RECIPIES FOR HEALTH
Improving School Food in New York City

A Report of the Projects for Healthy Public Policies at the City University of New York School of Public Health at Hunter College and City Harvest.

August 2010
Who is this report for?
This report is for New York City policy makers, health and public health professionals, food advocates, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and anyone who cares about the health of New York City’s young people and wants to improve the City’s school food system so more kids can eat better food in their schools.

What is the goal of this report?
The goal of this report is to show readers how to join the school food reform movement to change the New York City school food system and improve the diets, health, and well-being of New York City school children.

We highlight several Policy Targets (with the symbol ), policy goals that would dramatically improve food environments in schools. The shaded Take Action! sections suggest what you can do now to improve school food. We hope readers will consider the following questions as they take action to improve school food.

1. Why is school food an important health, economic, and social justice issue in New York City?
2. Why is now a good time to act to improve school food in New York City and the nation?
3. How does the New York City school food system work? What’s working well? What needs to change?
4. What resources are needed in order for our school food system to better support the diets, health, and well-being of New York City school children?
5. What can young people, parents, teachers, principals, health professionals, policy makers, and advocates do now to improve school food in New York City?
6. What is a realistic vision of an improved school food environment for the foreseeable future?
7. What is the current policy agenda for New York City school food, and how can the many individuals and groups who care about school food, children, and health plug into the movement?
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This report can be found online at: http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/NYCSchoolFood.pdf
Executive Summary

School food programs reflect how we value nutrition, health and the elimination of hunger. They demonstrate the depth of our commitment to giving all our children the opportunity to succeed in school and learn food habits that offer lifetime health protection. In recent years, New York City has worked hard to improve its school food programs and as a result many children now have healthier food choices inside their schools. But many children in New York City still have trouble finding tasty, affordable and healthy food in their schools. Few schools have fully realized their potential to reduce both the hunger and food insecurity that so many of the city’s children still experience or to play a role in reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity and overweight that now affects almost half of the city’s children. This report describes New York City’s school food program, analyzes its strengths and weaknesses and recommends 10 specific steps the city can take to improve school food and the health of our children.

Each day, New York City schools serve meals to more than 860,000 children. Since school food contributes a significant portion of many children’s diets, improving school food programs can better the diets and health of young people and future generations. The scale and complexity of New York City’s school food program can make it difficult for parents, young people and even nutrition advocates to understand and improve it. Both government and business shape the school food system, sometimes making it hard to make changes. In addition, significant variations in food programs and quality occur across communities and even within schools. Fortunately, grassroots mobilizations of parents and young people can help to improve the food our schools serve.

Evidence shows that school food sold as part of the federal school lunch and breakfast programs tends to be healthier than food sold in vending machines, a la carte in school cafeterias, or in stores and fast food outlets surrounding schools. To improve school food and better health, officials and advocates will need to change some of the food available in and around schools. They will also need to strengthen food and nutrition education and physical activity programs in schools.

Many individuals, organizations, and policy makers in New York and the United States are committed to improving school food today. A window of opportunity to create a local and national movement for meaningful school food reform has opened. By working together to change school food in a single school or community, young people, parents, advocates, teachers, principals, and policy makers in New York City can reduce hunger, obesity, and poverty and improve the health and well-being of children and future generations.

Despite New York City’s major investment in school food, only 38 percent of the city’s high school students, 70 percent of its middle school students, and 84 percent of its elementary school students participate in the school lunch program. Even fewer participate in the school breakfast program. The rest bring food from home or buy food at the bodegas and fast food outlets that surround their schools and homes, and many don’t eat in school at all. Improving school food can increase the number of children who choose to eat it, benefiting health and increasing revenue for the system.
To create a healthy, sustainable New York City school food program will require action on several fronts. The policy agenda listed below suggests 10 steps for improving the food served in city schools. The goals of this agenda are to encourage dialogue on how the many organizations and individuals working to improve school food can coordinate their actions, to help set priorities for immediate and longer-term objectives and to articulate a comprehensive vision of a school food program that promotes health.

**A POLICY AGENDA TO IMPROVE SCHOOL FOOD IN NEW YORK CITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY TARGET 1: Strengthen the Child Nutrition Act by expanding access to school meals, improving the nutrition and quality of food in school meals, and increasing the use of local food.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POLICY TARGET 2: Improve the variety and quality of food served in New York City schools and evaluate school food programs more closely to ensure that they meet standards.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 3: Improve the climate and the environment of school lunchrooms.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 4: Advocate for universal free lunch programs in New York City and elsewhere.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 5: Create and implement a comprehensive K-12 health, food, and nutrition education curriculum for New York City.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 7: Expand and provide additional training for the school food workforce.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 8: Increase the number of city schools with fully functioning kitchens and needed equipment.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 9: Make sure that every New York City school provides easy access to clean tap water.</td>
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<td>POLICY TARGET 10: Ban all competitive food from New York City public schools.</td>
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New York City, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, deserves a world-class school food program. Better school food can improve learning, reduce hunger and obesity, lessen children’s reliance on fast food outlets and other sources of unhealthy food, prevent lifetime health problems, and shrink socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in health. Few social investments offer such expansive and ongoing benefits.

Several current developments – local and national attention on the twin crises of growing hunger and obesity; the commitment of city, state, and federal officials to improving food policy; and emerging food and school food movements – provide a window of opportunity to make real changes in school food in New York City. Our city can show the United States what it takes to make an efficient, effective school food program that provides healthy, tasty food to its children. We can show the benefits of improving children’s health and school achievement while creating a foundation for a healthier food system. By demonstrating this possibility, New York can make a great contribution to our nation’s future.
Introduction

From the White House to City Hall, from the hundreds of cafeterias in New York City schools to the parents who worry about their children’s diets and health, school food has attracted new attention. Anti-poverty and anti-hunger advocates have worked for decades to improve school food in order to better children’s well-being, and the rise in childhood obesity and growing concerns about a food system that contributes to chronic health problems have put a new spotlight on school food.

Parents, teachers, policy makers, environmentalists, and nutrition, anti-hunger and health advocates are creating a new movement to improve school food and the larger food system in which it is embedded. They envision a day when all children will eat healthy, appealing school meals, provided by a school food system that has sufficient resources and supports good food choices. This vision is achievable, but it will not come about in a month or a year. To make positive and sustainable change, we must first understand the school food system and acknowledge the many important purposes it serves, recognize what works (and doesn’t work), identify the advocates and key players in this movement, and consider the opportunities for making feasible short- and longer-term changes.

The school food system is large and complex: The national school meals program operates in more than 101,000 schools and child care settings, serving more than 31 million kids every day nationwide, almost 1 million in New York City alone.

Our current school meal system has strengths and weaknesses. School meals are a vital source of food for many children in need – children who may otherwise not eat between 8 am and 3 pm. This original focus on reducing hunger, however, has given school meals a reputation for being “welfare food” and brings with it a stigma that few children want to endure. On the other hand, while nutrition standards for school meals are improving, children must be educated and encouraged to choose wisely and must like the offerings enough to eat them. Without food and nutrition education, which isn’t formally provided in schools, this opportunity to shape good dietary habits for a captive audience may be lost. This is one area where we can act now to grow future generations of healthy, well-nourished children.

We describe here the current situation of school food in New York City, highlighting problems, recent improvements, promising strategies, and the work of local and national organizations. Most importantly, we identify where each of us can take action to improve school food. Our report includes ten specific recommendations, listed in the Executive Summary and throughout, as Policy Targets, to improve school food for elementary, middle, and high school students in New York City.

A focused policy agenda can help individuals and coalitions to set priorities, support one another’s disparate goals, and win meaningful reforms. If we are to bring together the many organizations and individuals currently working on school food reform, such an agenda is needed. Below we propose one such an agenda based on the
review presented in this report. Although we believe the ten recommendations are reasonable priorities for school food in New York City, we also propose this agenda to stimulate discussion and debate among the wide array of constituencies involved in school food.

**Excerpts from Michelle Obama’s Remarks on Childhood Obesity, February 9, 2010**

Thirty-one million American children participate in federal school meal programs—and many of these kids consume as many as half their daily calories at school. And what we don’t want is a situation where parents are taking all the right steps at home—and then their kids undo all that work with salty, fatty food in the school cafeteria. So let’s move to get healthier food into our nation’s schools. We’ll start by updating and strengthening the Child Nutrition Act — the law that sets nutrition standards for what our kids eat at school. And we’ve proposed an historic investment of an additional $10 billion over ten years to fund that legislation. With this new investment, we’ll knock down barriers that keep families from participating in school meal programs and serve an additional one million students in the first five years alone. And we’ll dramatically improve the quality of the food we offer in schools - including in school vending machines. We’ll take away some of the empty calories, and add more fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious options. We also plan to double the number of schools in the Healthier US School Challenge — an innovative program that recognizes schools doing the very best work to keep kids healthy — from providing healthy school meals to requiring physical education classes each week. To help us meet that goal, I’m thrilled to announce that for the very first time, several major school food suppliers have come together and committed to decrease sugar, fat and salt; increase whole grains; and double the fresh produce in the school meals they serve. And also for the first time, food service workers — along with principals, superintendents and school board members across America — are coming together to support these efforts. With these commitments, we’ll reach just about every school child in this country with better information and more nutritious meals to put them on track to a healthier life.

Parents, children and youth, schools systems, and activists are working to improve school food around the country and the world. From Berkeley to New York, celebrity chefs are helping to put healthy, tasty food on school lunch menus. Across the Atlantic, pressure from parents and Chef Jamie Oliver led England to set new standards for healthy school food. Here in the US, national coalitions are pressing Congress to use the Child Nutrition Act, the bill authorizing school food programs, to transform school breakfasts and lunches. Even in the midst of national and global crises, President and Michelle Obama have launched a new campaign to reduce childhood obesity and define a new role for the federal government in improving school food.

Schools in New York City, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, feed close to 1 million children daily, four-fifths of whom qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. And New York City serves more meals than any other school system in the country, in approximately 1,500 locations citywide. New York City has made important improvements in school food in the last five years, but some very serious problems remain.

Forty-seven percent of the city’s households with children faced challenges affording food in 2009, and 70 percent of soup kitchens and food pantries served more children this year than last (1). At the same time, nearly 50 percent of elementary school children are overweight or obese (2, 3). Overweight children are much more likely to be overweight adults and are at higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions. Experts warn that if current overweight and obesity trends persist, today’s children will have shorter life spans than their parents and grandparents, reversing more than a century of public health progress (4).

Despite New York City’s major investment in school food, only 38 percent of the city’s high school students, 70 percent of its middle school students, and 84 percent of its elementary school students participate in the school lunch program; even fewer participate in the school breakfast program. The rest bring food from home or buy food at the bodegas and fast food outlets that surround their schools and homes, and many don’t eat at all.

**Setting the stage**

To understand school food requires a closer look at our food system as a whole. One reason so many children are hungry, overweight, or both is that our current food system produces and aggressively promotes too much unhealthy, highly processed food and leaves low-income neighborhoods with poor access to healthy food. New York City has more than 2,000 chain restaurants, disproportionately located in poor neighborhoods, and approximately 3 million New Yorkers live in neighborhoods with little access to fresh produce, often called “food deserts” (5). Foods high in calories, fat, sugar, and salt are ubiquitous—in convenience stores, movie theaters, subway stations, and elsewhere – and our children are inundated with commercials urging them to consume more of these highly processed unhealthy foods and drinks. Growing evidence shows that these differences in access to healthy food based on income and race or ethnicity contribute to the higher rates of premature and preventable deaths from diabetes, heart disease, and cancer among these groups (6-10). Since school food programs in New York City
overwhelmingly serve low-income children, improving the quality of school food and the number of children who use the program can help shrink these health inequities. Our city’s school food system can be better. New York City deserves a world-class school food program.

Why now? Why New York?

Here are five reasons why now is a good time to act to improve school food in New York City:

1. The political leadership has taken interest in this issue. The mayor, the city council speaker, the governor, our two US senators, and the president have all linked better food to better health and have identified school food as an area for action. Mobilized constituencies can advocate for specific improvements in school food and convert these officials’ words of support into action for change.

2. No single policy change can solve all the food and health problems facing New York City’s children, but working on multiple fronts will increase our chances of success. In recent years, New York City has banned trans fats in restaurants, required chain restaurants to post calories, increased the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables through Green Carts, and set new rules to encourage city agencies to buy healthy food. New initiatives include FRESH (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health), which encourages the opening of new grocery stores and brings healthier foods to underserved neighborhoods (11). The city has expanded access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) and developed Health Bucks coupons for free fruits and vegetables with SNAP purchases at farmers’ markets (12); the city purchased and distributed fruit and vegetables to the city’s highest volume food pantries and soup kitchens as part of the targeted relief during the economic recession. By making improvements in school food a top priority, New York can get synergistic benefits from these other policy initiatives.
3. The burgeoning “food movement” that seeks to improve access to healthy, affordable food – not only in New York City but across the nation – has highlighted school food as a top priority. This movement takes many forms, from school gardening and farm-to-school programs, to serving breakfast in the classroom and putting restaurant chefs into the cafeteria. It includes nonprofit groups and university researchers, health care providers, and food merchants. Parents, children and teens, and teachers are in the forefront of this movement in many places, and their energy and passion can bring the movement’s messages to policy makers’ attention. School food reform efforts in New York City have been publicized in newspapers and on television (13-15) and in professional circles (16), priming many ears for new messages.

4. Congress reauthorizes the Child Nutrition Act every five years. This year’s reauthorization comes during an economic downturn, when record numbers of families are relying on federal nutrition programs. The stars are aligned for action in New York City and Washington, DC, two important forums for changes in school food.

5. Finally, the New York City Department of Education has taken important steps to improve the quality of food and strengthen the central operation. But outside pressure and partnerships are needed to ensure that City and Department of Education leaders translate these first steps into sustainable practice.

Opportunities for improving school food abound in 2010. This report serves as a catalyst for those who care about children, health, and social justice to use our school food program to nourish our children and support their health. The report is also a resource for emerging leaders who will mobilize to convert today’s new interest in school food into sustainable programs and policies.
“We waste energy not knowing how complex the system is and what it will take to make real changes. . . There are three things to know about improving school lunches: school meals are highly regulated, they are under-funded. . . and they need community-wide support to have systemic change.”

– Paula Jones, Director of Food Systems for San Francisco Department of Public Health, Edible San Francisco, September 30, 2007

To understand what is on the tray in a school lunchroom at PS 187, we must travel to Washington, DC, where our school food program begins. Congress sets rules and funding levels for school meals every five years via the Child Nutrition Act (CNA). The National School Lunch Program is the largest child nutrition program among several the CNA authorizes (17); in 2009 it cost $9 billion to operate and served 31 million, mostly low-income, children nationwide.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) interprets and implements the policies set by Congress; it determines what qualifies as a meal; determines eligibility for students and reimburses for meals served; provides commodity foods at a discount or free; and determines the required nutritional profile of school meals.
The 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization was a major focus in 2009 and 2010 of groups engaged in school food reform advocacy on the national level. In addition to many organizations working independently, two massive networks, the Child Nutrition Forum and the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA) – each with about 400 national organizational members – convene every 5 years to lobby for their collective priorities for CNR. The Reauthorization process involves Congress members on the reviewing committees seeking input from these coalitions, community organizations, and individuals about needed changes in the school food and other programs. They take these recommendations and draft small “marker bills” that will hopefully be included in the overall legislation. In this cycle New York was in a unique position to influence the bill because of Congressional representation on the relevant committees (see chart on following page).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES THAT WRITE THE CHILD NUTRITION BILL</th>
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<tr>
<td>Senator Kirsten Gillibrand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representative Yvette Clarke</td>
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<tr>
<th>CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES THAT CAN INFLUENCE FUNDING LEVELS AND SOURCES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Representative Charles Rangel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senator Charles Schumer</td>
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The USDA reimburses the New York City Office of SchoolFood (SchoolFood) for meals served in the breakfast, lunch, and after-school snack programs based on the eligible student’s family income (see chart on following page). SchoolFood determines how much students pay for meals within a range allowed by USDA. This huge administrative effort requires students, parents, school staff, school food service agencies, local and state government, and finally, USDA to distribute, collect, and verify applications.
Cost to student and USDA reimbursement for school meals

The chart below outlines income guidelines and federal reimbursement rates for school meals for 2009-2010 (18). Children whose families are at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level receive a free lunch, and SchoolFood is reimbursed $2.68 from the federal government and $0.06 from the state. School districts “lose” money on “paid” meals because the federal reimbursement is so trivial ($1.81 vs. $2.74 for a free meal). New York City, like other urban areas with high costs of living and large populations of low-income students, makes every effort to keep the cost of “paid” meals affordable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meal payment category</th>
<th>Qualifying income for a family of four</th>
<th>Price of meals to student (NYC)</th>
<th>Federal reimbursement per meal</th>
<th>NY State reimbursement</th>
<th>Total meal payment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free</td>
<td>$28,665 or less (130% of poverty)</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$2.68</td>
<td>$0.06</td>
<td>$2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced Price</td>
<td>$40,793 or less (185% of poverty)</td>
<td>$0.25</td>
<td>$2.28</td>
<td>$0.20</td>
<td>$2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid by student</td>
<td>More than $40,793</td>
<td>$1.50</td>
<td>$0.25</td>
<td>$0.06</td>
<td>$1.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The first step toward healthier school food is to increase that free-lunch subsidy by at least 70 cents. If you feed a kid chicken nuggets and canned peas and Doritos and canned fruit as a school lunch or you feed him grilled chicken, steamed broccoli and fresh fruits and a whole grain roll, the difference is night and day.” — Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, New York Times, August 18, 2009

Take Action!

Parents, teachers, and students: New York City advocacy groups have gathered under the umbrella New York City Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization to sway the legislators listed on the previous page. Visit www.nycforcnr.org to get involved.

Policy Target 1:

Strengthen the Child Nutrition Act by expanding access to school meals, improving the nutrition and quality of food in school meals, and increasing the use of local food.
Factors Shaping the Content of School Meals: Challenges and Progress

“We at USDA provide school lunch and school breakfast, and my guess is that some
days you’re not happy with what you see in the cafeteria. We’ve found that we’re probably giving
you too much sugar and too much fat, and not enough good calories to make you healthy...
Michelle Obama is going to lead an effort this year to make school lunch better.”
— USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, Central Park East Middle School, New York City, January 15, 2010

School meals are intended to be highly nutritious and are required to provide appropriate levels of necessary
nutrients. Lunch, for example, must provide one-third the recommended daily allowance of protein, vitamins A
and C, iron, calcium, and calories, as well as limiting calories from fat to less than 30 percent and calories from
saturated fats to less than 10 percent. USDA will only reimburse meals that meet these standards, although
children can choose from among the options available and may not create a balanced meal. The same is not true
of delis, fast food establishments, or other outlets in school campuses where many school children opt to eat
instead. One reason it’s so important to improve school food and urge more kids to eat it is that the alternatives
are far less healthy, much more expensive, and, in some cases, more appealing.

What foods are offered in a meal?
New York City schools must offer a five-component lunch:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Component</th>
<th>Serving Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluid cow’s milk</td>
<td>8 ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat or meat alternate (meat, fish, cheese, eggs, beans, peanut butter)</td>
<td>2 ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grain (bread, rice, etc)</td>
<td>1 serving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetable and fruit</td>
<td>2 servings (3/4 cup a day)</td>
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Students must choose three out of the five components (known as Offer vs. Serve) in order for school districts to be
reimbursed for the meal. For instance, if a child takes only an orange, the USDA will not reimburse the cost of the orange.
The following are examples of approved, reimbursable school lunches, assembled from SchoolFood’s online menu (19):

1. Orange, milk, and potato salad (fruit, milk, vegetable)
2. Breaded chicken patty on a small whole wheat bun, steamed corn (meat/meat alternate, grain, vegetable)
3. Toasted cheese sandwich, chocolate milk (meat/meat alternate, grain, milk)
4. Cheeseburger on whole wheat bun, wedge cut potatoes (meat/meat alternate, grain, vegetable)
5. Salami, cheese, lettuce on whole wheat bread (meat/meat alternate, grain, vegetable)
6. Roasted chicken with guisado sauce, turmeric herb scented rice, sweet plantains (meat/meat alternate, grain, vegetable)
Nutrition standards alone can’t make an ideal meal

A big challenge for school food programs is to feed hungry children who need a nutritious meal as well as the growing number who are overweight and obese. Children eating school meals often battle both these problems. Consider the meal you would prepare for three guests – one undernourished from lack of food, one obese, and one of normal weight and well-nourished. Standards define calorie minimums but not maximums, so carbohydrate calories in the form of sweeteners are often added to otherwise perfectly good meals to meet the calorie requirement. This is an unintended consequence of using nutrient guidelines rather than promoting balanced diets of whole foods.

In one sense, these federal nutritional requirements are too flexible. As we’ve already seen, the pastry of a Jamaican beef patty counts as a “grain,” one of the five meal components that make up a school meal. French fries count as a vegetable. This means a Jamaican beef patty and French fries count as a reimbursable meal.

On the other hand, the USDA standards are too rigid because the nutrient requirements force meals into a box that natural, whole foods don’t fit into. For example, the fruit component must be two ounces and not one or three ounces. These stringent guidelines make it more challenging to serve “food” in its whole form and leaves little flexibility or creativity for food service managers. To meet these requirements, it is often easier to order highly processed foods whose nutrient profiles have been pre-calculated to ensure compliance with federal standards.

Agricultural commodities as part of the school meal

Another extremely complex part of the school food system is agricultural commodities, which make up 10 percent to 12 percent of school meals nationwide (20) and roughly 9 percent in New York City. Schools order from a list of “USDA foods” that includes all types of foods, but in which meats and cheeses predominate. (In fact, schools can use commodity allotments to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables through the Department of Defense Fresh Program.) Because the federal reimbursement for school meals has become inadequate to cover both food and related costs, SchoolFood relies on these commodities that often make up the “entrée” or protein item at the center of the school lunch tray. Federal regulations make it easy for schools to divert USDA foods to commercial processors to turn them into highly processed products, such as chicken turned into breaded nuggets, Smuckers Uncrustables, beef encased in Jamaican beef pastry, and processed cheese products. These processed products make it much easier for school districts to meet these precise nutrient specifications.
“Let’s look at the school lunch program… We are essentially feeding them fast food and teaching them how to eat it quickly… lunch should be educational. Right now the school lunch program is a disposal scheme for surplus agricultural commodities. When they have too much meat, when they have too much cheese, they send it to the schools, and they dispose it through our kids’ digestive systems. Let’s look at it in a different way. This should be about improving the health of our children.”

– Michael Pollan, interview with Bill Moyers, November 28, 2008

The current nutrition standards for school meals conform to the outdated 1995 Dietary Guidelines. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently recommended updated nutrition standards for school meals and specified an emphasis on whole foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. The IOM report also recognized the increased cost of such foods and urged the federal government to increase the meal reimbursement by at least $0.09 per meal to meet these necessary changes.

“To align school meals with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and improve the healthfulness of school meals, the Food and Nutrition Service should adopt standards for menu planning that increase the amount of fruits, vegetables and whole grains; increase the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat and sodium provided; and set a minimum and maximum level of calories.”

– Institute of Medicine 2009 Report on School Food (21).

How has NYC SchoolFood improved the quality of food in school meals?

The overarching goal of SchoolFood is to feed New York City school children. The system is underused, and SchoolFood is working to increase participation rates. SchoolFood has significantly improved the quality of school meals in pursuit of this goal. More fresh food is being served and nutrient profiles of multi-ingredient items like banana bread and tomato sauce have improved. The meals have less sodium, fat, and cholesterol than they did a few years ago; high fructose corn syrup, trans fat, and certain artificial ingredients have been eliminated; fiber content has increased; and whole milk has been replaced by 1 percent milk. The State Comptroller’s Office audited SchoolFood meals in 2008 and found that they met the federal nutritional guidelines for calories, fat, sodium, fiber, and other key nutrients (22).
New York City’s purchasing power has led to major improvements in nutrition, but not necessarily food quality. Food manufacturers are willing to reformulate products to meet the City’s higher nutrition standards and retain SchoolFood’s business. For instance, a breakfast loaf was recently reformulated to contain less sugar, more fiber, and not have high fructose corn syrup.

Investments have also been made in kitchen and cafeteria infrastructure. SchoolFood began installing salad bars in schools a few years ago as funds were available, and the pace increased recently when federal stimulus funds were used to purchase salad bars (23). “Burrito bars” and “deli bars” that mimic the serving lines at familiar quick service restaurants (though with healthier foods) are also found in many schools. Improvements in providing culturally appropriate foods for varying populations have also been made. And the purchase of local and regional items, such as SchoolFood’s much-publicized use of New York apples (14), has increased.

**TAKE ACTION!**

Parents and teachers: If your school has a salad bar, volunteer to staff it once a month. Students are more likely to try healthy foods offered to them, and elementary schools especially need help with salad bar service because many kids are too small to serve themselves. If your school doesn’t have a salad bar, it may be because there isn’t sufficient space, electrical capacity, or funds. Consider enlisting the principal to write SchoolFood to request one.

**How were improvements possible?**

Much of this success emerged from a 2004 restructuring of SchoolFood, as well as significant outside investment of dollars and resources in the following years. The “Culinary Concepts” department, complete with an Executive Chef and a team of Regional Chefs, was created to develop menus and train school cooking staff. Initiatives have also been made at the state level to bring local foods into schools. The state established a farm-to-school program, and a New York State Farm to School Coordinating Committee connects upstate farmers to schools,
providing technical assistance, promotional materials, networking opportunities, and other support. (The National Farm to School Network plays a similar role on the national level.) Studies show that kids are more likely to eat school meals when food and agriculture education is offered alongside local food products (24).

Because of its large size, SchoolFood procures food through large distributors rather than from individual vendors or producers and therefore is less likely to identify individual farmers. However, some local foods do end up in the SchoolFood supply, especially in the summer and fall, such as apples and yogurt from upstate New York and peaches and plums from New Jersey. Without a tracking mechanism, SchoolFood cannot determine which items or what percentage of products is from local sources. Efforts are underway to require city agencies to take all steps possible to identify the percent of local products used, but such information will be difficult to get without significant change at the state level as well.

The SchoolFood PLUS Initiative, which included investigating the sources of food, facilitated the necessary coordination among multiple agencies that has meant more local foods in New York City schools in recent years. That program has now ended, but the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets is developing a number of products suitable for the New York City schools, including a bagged salad mix and a frozen vegetable medley. The lack of processing facilities to transform foods into usable forms for ill-equipped schools (e.g., heads of broccoli into florets) has emerged as a significant challenge. Many farm-to-school advocates were encouraged by the recent mention in City Council Speaker Christine Quinn’s FoodWorks plan of a facility to process lettuce for use in schools.

System-wide change

The SchoolFood PLUS Initiative, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, was a collaboration of New York City departments, universities, nutrition advocates, and public school personnel (25). The project ran from 2004 to 2007 with the goal of improving the eating habits, health, and academic performance of public school children while strengthening the state agricultural economy (26, 27). The project had three components: classroom-based nutrition education, cafeteria-based adjustments to menus and food preparation, and institutional-level procurement changes. This investment brought $3 million to SchoolFood and helped institutionalize the quality improvements that occurred during this time. The Food Bank for New York City now operates the classroom component under the name CookShop Classroom™. The training of school kitchen staff has ceased for lack of funds. An important lesson learned is that sustained change and continued progress are difficult and difficult to document without outside support.

To sustain this positive momentum, City Harvest sought grant funding from the Kellogg Foundation for the 2008-2009 school year to engage SchoolFood and key stakeholders in a strategic planning process to identify ways to increase student participation and improve food quality in the next few years. Three major findings emerged from this work. First, SchoolFood has a number of innovative, successful pilots that bring higher quality food into schools and encourage children to participate (e.g., Garden to Café, Breakfast in the Classroom) but support is needed to expand these programs to more schools. Second, there is a lack of communication
about these programs and other positive changes within SchoolFood to external partners, parents, and the public generally. Third, it was recognized that greater resources are needed to make significant changes to food quality.

To address these issues, City Harvest worked with SchoolFood to document pilot programs and disseminated that information through networks of community members and school food advocates. City Harvest continues to support SchoolFood in communicating with parents, elected officials, and community groups by offering presentations, materials, and otherwise sharing their deep knowledge of this complex system at community meetings and other venues where “NYC School Food” is on the agenda. Finally, City Harvest took the opportunity to secure more resources for SchoolFood by convening the NYC Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization to advocate for New York City’s priorities for the legislation.

New York is one of more than twenty cities participating in School Food FOCUS, a new nationwide initiative that helps large urban school districts procure more healthful, regionally sourced, and sustainably produced food (28). In the FOCUS model, school districts work in tandem with a “community partner,” typically a nonprofit organization or a government agency, to support change. City Harvest is SchoolFood’s community partner. FOCUS is currently working with poultry producers and processors to supply healthier chicken products and with USDA to develop Farm-to-School Teams to assist school districts to purchase local foods.

Programs in the schools

Several promising strategies and initiatives are underway in a handful of New York City schools. Many are coordinated by outside groups that bring additional resources and allow SchoolFood to operate programs it could not support on its own. Thus, they serve as model programs that can be implemented with committed support from parents, teachers, school administration, volunteers, and students.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) – Eighteen elementary schools received FFVP grants from the State in 2009-2010. The program is open only to elementary schools that have 50 percent or more of students eligible for free or reduced price meals. Participating schools receive an allotment of $50 to $75 per child per year to provide a daily fresh fruit or vegetable snack offered throughout the school building (29). Funds are limited each year and are awarded on a competitive grant basis; schools must apply to the NYS Department of Education in the spring for the following school year. Applications and information can be found on the Department website (30). Although only 20
percent of the requests were met for this academic year, funding is expected to increase during the next three years. Most principals probably don’t know this program exists, so write a letter telling them about the FFVP and asking them to appoint someone to complete the application (noting the deadline).

Garden to Café (31) is a promising initiative started by SchoolFood and the State Department of Agriculture and Markets in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension, (32) GreenThumb, (33) and more than twenty community-based organizations. The goal is to promote vegetarian options, connect students to local food and farming, increase awareness of school gardening, and provide opportunities to integrate school gardening and school lunch. Twenty city schools participated in school gardening and educational activities such as tasting and cooking demonstrations in 2008-2009. Research shows that when students learn about where their food comes from and participate in growing it, they are more likely to eat it and adopt healthier eating habits (34, 35).

Numerous nonprofit organizations have developed programs for schools to accomplish similar goals. For example, Greenmarket offers tours to school children at farmers markets (36) and organizes “Meet your Farmer” classroom visits (37). SlowFood NYC, Added Value, and a handful of other organizations also offer kids opportunities to garden and receive food education. See the appendix for a listing of organizations.

In sum, dozens of organizations, hundreds of schools, and hundreds of thousands of New York City children are involved in innovative programs that bring healthier, tastier food to schools. The challenge for the next phase of school food reform is to bring these small programs to scale and to find ongoing funding to support them.

**TAKE ACTION!**

Teachers: Sign up for a Greenmarket field trip or bring your students to a local garden, urban farm, or farmers market. GreenThumb has a listing of community gardens.
Policy Target 2: Improve the variety and quality of food served in New York City schools and evaluate school food programs more closely to ensure that they meet standards.

Factors Influencing Who Eats School Meals: Challenges and Progress

“I eat school lunch almost daily. I can’t function on an empty stomach. But for many teens the chicken patties and mashed potatoes come with a side order of shame... Real change will only come when the quality of the food gets better. I am not ashamed of eating the food, but I am ashamed of the way it’s prepared. Chef Jorge said that better food comes down to the skill of the cooks. In that case, I think the DOE should provide more professional training for as many cooks as possible... I think the DOE should provide more professional training for as many cooks as possible. They should also increase the number of healthy items on offer, such as fruits and vegetables. They’ve already started offering salad bars and providing cooking classes for their staff, which are great steps. In the meantime, I’ll keep going to the lunch line and hoping for the best.”


NYC Schoolfood by the Numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total meals served daily</td>
<td>860,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals served free or at reduced price (38)</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC school-age children living in poverty (39)</td>
<td>516,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC households with children that have difficultyaffording food (1)</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who pay for school breakfast in NYC</td>
<td>0 - breakfast is free for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children relying on food pantries who also eat free school breakfast</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who is eating school meals?

The box below shows the average daily participation rate in breakfast and lunch for each grade level for one month in school year 2009-2010 compared to 2006-2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>LUNCH PARTICIPATION</th>
<th>BREAKFAST PARTICIPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data provided by the Office of SchoolFood

Although participation has increased in the last few years, many students still do not eat school meals, particularly in high school. Rather, as they get older, students skip meals or buy food outside of school. School meals offer the many low-income children who are eligible for free meals a consistent opportunity that many rely on to eat. In addition, the many “food deserts” in New York City mean school perimeters offer fast food, candy stores, and other unhealthy options, often at a lower price than healthier choices, particularly in lower-income, underserved communities (5).

Hunger, food insecurity, and school performance

Support for the value of school food comes from studies showing that children who eat appropriately throughout the day do better on exams and have fewer behavior problems. School breakfast has been shown to improve nutrient intake, academic performance, psychosocial and cognitive functioning, as well as reduce absenteeism and tardiness (40-42). As anyone who has spent a workday hungry and distracted knows, it’s hard to concentrate on an empty stomach.

Sadly, many kids may spend the entire school day hungry if they’re unable or unwilling to eat school meals. As food insecurity rises, many kids don’t get enough to eat at home. According to the most recent USDA report, Household Food Security in the United States, 17 million households, or 14.6 percent, faced difficulties putting enough food on the table in 2008 (43). For kids whose families are food insecure, school meals may make up a substantial portion of their daily food intake, providing two or more meals a day. These meals are vital to many kids in New York City, one in five of whom visits a food pantry or soup kitchen (44). Yet among households with school-age children that rely on emergency food, only 64 percent and 49 percent, respectively, participate in the federal school lunch and school breakfast programs (45). Slightly more than 80 percent of students who submit applications qualify for free and reduced meals – however, this is only a subset of the 1.1 million New York City school children (80 percent of total enrolled students actually return applications) (38).
What the kids say…the Health Equity Project

The Health Equity Project, a partnership between the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene - District Public Health Offices and Hunter College, City University of New York, works with high school students in underserved neighborhoods to assess and change access to healthy and unhealthy foods in their communities. Last year, high school students from Central Brooklyn and the South Bronx created, collected, and analyzed 206 surveys of fellow students from seventeen high schools, assessing their attitudes and behaviors toward school food. They found that just over half of those surveyed reported eating school lunch two or fewer days per week. Almost 60 percent rated school lunch as terrible or poor, with the top issues being lack of variety, poor taste, and foods being poorly prepared (e.g., “reheated”). Interviews with SchoolFood managers, however, uncovered a disconnect between students and managers, with the latter rating the food and service as excellent and stating that schools offer a wide variety of nutritious foods. The students presented recommendations, including improving communication between students and managers by advertising student/SchoolFood manager meetings, providing comment cards, advertising the menus more visibly, and bringing in fresher produce. This highlights the need for kids to engage in school food discussions and offer feedback on their experience.

Environment and time

Many students report that school cafeterias discourage them from eating in school. With overcrowded schools and limited space, cafeterias are often not inviting environments. Lunch periods can begin as early as 10 am, and go as late as 2 pm, and often students have only thirty to forty minutes to get to the cafeteria, go through the lunch line, eat, socialize, and make it to their next class. These short and varied time slots can be a deterrent, as some may not want to eat so early, while others are left with fewer options by the last lunch period. Lastly, cafeteria environments replicate many aspects of fast food restaurants. In a society that is already struggling against social norms that reinforce unhealthy eating habits, these characteristics don’t make it any easier to encourage healthier eating habits in school. Despite the many known benefits of eating breakfast, and even though New York City has “Universal school breakfast” (served free to all students regardless of income), we still rank second to lowest in school breakfast participation among twenty-three large US cities. Fewer than 30 percent of children who eat school lunches eat school breakfast (46). Major barriers to increasing school breakfast participation are: the inability of children to arrive at school for the early service time, students’ unwillingness to visit the cafeteria for a meal while others are outside the school building, a desire to socialize rather than eat, and a desire to avoid the stigma of eating cafeteria breakfast.

“Studies have shown that eating a nutritious breakfast and lunch helps students be productive in school, stay alert and perform to the best of their abilities,” New York City Deputy Mayor for Education and Community Development, Dennis M. Walcott said.
New York City has had a lot of success with its Breakfast in the Classroom and Grab ‘n’ Go programs, both funded and supported by SchoolFood (47). These programs provide an option for students who don’t eat breakfast for any number of reasons: maybe they aren’t given breakfast at home, they are ashamed to partake in free breakfast at school, or they don’t arrive early enough to eat in the cafeteria. With Breakfast in the Classroom, SchoolFood delivers breakfast directly to classrooms where students can eat. The Grab ‘n’ Go system hands out bagged breakfasts to every student as they come into school, and students are allowed to eat breakfast in their first class.

Some have voiced concern that serving breakfast in the classroom could lead to food safety, vermin, and trash problems as well as make more work for janitorial staff. But many schools have successfully provided breakfast in the classroom. This approach has been shown to result in fewer sick students, decreased hunger, and increased attention, particularly in the beginning of the day. According to the NYC DOE, participation rates in schools that offer Breakfast in the Classroom school-wide increased from 20% to 90% in two years (38). The program is currently in 300 schools but is available to any school at the discretion of the principal. Many schools implement the program in only a handful of classrooms because of concerns cited above.

**TAKE ACTION!**

Students and parents: Teachers have the most control over what happens in the classroom. Let teachers know that Breakfast in the Classroom is a hit with their peers by showing the video on SchoolFood’s website, and ask them to urge the principal to accept the program and/or expand it to more classrooms.

**Fiscal Year 2011 budget cuts in NYC school food**

The DOE plans to reduce spending on school food by reducing the variety of foods served to students and thereby reducing the staff required to prepare meals. DOE expects to eliminate the equivalent of 276 full time food service workers. The staff reductions will save approximately $20 million. The remaining $3.7 million savings will be achieved by eliminating approximately 100 schools from the Universal School Meals Program, a provision that allows schools with a high proportion of low income students to serve meals free to all students and eliminates the administrative burden of school meal applications and the stigma associated with eating free meals. These cuts are a step in the wrong direction (86).

**Stigma, trust, and image**

Another problem is that the system of free, reduced-price, “paid,” and a la carte meals can be stigmatizing and discourage students from participating in school meal programs. School meals are derided as being for “poor kids,” making it difficult for students who need or want to eat during the day to do so without shame or criticism from their peers. High school students may say “school food is nasty” or call school meals “free-free.” It is no surprise, then, that kids don’t feel good about eating these meals.
“I believe the time has come for a new paradigm in school food... It is time to move to universal free school meals. This would benefit poor children who would no longer have to eat a meal seasoned by shame, and it would benefit middle-income children for whom healthy school meals would become the norm. It would benefit our over-stressed time-starved working families by taking one more task... off the table... And in the long run it would benefit us all through savings in health care costs and better educational outcomes.”


Some schools offer universal free lunch, but there is still a long-standing and deeply ingrained mistrust of school food. One Health Equity Project student remarked, “We don’t see where it’s coming from, what they do to it.” Some students are more apt to trust “brand name” foods like McDonald’s. This trust is enhanced by the almost $2.5 million a day McDonald’s spends on advertising in the US, most of which is targeted at children (48). These ads put the healthier SchoolFood system at a distinct disadvantage. Changing the social norms and culture around school food will require significant new action. As the quality of school food improves, the image of school food needs to improve too. Parents, principals, staff, and students can model positive feelings about school meals as improvements continue. Further improvements will reinforce this virtuous circle.

**Policy Target 4:** Advocate for universal free lunch programs in New York City and elsewhere.

**TAKE ACTION!**

**Teachers and parents:** Eat a meal in the school cafeteria so that kids will follow your lead and feel comfortable eating there too.

**The role of food and nutrition education**

Improving food quality is only part of the picture – students also need to learn how to have healthy diets. Food and nutrition education is not a formal part of the school curriculum, though nutrition topics can be used to meet learning objectives of science education. The Linking Food and the Environment curriculum developed by The Center for Food and Environment at Teachers College, Columbia University is an inquiry-based program that meets national science education standards and can be integrated into the standard science curriculum in many schools. The Cookshop Classroom™ currently operated by Food Bank For NYC teaches cooking and nutrition in 500 pre-kindergarten through second grade classes (49). The State Department of Agriculture and Markets is seeking to integrate its garden curriculum into state standards for science education so that school gardening may fit better into the school day.
Another opportunity would be to integrate these topics into health education curricula. The New York City Department of Education does cover some nutrition for elementary, middle, and high schools, but its scope is limited (50). Many groups have developed pilot nutrition education programs using puppets (51), peer educators (52), and staff from community-based organizations in New York City and elsewhere, providing evidence-based models for expansion or replication. Given that recent reviews have shown that linking nutrition education with changes in school food programs and policies can lead to healthier eating and reductions in obesity (53-56), New York City schools have opportunities for improvements in this area. One of the best nutrition education lessons is serving healthy, balanced meals and removing competitive, unhealthy foods.

The federal government requires all schools that operate lunch programs to have a school wellness policy designed to improve nutrition and physical activity for the school community. Policies are typically established by a School Wellness Council that may include parents, students, SchoolFood representatives, staff and administration, and others (57), but ultimately implementation depends on the willingness and participation of school administrators and staff. The City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene School Wellness Council Project works with elementary schools in the District Public Health Office catchment areas to implement policies promoting nutrition or physical activity. Policies have included banning food as a reward in classes or organizing physical activity in the classroom (58). Nutrition and physical activity policies have not been a priority in most city schools due to lack of resources to implement proposed changes, limited evaluation, a shortage of qualified nutrition and health education teachers, and the Department of Education’s strong focus on reading and arithmetic test scores. As a result, few New York City school children have the information and skills needed to maintain a healthy diet.

Policy Target 5: Create and implement a comprehensive K-12 health, food, and nutrition education curriculum for New York City.
Navigating the System: How Does SchoolFood Work In New York City?

The New York City Office of SchoolFood continues to improve the quality and nutritional content of school food, building on the last few years of success and using new resources available. However, given SchoolFood’s size and multi-layered hierarchy, parents and students often complain about poor communication, limited transparency, and erratic implementation of new policies.

MORE NUMBERS ON NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL FOOD

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SchoolFood employees</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools serving meals</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals served per day</td>
<td>860,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating budget</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount available to spend on food costs (per lunch)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salad bars in NYC schools</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples served daily in NYC</td>
<td>114,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data provided by the Office of SchoolFood, 2010
SchoolFood is the second largest institutional food purchaser in the country (after the Department of Defense); it is responsible for the daily operation of the school breakfast, lunch, and snack programs in New York City’s more than 1,500 schools.

Managing a system this large is a huge challenge. It is difficult to communicate consistent messages to 9,000 employees throughout the five boroughs. Eliminating food items from 1,500 locations throughout the city takes longer than parents, the advocacy community, and even SchoolFood would like. Replacing items on citywide menus must take into account students’ diverse food preferences and often depends on the school’s location. The Italian items that are loved in Howard Beach are often not the first choice of students in the largely Dominican section of Washington Heights, for example. Implementing a new service model such as a “burrito bar” requires onsite training of school staff. Rolling out new programs means some schools will not get them until next year. This leads to tremendous variation across schools.

**How to communicate with the Office of SchoolFood**

Although school administrators are responsible for students and supervise most of the school staff, much of what happens in the school cafeteria is under the authority of SchoolFood, an entity not present on school grounds. SchoolFood does not have an easy or accessible way to communicate directly with schools, and students, parents, and teachers report that it’s hard to talk to SchoolFood representatives and to find ways to participate in shaping the school meal program.

To address this need, SchoolFood managers, the highest-ranking SchoolFood employees on school grounds, are required to hold monthly “SchoolFood Partnership Meetings” in each school to exchange information, ideas, and concerns with students, parents, principals, teachers, and other school staff. Meetings usually involve a select group of students, parent coordinators, school nurses, school aides and parents and are held during the SchoolFood managers workday, which is also the school day. Therefore, it’s a challenge to include students (who are in class), parents (who may be working), and teachers (who are teaching). The meeting agenda is set by the SchoolFood manager but includes an open comment period. A typical agenda includes discussion of new menu items, nutrition topics and activities, and decorating the cafeteria for special events.

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**TAKE ACTION!**

Parents and teachers: Share your knowledge of school food with parents and others to get them involved in improvements in your school. Submit an article to the school newsletter or ask the principal to create a space on the school website about school food.

**TAKE ACTION!**

Parents and teachers: Your SchoolFood manager has the option to order a variety of items from the citywide list, many of which may not be regularly served in your school. Write a letter requesting preferred foods so they’ll know what to order.
For now, SchoolFood Partnership meetings are the best available way to communicate about school meals and cafeteria operation, although levels of success depend on the school and engagement from stakeholders. The box below describes the responsibilities of SchoolFood managers.

“I’m pushing down from above, but real change happens in each of your schools when you talk to the school manager. Challenge them; it’s your cafeteria.” – Executive Chef Jorge Collazo, SchoolFood, *Grilling with Chef Jorge*, youthcomm.org, September 11, 2009

**SchoolFood Managers and Staff**

Managers are the highest level SchoolFood staff and oversee four to five schools in a geographic cluster and are present only once a week in each school. Schools also have a Cook in Charge (one per building), at least one Senior School Lunch Helper (for heavy duties such as lifting), and at least one School Lunch Helper (for lighter duty, such as sandwich preparation). The SchoolFood manager’s responsibilities are to: supervise, train, and motivate food service staff; order food and supplies; maintain inventory and cash controls; increase meal participation; focus on customer service; implement SchoolFood procedures; and communicate and promote SchoolFood programs to students, parents, and administrators.
**Policy Target 6:** Provide parents and students with meaningful opportunities to participate in improving school food.

**Investments: Cost, staff training, and infrastructure**

The federal government pays for the school meals program, but it doesn’t allocate enough money to provide great meals. After labor and equipment costs, just under $1.00 (out of the $2.68 reimbursed) is left to buy food for each student’s lunch. Schools must put together meals that meet the standards described above and that are appealing to kids despite these miniscule budgets. This is nearly impossible, since healthy food (fresh, unprocessed, flavorful) is usually more expensive than processed and energy-dense food (59). Kitchen labor and equipment are also part of the equation and also underfunded. Schools need real cooks in the kitchen, appropriate equipment, and whole nutritious foods to cook well.

School food jobs have deteriorated during the last three decades, from skilled cooking positions to low-skilled, low-wage staff opening and reheating packaged foods. Training for staff is infrequent and focuses primarily on food safety and general preparation. Real scratch cooking training is scarce, as is food and nutrition education. The tight labor budget allows for only the most necessary staffing, and lack of advancement opportunities erodes morale in spite of SchoolFood’s staff appreciation events.

**Policy Target 7:** Expand and provide additional training for the school food workforce.

Even if schools were given larger reimbursements, barriers to preparing school food would remain. Many City schools lack fully equipped kitchens, leaving staff with few options other than microwaving pre-cooked meals. According to a recent New York Times article, “barely half of New York’s 1,385 school kitchens have enough cooking and fire-suppression equipment so cooks can actually sauté, brown or boil over open flame” (60). Even in
kitchens that have the necessary equipment, it often does not function properly, is not readily available, or cannot be used because staff have not received proper training (60).

Policy Target 8: Increase the number of city schools with fully functioning kitchens and needed equipment.

The good news is that New York State received nearly $6 million through the American Recovery and Reimbursement Act of 2009 for equipment that improves and increases the quality, safety, and efficiency of and participation in school meals (61). More than two million dollars went to the purchase of kitchen equipment, including salad bars and water jet machines, as well as wiring and installation costs in 190 schools (62). In 2009, SchoolFood and the City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene began a partnership to install “water jet” machines in lunch lines to supply free tap water to students. Approximately fifty schools have received water jets, and 300 more are already slated to get machines.

TAKE ACTION!

Parents and teachers: Parents, students, and teachers: Encourage more children to eat school lunch so that your school can get more kitchen staff, which makes it easier to prepare tasty meals from scratch.

TAKE ACTION!

Parents and teachers: Ask your principal to request an assessment to determine if the water jet can be installed in your cafeteria. You may have to raise funds to buy the machine, which costs $720 for a small and $950 for a large machine. In the meantime, ask your principal to ensure that the water fountains are clean and in good working order.

School food service as employment opportunity

School “lunch ladies” once prepared and served food in schools across the country, and for many families, these jobs provided an important source of income. Federal stimulus funds could be used to jumpstart a new jobs program to train residents to prepare and serve healthy food in neighborhood schools and counteract current sky-high unemployment rates, especially in the City’s poorest neighborhoods. Such an initiative combines economic and community development, employment, health and education.

SchoolFood has also recruited multiple outside partners to maximize its efforts. A parent-founded organization, Wellness in the Schools (WITS), for example, solicits culinary interns as volunteers to prepare meals from scratch in eight city schools. WITS interns also prepare fresh produce for salad bars, which is time consuming and often
difficult for existing cafeteria staff to manage. WITS has created a buzz by engaging well-known Chef Bill Telepan in its work; his presence in the school is usually enough to get all kids into the cafeteria on Wellness Café days, which parents, school staff, and others are encouraged to attend.

More organizations and sectors get involved in efforts to improve school food each year. You will find descriptions of some of the key players in the school food movement on the national, state, and city level, along with some promising programs and policies in the appendix.

**Outside the Cafeteria: the Rest of the School Food Environment**

“I’m not just talking about the school lunch program, but the entire culture of food in schools, which is reflective of the entire culture of food in America: the availability of lots of processed food that fills you up but doesn’t contribute to optimum learning and behavior.”

– Amy Kalafa, Two Angry Moms, “Mothers Start a Food Fight,” USA Today, August 7, 2007

**Food as an afterthought in the school environment**

Water fountains in many schools do not work, forcing students to spend their limited funds on drinks – including bottled water – from vending machines. The short lunch periods and unbalanced meals promote a fast food lunchroom culture, and the a la carte lines enforce a business model that both deters students from eating school meals and reinforces the stigma associated with them. Students who skip school meals and buy lunch outside the school usually face even less healthy options.

Schools are where kids learn the necessities to succeed in life. Surely good health and proper diet are a piece of this puzzle, yet schools are not required to teach about healthy eating. In fact, the school food environment – pervaded by treats and snack food – actually undermines efforts to send positive food and nutrition messages and shape good dietary habits. If we expect classrooms to impart knowledge and skills, we need to expect the school food environment to teach and promote healthy eating habits. Just as classrooms do not offer children poorly written reading material with profanities and slang to develop their reading skills or math booklets with incorrect computations, neither should schools offer children fast food and nutrient-poor snack foods and hope to establish appropriate dietary skills!

**School meals vs. competitive foods**

The school cafeteria isn’t the only place students get food. “Competitive foods” are food and beverages sold inside the school, but outside of the federally regulated school meal program (and therefore not under the authority
of the USDA). These foods are often important sources of revenue for schools and include foods and drinks sold in vending machines, à la carte lines, school stores, classrooms, and fundraisers. The number of food options available to students has increased alongside the rise in obesity. Researchers have found that the prevalence of snacks and drinks in schools is associated with higher intakes of total calories and saturated fat and lower consumption of fruits, vegetables, and milk (63, 64). Further, students participating in the school meal programs were less likely to consume competitive foods than nonparticipants (65). Providing clean, accessible tap water, in particular, may offer a healthy and cost-effective alternative to and help reduce consumption of sweetened beverages.

**Policy Target 9:** Make sure that every New York City school provides easy access to clean tap water.

Although competitive foods have been subject to scrutiny and increasing regulation in the last few years, they are not regulated by one agency, making standardized regulations difficult. Eliminating these least healthy foods from schools is an achievable priority.

**How can we remove unhealthy foods from schools?**

Federal regulation bars “Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value” (FMNV), such as chewing gum and hard candy, from school environments. Local standards vary widely beyond that. New York City sets strict guidelines for snacks and drinks sold in schools outside of the federal school meal program. State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, however, found that that stores and vending machines in twenty of thirty New York City schools visited sold candy, soda, and other unhealthy snacks during lunch periods in direct violation of the Chancellor’s policies and in direct competition with the healthy lunches (22). This points to the importance of monitoring implementation of all school food regulations, which, of course, requires additional resources.
According to city regulations, drinks cannot have more than ten calories per eight ounces in elementary and middle schools or more than twenty-five in high schools; snacks must have fewer than 200 calories, less than 200 mg sodium, and less than 10 percent saturated fat (66, 67). Backlash against federal regulations has focused on how easy it is to offer highly processed foods that conform readily to strict nutrient guidelines (in the same way that USDA standards result in processed foods being used in school meals). And although policies control the size of each snack, students are still free to purchase as many items as they like. Furthermore, regulations were weakened in February 2010 when a ban on selling competitive foods during school meal times was rescinded. Now, students can sell any “approved” items at any time during the day (outside of the cafeteria) in direct competition with school meals (68). This list of items includes Doritos – Cool Ranch Reduced Fat, Pop-Tarts toaster pastries, Brown Rice Marshmallow Treats, Nutri-Grain Cereal Bars, etc (69). Lastly, PTAs may sell unapproved foods during the school day once a month (outside of the cafeteria).

**Corporations in our schools**

The school food program has long been a target for food companies that want to develop brand loyalty among future consumers for profitable processed food such as soda and candy. The City Department of Education’s five-year contract with Snapple has expired, allowing independent contractors to run the schools’ vending machines. Although new stringent guidelines will limit the least healthy drinks and snacks, vendors still sell brand name, highly processed snacks and have the benefit of heavily marketing and promoting their products in the school or at sporting events (70). Evidence that advertising can change kids’ food choices and that children are more likely to request foods they see advertised on television abounds (71-73). Children are already inundated with unhealthy food and soda marketing – through the TV, Internet, social media, storefront advertising, and everywhere else. Vending machines and other competitive foods may bring in needed revenue, but they are also prime real estate for corporations to continue building brand loyalty at the expense of our children’s well-being.

“A world class educational system does not ask its children to consume high-sugar, high-fat food in order to refurbish its ping pong tables nor ask them to slake their thirst with caffeinated sugary drinks in order to play sports after school.” — Leader of Seattle’s successful effort to end Coca Cola’s exclusive contract with the Seattle School District, 2002

**Policy Target 10:** Ban all competitive food from New York City public schools.
Food available outside schools

No school is an island, and so children’s food choices are also influenced by the food options near their schools. Too many schools in New York City are surrounded by fast food outlets, convenience stores, and bodegas that sell sweet, salty, high-fat, and high-calorie products – just the types of foods that contribute to poor health, obesity, and later chronic illnesses. One important reason for improving the taste, quality, and variety of school food and lowering its price is to compete more effectively with food outlets that surround schools. The more kids eat and drink in school, the less likely they are to buy unhealthy products outside of school.

Consider the following research findings:

- A California study found that obesity rates were 5 percent higher among students whose schools were within one-tenth of a mile of a fast food restaurant, compared with those whose schools were farther away from such food outlets (74). Students whose schools were near fast food restaurants consumed fewer fruits and vegetables and more soda (75).
- A disproportionately higher density of fast food establishments are located in poor, predominantly minority neighborhoods (9, 76, 77).
  - The percentage of fast food restaurants is much higher in Harlem than in the Upper East Side (16 percent vs. 4 percent).
  - About two out of three food stores in East and Central Harlem are bodegas (compared to one in three stores on the Upper East Side), which offer fewer selections than supermarkets and are less likely to carry healthier options, such as low-fat dairy products, fruits, and vegetables (78).
  - Although apples, oranges, and bananas are the most common fruits available in Central Brooklyn, they are found in only 28 percent of bodegas (79).
  - Eighty percent of adolescents and more than 90 percent of adults in the South Bronx say they eat fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables a day – not surprising, given that 90 percent of food stores are bodegas (80).

TAKE ACTION!

Parents, teachers, and students: Visit local food establishments and ask the manager to offer affordable healthier options for students. Special discounts on healthy foods for students can improve stores’ revenues and children’s health. Work with the City Department of Health’s Healthy Bodegas Initiative or Green My Bodega in Brooklyn.
New York City’s Food Movement

Not only is there a growing school food movement underway, but also an energetic, citywide food movement that has goals beyond the school cafeteria. Connecting school food with other initiatives is important for creating synergy, sharing resources, and mobilizing communities. Ultimately, our school food system depends on the larger food system. Here are some recent New York City initiatives and policies aimed at improving the City’s food environment.

FoodWorks New York

At the end of 2009, Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn announced “FoodWorks New York,” the first comprehensive plan to use New York City’s food system to create jobs, improve public health, and protect the environment (81). Goals include improving the city’s food infrastructure, creating better job opportunities in the food industry, increasing local food markets, reducing diet-related diseases, and reducing environmental damage from food-related activities. School food fits into each of these goals – by adding kitchens, hiring more cafeteria staff, buying local food, increasing school meal participation, and eliminating the use of Styrofoam trays.

New York City Health Department and other City agencies’ food and nutrition initiatives

Since 2006, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has banned trans fat in commercial food outlets; required chain restaurants to label the number of calories in the products they sell; created a program called Healthy Bodega to assist local grocers to offer healthier, more affordable food; and established the Green Carts programs so that food vendors can sell fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income, high-obesity neighborhoods.

Other city agencies have also created food programs. The FRESH (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health) Initiative offers tax incentives and more flexible zoning rules to lure grocery stores into underserved areas; in exchange, they agree to allocate a certain amount of space to fresh produce, meats, dairy and other perishables (11). The city has also opened farmers markets in many new neighborhoods, innovated the use of Electronic Benefits Transfer in farmers markets in low-income neighborhoods, and provided subsidies to Food Stamp recipients to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables. These programs have the potential to link with school food programs.
TAKE ACTION!

Parents, teachers, and students: Make sure a Green Cart is located outside of your high school so that teens have alternatives to fast food, soda, and candy.

Soda tax to provide revenues for school food

Governor Patterson’s proposed 15 percent tax on non-diet sodas has generated considerable controversy. Given the demonstrated link between consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (82-84), why not impose a tax on soda and allocate the revenues to school food reform? If all sugar-sweetened beverages were taxed $0.01 per ounce, New York City would bring in more than $404 million annually (85). These dollars could be put toward training cafeteria staff, building kitchen infrastructure, supplying organic hormone-free milk, starting edible gardens, replacing Styrofoam trays with reusable trays, and the list continues. All would contribute to improving the health of New York City schools and communities. The defeat of the soda tax this year demonstrates the political muscle of the beverage industry and legislators’ reluctance to consider new revenue streams to support improved nutrition.

Conclusion

New York City, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, deserves a world-class school food program. Better school food can improve learning, reduce hunger and obesity, lessen children’s reliance on fast food outlets and other sources of unhealthy food, prevent lifetime health problems, and shrink socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in health. Few social investments offer such expansive and ongoing benefits.

Several current developments – local and national attention on the twin crises of growing hunger and growing obesity; the commitment of city, state, and federal officials to improving food policy; and emerging food and school food movements – provide a window of opportunity to make real changes in school food in New York City. We described here some steps that young people, parents, teachers, advocates, health providers, and school, health, and political leaders can take to improve school food programs in New York City.

We end with one final benefit of improving school food in New York City. To paraphrase Frank Sinatra, if we can make school food work in New York City, others can make it work anywhere. Our city can show the United States what it takes to make an efficient, effective school food program that provides healthy tasty food to its children. We can show the benefits of improving children’s health and school achievement while creating a foundation for a new healthier food system. By demonstrating this possibility, New York can make a great contribution to our nation’s future.
The main take-home messages of this report

1. How our schools feed our children reflects our values on food, nutrition, health, and child poverty. New York City deserves a school food program that demonstrates our commitments to health for all, an end to childhood poverty and hunger, and the right to an education that prepares children for their futures.

2. School food contributes a significant portion to many children’s diets. Therefore, improving school food programs can have a positive impact on the diets and health of young people and future generations.

3. Government and business both shape the school food system, making it difficult to understand and navigate. The complexity and scale of the system, both in the United States and New York City, leads to significant variations in food programs and quality, across communities and even within schools. But grassroots efforts can have an effect on every level. School food sold as part of the federal school lunch and breakfast programs tends to be healthier than food sold outside of these programs in vending machines, a la carte in school cafeterias, or in stores and fast food outlets surrounding schools. To improve school food, officials and advocates will need to change all the food available in and around schools. They will also need to strengthen nutrition education in schools.

4. Many individuals, organizations, and policy makers in New York and the United States are committed to improving school food today. A window of opportunity to create a local and national movement for meaningful school food reform has opened. By working together to change school food in a single school or community, young people, parents, advocates, teachers, principals, and policy makers in New York City can reduce hunger, obesity, and poverty and improve the health and well-being of children and future generations.
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Appendix: Some Organizations Working on NYC School Food Issues

**Added Value**: A non-profit organization promoting the sustainable development of Red Hook by nurturing a new generation of young leaders through the operation of a socially responsible urban farming enterprise.  [http://www.added-value.org/](http://www.added-value.org/)

**Brooklyn Food Coalition**: A grassroots partnership of individuals and groups advocating for changes that will bring tasty, healthy, and affordable food to Brooklyn. If you live or work in Brooklyn and want to get involved email info@brooklyfoodcoalition.org asking to join the School Food Reform Group and attend the next meeting. [http://brooklyfoodcoalition.ning.com/](http://brooklyfoodcoalition.ning.com/)

**City Harvest**: The Healthy Schools program provides interns to willing schools in City Harvest’s Healthy Neighborhoods of the South Bronx, Stapleton Staten Island, and Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, to help schools access supportive programming to increase student participation and improve food quality in school meals. [http://www.cityharvest.org/programs/healthy-neighborhoods/](http://www.cityharvest.org/programs/healthy-neighborhoods/)

**CookShop**: The Food Bank For New York City’s nutrition education program gives low-income New Yorkers of all ages the knowledge and information to make healthy food choices through four components: CookShop Classroom; CookShop for Teens, also known as EATWISE; CookShop for Adults; and CookShop Social Marketing. [http://www.foodbankny.org/go/about-the-food-bank](http://www.foodbankny.org/go/about-the-food-bank)

**Greenmarket**: GrowNYC’s Greenmarket program promotes regional agriculture by providing small family farms the opportunity to sell their locally grown, caught, foraged and baked products directly to consumers, and works to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to the fresh, nutritious, locally grown food. The Greenmarket Youth Education Project connects thousands of New York City schoolchildren in grades K-12 with Greenmarkets and our farmers and chefs each year.  [http://www.grownyc.org/greenmarket](http://www.grownyc.org/greenmarket)

**Health Equity Project**: The Health Equity Project (HEP) serves as a model of community engagement targeting adolescents ages 12-18 within high-need neighborhoods in New York City. HEP incorporates a structured dialogue process with youth and youth-serving agencies to raise awareness about the underlying causes of poor health in lower-income neighborhoods, looking particularly at issues such as the food environment. For more information email: nfreuden@hunter.cuny.edu

**Learn It, Grow It, Eat It**: In this GrowNYC program, youth grow their own food in 4 high schools and 3 community gardens in Morissania, Bronx. For more information:  David Saphire dsaphire@cenyc.org or Lenny Librizzi llibrizzi@cenyc.org or [http://www.grownyc.org/ee/lge](http://www.grownyc.org/ee/lge).

**NYC Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization**: A coalition of New York groups formed in March 2009, seeking to influence the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Join the Action Campaign where you can attend an event, organize letter writing, or plan a visit to a Congress member to talk about CNR. The Alliance website provides tools and letter templates.  [http://nycforcnr.org/](http://nycforcnr.org/)

**NY Coalition for Healthy School Food**: A nonprofit organization seeking greater inclusion of plant-based entrees (such as beans and soy-based items) in school meals and access to alternatives to dairy milk (such as soymilk).  [http://www.healthylunches.org](http://www.healthylunches.org)
New York City Food and Fitness Partnership: Engages communities in making the healthy choice the easy choice by creating equitable access to healthy, quality, affordable foods and opportunities for active living, starting in the neighborhoods of highest need. The Partnership has a special focus on Central Brooklyn and also seeks to improve school food citywide. [http://www.nycfoodandfitness.org/](http://www.nycfoodandfitness.org/)

School Food FOCUS: School Food FOCUS is a national initiative that helps large urban school districts, including New York City, to purchase and serve foods that are healthier, more sustainably produced and more locally sourced (discussed in “What Counts as Food”). Keep up to date on their efforts by signing up for their monthly e-newsletter via the website at [www.schoolfoodfocus.org](http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org)

Slow Food NYC: The New York City chapter of Slow Food, a non-profit, member-supported organization was founded to counteract fast food and fast life. Their “Harvest Time” program is a school based nutrition and food education program. They also operate a student-run food stand in East Harlem. [http://www.slowfoodnyc.org/](http://www.slowfoodnyc.org/)

The New York City Strategic Alliance for Health (SAfH): Seeks to improve individual, family, and community health of the South Bronx and East and Central Harlem neighborhoods by advancing policy, system and environmental changes that influence physical activity and nutrition. Improving school food is one of its priorities. One of their major accomplishments in 2010 was the creation of the Excellence in School Wellness Award that recognizes the strides that schools are making in creating healthy school environments as a means to prevent childhood obesity and improve academic achievement. Forty schools in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx received the award in the 2009-2010 school year. [http://www.nyam.org/initiatives/sp-safh7.shtml](http://www.nyam.org/initiatives/sp-safh7.shtml)

Universal School Meals Coalition: Food Bank For New York City convenes this coalition, which includes school employees, unions, government officials, community-based organizations, advocates and other stakeholders who work toward implementation of universal school meals. For more information, contact Roxanne Henry, Community Outreach Manager at rhenry@foodbanknyc.org.

Wellness in the Schools (WITS): A parent-founded nonprofit promoting a healthy school environment including nutritious food and increased physical activity. They operate a Wellness Café in 13 New York City schools. Chef Bill Telepan and culinary interns prepare meals, and monthly promotional events invite parents and others in the school community to participate in the school meals. [http://www.wellnessinthescchools.org/](http://www.wellnessinthescchools.org/)