

## Unhealthy School Food is Worsening the Obesity Epidemic in America

“Our school serves really low-quality food. When you look at it, it makes you want to throw up in your mouth” (Patten & Hudson). Over 4.8 billion school lunches were served to students in the U.S. in FY 2019 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Looking at the average food served each day it is no wonder this generation of children are expected to live shorter lives than their parents. Heavily processed, greasy, and sugar filled foods are given to children who depend on the food to fuel their bodies and minds. The growing obesity epidemic is a national health crisis (Center for Disease Control and Prevention), and schools have both a responsibility and great opportunity to make a huge positive impact on the health of the children they serve. Parents, school staff, and each school state board of education are implored to take this crisis seriously and demand immediate changes. First, this essay will examine average food served in U.S. schools. Next, nutrition requirements for school meals and lack of accountability are examined. Then arguments against these changes due to cost are discussed. The arguments are contrasted with a school that implemented healthy changes despite funding limitations. Lastly, resources for parents, school staff, and concerned parties are provided to advocate for better school nutrition. Significant improvements in funding, kitchen staff education, and school district accountability could enable schools throughout the country to serve healthy meals to students and improve the worsening obesity epidemic in America.

## School Food and Nutrition Issues

We must care for the health and wellness of the next generation, and by not providing each student with nutritious food at school, schools are worsening the obesity epidemic. The CDC states that obesity-related health conditions are among the leading causes of preventable

death. In the U.S. 14.4 million individuals between 2-19 years old are considered obese (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Covering all issues with food served in individual schools across the U.S. is beyond the grasp of this essay, but overarching problems and examples are provided from public schools in Meridian, Idaho.

### Average School Food Options

Jill, a high school student and life-long Meridian, Idaho resident, grew up in the public school system. When asked about school food she said, “We get very little portions of food, like the same that we have gotten since kindergarten. And only two options are given, always

Uncrustables and then another option, depends on the day. I



Fig. 1 Jillian Patten. *School Vending Machine* (2021). Cell phone image. Meridian, ID.

do remember that they give us a bag of chips every day and either chocolate milk in a tiny carton or regular milk and little juice cups. Sometimes they give us like a tiny cup of canned green beans or four pieces of broccoli or carrots. Vending machines have few options and are always pretty empty” (Patten & Hudson). Online menus for her high school show breakfast options like: Fat Cat Scone, Pop Tarts, Muffin Tops, Mini Cinnis, chocolate milk and Maple Madness Waffles (School Nutrition Services / Secondary Menus). Lunch options include “stuffwich,” pizza rippers, cheeseburgers, stuffed cheese breadstick, chicken nuggets, Uncrustable sandwiches, and chicken & gravy (School Nutrition Services / Secondary Menus). While not an exhaustive list, this shows many highly processed food options served to students.



Fig. 2 Jillian Patten. *Stuffwich* (2021). Cell phone image. Meridian, ID.

Online menus for local elementary schools have similar options: Pop Tarts, Mini Cinnis, Bar ZZ Birthday Cake, chocolate milk, and Raisels (School Nutrition Services / Elementary Menus). These sugar-filled options are not healthy ways to fuel a child for a day of learning. Beans, since they are a legume, are even considered a vegetable in lunch options to cover nutrition requirements (Hudson & Erpenbach). Cheeseburgers, sloppy joes, corn dogs, pizza, chicken and gravy, chicken nuggets, and stuffwiches are lunch options throughout the month (School Nutrition Services / Elementary Menus).

These examples reflect issues at public schools across the nation, as seen on sites like [NPR: This is what America's school lunches really look like](#) (Godoy), and at Patterson High School in NJ, where a pastime is "[label that lunch](#)" (YouTube). Searching "bad U.S. school lunch" on YouTube showcases more unhealthy school lunches. Comments on these videos provide additional perspective:

"This is why I bring my own [food] to school. No way would I drink expired milk."

"Finally people understand that my lunch is made from rat droppings."

"Bro imagine being the 'unfortunate' kid and this is the only meal you can have for the day."

"Bruh, at this point I feel like if they shipped prison food to feed kids at school it would look WAY better, heck might even have a bit of flavor or even taste good at this point."

"It's scientifically proved being fed well improves your physical wellbeing, mental health, and work performance. How do they expect children to perform well in school with these meals!?" (YouTube)

Consuming these unhealthy foods puts children at risk for numerous health issues, including obesity.

### Dangers of Ultra-Processed Foods and Excessive Sugar Intake

A national health survey found that “A high intake of added sugars increases the risk of weight gain, excessive body weight and obesity; type 2 diabetes; higher serum triglycerides and high blood cholesterol; higher blood pressure and hypertension; stroke; coronary heart disease; cancer... A strong linear relationship was found between the dietary contribution of ultra-processed foods and the dietary content of added sugars.” It defines ultra-processed foods as “industrial formulations which, besides salt, sugar, oils and fats, include substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular additives used to imitate sensorial qualities of minimally processed foods and their culinary preparations.” This study suggests that because almost 60% of calories and 90% of added sugars consumed in the U.S. come from ultra-processed foods, limiting these foods in the U.S. diet would be highly effective in reducing sugar consumption. The study encourages replacing ultra-processed foods with minimally processed and freshly prepared foods including fruits, nuts, whole grains, and vegetables (Martínez Steele et al.).

Another article regarding childhood obesity states that solutions will only be effective if there are sustainable improvements in children’s knowledge about health, if they have access to nutritious foods and beverages, and if unhealthy food choices are discouraged. The article says school, community, and legislative actions to encourage healthier choices for children are necessary to battle this nation-wide health crisis (Rogers, Robert et al). Healthy alternatives must replace unhealthy options throughout schools in the U.S. to help reverse the growing obesity epidemic in our nation’s children.

## School Food Regulations and Policies are Not Enough

Unhealthy school food options should not be commonplace when regulations specify the types of food to be served in U.S. schools. In providing results of a school health policies study, the CDC stated that “To monitor progress in each of these areas, it is critical to measure periodically the extent to which schools and school districts nationwide have policies and practices in place that address these components” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). All schools in the U.S. should be held accountable for the food they serve.

### Meal Program Regulations

The CDC states that “Schools are in a unique position to promote healthy behaviors. Most US children spend an average of 6 to 7 hours a day at school, which is a large part of their waking hours” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Many children eat breakfast and lunch at school, and some lower income families qualify for weekend food bags. In an email interview with a teacher who wished to remain anonymous, she wrote, “I’m a teacher, so my heart goes out to some of our families who I know are struggling. I’ve seen students panic on Friday afternoon if they don’t think they are going to receive their weekend food bag (a small handful of families are getting this). Frankly, it’s not even very healthy. Very carb and preservative heavy” (Anonymous & Hudson). The CDC claims that school meal programs provide students with balanced meals meeting federal nutrition standards and include a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Meals are supposed to have limits on the saturated fat and sodium contents, as well as minimum and maximum calorie levels (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The Idaho State Department of Education website details requirements for the federally funded and state administered School Breakfast Program. It claims to provide nutritionally balanced breakfasts to children each day. Guidelines also state that hash browns can

be offered in place of fruit if two cups per week of non-starchy vegetables are also offered. The website says, “Upon state agency administrative review, menus must be determined to meet the current nutrient standards” (Idaho State Department of Education). Pop Tarts and chocolate milk are not a balanced meal and should never be considered a nutritious breakfast for a child. There must be accountability to ensure healthy food is served.

### Accountability

Stories from students and parents expressing outrage at unhealthy food being served to students can be found on news outlets, websites, and YouTube. Inside Edition showed parents in Patterson, NJ, appalled after seeing images of moldy food and expired milk being served to their children. One parent said that they have enough to worry about for their children, and raw, uncooked, inedible food shouldn't be one of them (YouTube).

CNBC asked viewers how a slice of Domino's pizza meets USDA guidelines, and the answer was “money, lots and lots of money.” They also questioned how one school provides inedible food for \$1.25, and another can provide a healthy meal at the same cost. In 2017, 4.9 billion lunches were served at a cost of \$13.6 billion. In the video, Robert Doar, who administered food assistance programs in NYC under Mayor Bloomberg, said, “It is true that the interests here are not only what's best for low-income families, the other interests are the various providers of the food. This is true of anything we do in government, anytime the Federal government is extending significant dollars on a product, people that sell that product you're gonna be interested in maximizing that spending.” The video detailed a product catalog of frozen foods Tyson designed specifically for school cafeterias. They explained that the USDA lists fries as a vegetable, and some cafeterias still consider pizza sauce as a vegetable. Domino's pizza has a Smart Rewards program where schools can earn purchase points to trade in for swag and

cafeteria equipment (YouTube). The health of children appears less important than making money.

## Healthy Food is Too Expensive and Won't Make a Difference

Some people argue that schools cannot be expected to solve the obesity epidemic. The cost for healthier food is too high, there aren't enough staff to make food from scratch, and kids won't eat healthier food. When Michelle Obama fought for stricter regulations and schools began to serve more fruits and vegetables, some schools noticed an increase in healthier food intake, but also an increase in food thrown away (YouTube). Can schools afford nutritious food students will eat?

### The Budget is Too Small

Dan Giusti created meals costing over a hundred dollars a person as the former head chef of Noma. He now runs a group called Brigade that teaches cooking from scratch to school cafeterias around the country, still with the budget of \$1.25 per meal. Discussing school meals, he said, "It's almost like it's this rite of passage, like as a student in an institution like it's just what you get, you get lousy food" (YouTube).

Chef Ann Cooper was the director of food services for Boulder Valley School District in Colorado and created her own foundation to provide solutions for parents and schools to advocate for healthy student meals. She understands budget struggles, saying changing school food may be the hardest job she ever had. Her website has free tools to help concerned individuals advocate for change and raises money to put salad bars in schools to help bring healthier options to schools that have difficulty affording it (Cooper). Changing school food will not be a quick fix, nor easy, but can happen even on small budgets.

## Schools Cannot Make a Difference

Another argument is that schools cannot improve the obesity epidemic by providing healthier food. Children learn habits at home and may throw away healthier options they are served. Why should schools go through the effort and cost of changing their menu offerings if kids will not eat it? Programs are popping up across the nation to reverse kids' negative attitudes toward healthy food. Some have successfully shown students how and why to make healthier choices. One example is Slow Food USA which "aims to reconnect youth with their food by teaching them how to grow, cook and enjoy real food" (Slow Food USA). While many health habits are formed in the home, the CDC states, "Students in the United States engage in behaviors that place them at risk for the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among youth and adults. These behaviors often are established during childhood and adolescence and extend into adulthood; therefore, it is important to prevent such behaviors at an early age. Because schools have direct contact with more than 95 percent of our nation's young people aged 5-17 years, they play a critical role in promoting the health and safety of young people and helping them establish lifelong healthy behavior patterns" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). There are hurdles to overcome when fighting for healthier food in schools, but change is possible, and schools CAN make a significant impact.

## What Does Healthy, Affordable School Food Look Like?

At Compass Public Charter School in Meridian, Idaho, nutritious and appetizing food is made on a tight budget. The school purchased new equipment to help provide more healthy options to students. The images provided rival many restaurant level menus and were created by staff that truly care about the students they serve.

## How One School Provides Healthy Meals on a Budget

Aalisa, a kitchen assistant at Compass, provided insight for how schools can make a huge impact. She said the director listens to staff's meal suggestions and ideas and student health is highly valued. Four years ago, they were in a smaller building, no one really cared about the food, and they didn't have enough staff to make improvements. Two years later they moved into a new building and hired additional staff. Now kitchen staff can cook and prep for the next day, producing most meals from scratch. With extra money provided by the Free Lunch Program, they purchase more vegetables and a variety of fruits including peaches, nectarines, kiwis, strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries. They purchased more kitchen equipment like a



Fig. 3 Aalisa Erpenbach. *Compass Charter School Falafel Lunch (2021)*. Cell phone image. Meridian, ID.



Fig. 4 Aalisa Erpenbach. *Compass Charter School Bruschetta Pizza Lunch (2021)*. Cell phone image. Meridian, ID.

large food processor, knives, cutting boards, food warmers, and salad bars. Items made from scratch include whole grain pizza crust and tomato sauce, Pico de Gallo, and muffins with seasonal ingredients. Aalisa enjoys creating new options and walks around getting feedback directly from students. Middle and high schoolers have healthier menus because most upper classmen enjoy them. Veggie bowls with rice are popular, and once the kids try it, they usually like it. Options include taco day with roasted veggies, vegan buddha bowls, handmade

veggie burgers, baked potatoes, Thai curry, falafels, bruschetta pizza, mandarin orange salad, and

taco salad in hand-pressed taco shells. Older students enjoy ethnic, diverse varieties not normally found at schools (Erpenbach & Hudson).

### Barriers and Room for Improvement

When asked for improvement ideas, Aalisa said, “There are so many things. I wish overly processed food wasn’t so popular and wasn’t served to students. I wish we made everything from scratch.” She believes young kids eat less variety due to learned behaviors. “Parent think, ‘My kid won’t eat this, so I won’t even bother’ or it takes too much work to prep and fight kids to eat it. Fast food is easier.” She said schools choose the food options and some pick what is easy rather than healthy. She notes that elementary kids eat more fruits like apples and oranges if they are sliced, which takes kitchen staff prep time. If given a larger budget, she would love to make



Fig. 5 Aalisa Erpenbach. *Compass Charter School Lunches* (2021). Cell phone image. Meridian, ID.

chicken nuggets from scratch so “they had real chicken” and would be healthier for students. She doesn’t believe nutritious foods are much more expensive, but preparation requires more staff.

Aalisa teaches Nutrition and Foods at Compass and assists with Intro to Culinary and Advanced Culinary. She said having these classes, especially for younger students and their parents, could help kids be more adventurous with food choices. She hopes the new foods learned at school encourage students to ask for more healthy options at home. “Kids are more willing to try things than people think they are. I think having other kids try things with them is more important than their parents telling them to eat it. They’re more willing to try it when other

kids are trying it than parents saying, ‘You should eat it’” (Erpenbach & Hudson). Stories like this prove change is possible, even on a tight budget.

## Change is Within Our Reach

The average food served to students across the U.S. is ultra-processed, filled with excess sugar, dangerous for their health, and worsening the obesity epidemic. Current regulations do not ensure students receive the nutritious food they need at school. Schools must hire staff that care and provide them with necessary tools to create nutritious meals. Without action from parents and concerned citizens, this change is unlikely to occur. Please visit The Chef Ann Foundation, <https://www.chefannfoundation.org>, which provides free toolkits with information for approaching local school districts to advocate for healthier student meals. To support this initiative and bring salad bars to needy schools, they also have a donation page. Nourishing meals and nutrition education can help students develop healthy eating habits and benefit them for the rest of their life (Cooper). Schools must provide healthier meals to have healthier students, and change must start now.

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