between meals.

“It’s not rocket science and it’s not only the French,” said Ms. Le Billon, who divides her time between Palo Alto, Calif., Vancouver, Canada and Brittany. “These are things that parents in other less obese countries, like Japan and Italy, know and teach their kids but we have somehow forgotten. We are a culture of constant eating and it’s not working in terms of keeping us at a healthy weight.”

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