

LUNCHTIME



IS LEARNING TIME

Lessons from other nations on putting education—and civility—back into school meals

BY KAREN EVANS STOUT

Ding-g-g-g. The lunch bell rings, and it's time to eat. Everyone rushes to get a good spot in the line, which snakes down the hallway and into the cafeteria. Once the students have gone through the serving line, the lunchroom supervisor ushers them to picnic-style tables. They climb over the benches and sit down, every other seat, on one side only.

Lunch is served in an urban middle school.

Was the cafeteria reasonably quiet and orderly? Absolutely. At the same time, were students given an opportunity for a social break with friends, a chance to learn about healthy eating, and a chance to be part of their school community? Not really. Were teachers and principals taking advantage of the time to get to know their students in a setting outside classrooms or the central office? Again, no.

My journey as a researcher studying what happens during school lunchtime began in a college class. Watching a video about a year in a Japanese elementary school, I was struck by the students' active participation. In this school, and in most Japanese schools, children planned activities at lunchtime. Older children acted as mentors to younger children, and they all helped serve and clean up.

I decided to study the culture of school lunch in America, because it is one of the few times during the school day when students and teachers leave the isolation of individual classrooms to come together.

Why does school lunch matter?

More than 27 million children participate in the National School

Lunch Program (NSLP), which supplies schools with more than \$6 billion each year in commodities and subsidies for free and reduced-price lunches. Since its inception in 1946, the program has had two main goals—assisting with the health of the nation's children and ensuring a market for farmers.

Over time, educators and nutritionists came to believe that the school lunch program also should include a nutrition education component. Accordingly, in 1979, federal regulations advised schools to promote activities for students and parents about making healthy choices.

Most of us want school lunches to do at least three things:

1. Nourish children,
2. Support the school or district's nutritional program, and
3. Provide a break for students from the stresses of the academic day.

Unfortunately, the way the school lunch program presently operates, we fall short on all three goals. First, in terms of nutrition, we are experiencing an alarming growth in childhood obesity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention obesity rates for school-age children have more than doubled since 1980. Of course, childhood obesity is caused by many factors, but school lunches do play a role.

Many people believe that school lunches actually contribute to the deterioration of eating habits in American children. Barry Yeoman, in the January-February 2003 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine, wrote a scathing review of NSLP, calling it basically a farm-subsidy program. He noted that the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the subsidy system, provides largely meat and dairy products that often are laden with satu-

rated fats. For example, the USDA spent \$350 million on surplus beef and cheese for schools in 2001, compared with only \$161 million for all fruits and vegetables, most of which were canned or frozen.

Second, many educators—eager to improve student achievement on the basics—see the lunch break as one place to squeeze in some additional precious learning. This has fostered a trend toward shorter lunch periods. Researchers for the National Food Service Management Institute in Oxford, Miss., found that children actually need only seven to 10 minutes to eat, and some educators have used this research to justify shorter lunch breaks. Also, many educators believe that giving students the shortest time possible decreases behavior problems.

The cost of the short period may be too great, however. If a school allows only 15 minutes for lunch, 10 of those minutes might be spent waiting in line, meaning the student has a scant five minutes to eat. Other researchers have noted that young children need to be exposed to a new food five to 10 times before they try it. The best predictor of whether a child will try a new food is seeing other children eat the food. When we rush children, we do not support the natural learning that requires time to happen.

Third, Hofstra University Professor Emeritus Mary Ann Raywid observes that, as schools face increased pressure to improve student performance, it is easy to forget that we are educating the people who will be our next-door neighbors. Schools not only teach academics, but also they prepare future citizens, says Raywid, who has studied the impact of small schools. The lunchroom is an opportunity to teach valued goals, such as taking responsibility, negotiating differences, and learning to live in a community. Unfortunately, little research has been done about using the time more constructively to support the goals of schooling that are not easily addressed through academics.

Learning from other countries

Barbara Rogoff, a University of California professor of psychology and education, suggests that one way to study your own practices is to contrast them with the practices in other countries. Thus I began my study of school lunch culture by comparing lunch in the United States, Austria, and Switzerland. From that study I noted two characteristics that influence lunch: the facility itself and the need for efficiency balanced with meeting student needs.

Next, my colleague, Lehigh Professor George White, and I analyzed results from a statewide survey of middle schools in Pennsylvania. We asked students about their perceptions of lunchtime, and we interviewed principals about the factors they take into account in when they decide how to structure the experience. Here are the major findings from these studies:

■ **Facilities.** The principals and supervisors we interviewed always noted that the facility shaped their decisions. School buildings vary greatly in the United States. Some schools are forced to serve meals in gymnasiums that must be cleaned rapidly after lunch so classes can resume. Other schools strug-

gle with overcrowding in their lunchrooms.

Some have buildings designed for different purposes or student age ranges. For example, the cafeteria might have serving lines that were planned for older students—too high for the elementary students the building now houses. Many lunchrooms have no noise-dampening features, and many kitchens are too antiquated to cook lunch on site. Most lunchrooms I've observed still use picnic-style tables that can be folded and stored at the end of lunch.

European educators are no different from American educators. They, too, discussed how facility constrains experience. Many Swiss and Austrian schools have small lunchrooms in old buildings with various physical problems. In the schools I observed, most floors were stone. In one Austrian school, the supervisor noted the improvement in the noise level after finally getting noise-dampening tiles for the floor and ceiling.

■ **Efficiency.** The need for efficiency must be balanced against the goal of delivering a sound lunch program. In Austria, teachers insisted that students need a break from rigorous academics. Although teachers ate in the lunchroom, they intervened only when absolutely necessary. They preferred to let the students handle differences and believed that resolving differences was part of the experience.

The Swiss supervisors used routine to achieve efficiency—procedures for going to the buffet table, clear rules about talking, a procedure for giving seconds, customs for placing the silverware to indicate whether the student wants more food or is finished eating, and a list of chores assigned to students.

In one U.S. school, efficiency was even more important. The school served 220 to 250 students during a 25-minute lunch with two supervisors, making the adult-to-student ratio considerably larger than in the European schools. The supervisor limited the number of students who could go to the serving line—some students waited as long as 13 minutes. A wastebasket was passed from table to table to restrict movement. Everything was throwaway, so there were no dishes to bus.

■ **Payment.** One of the most compelling differences between European schools and those in the United States is how we handle paying for lunch. In every European, Eastern European, and former Soviet bloc country I have visited, all children eat and no money is collected during lunch. The central office collects money; no one at lunch knows who has paid and who has not.

In the United States, the NSLP requires schools to account for expenditures and free and reduced-price lunch participation. This means that every food purchase must be recorded. Schools use a variety of systems to accomplish this. Some sell tickets, some collect cash, some issue scannable cards, and others use a computerized system in which each student is assigned a number. In all cases, someone must monitor purchases.

Most of the schools I've visited penalize students who are behind in payments. In one elementary school, students who were behind two or more days were served only peanut butter sandwiches and milk. Also, many schools allow students to

purchase individual items. As a result, students who are short of money might purchase only less-expensive and less-nutritious foods such as nachos, French fries, pickles, or candy.

Where do we start?

The more I observe school lunch, and the more people I interview, the more convinced I am that the lunchroom is an ecology. The facility has an impact on efficiency, and the balance of these two has an effect on the meal experience. For example, antiquated kitchens mean schools must rely on outside suppliers—more paper products to discard, more fast foods, and less control over the lunch's nutritional value.

A short lunch period with a large number of students to serve requires a menu that can be delivered and eaten quickly. Picnic-style tables limit socializing, tempting students to move around the room, and many supervisors and administrators have been forced to adopt seating charts. Consequently, changing lunch must be tackled from a holistic point of view.

To make changes, school board members, administrators, teachers, students, and parents need to determine what they want school lunch to represent. From there, they need to plan within the constraints of the facility, budget, USDA and state regulations, number of students, and time available.

One way to immediately improve lunches would be to reconsider the duty-free lunch period guaranteed by most teachers' contracts. In most U.S. lunchrooms, the assistant principal, teachers with lunch duty, or aides supervise in the cafeteria. They walk around tables monitoring behavior and cleanup but not socializing with students. In the European schools I visited, in contrast, teachers eat in the lunchroom with students every day, modeling appropriate lunchroom behavior.

Some U.S. educators see the value of having more teachers in the lunchroom and have found incentives to encourage them to eat with students. One school I observed received a grant that allowed teachers to eat for free if they sat with the students. In another school, the principal gave additional planning time to teachers who joined students for lunch.

In these schools, administrators also ate in the lunchroom.

Teachers told me that they have gotten to know students outside the academic setting. By being present in the lunchroom, principals say they establish a friendly relationship with students, which in turn makes them more accessible when a problem arises.

We know that having close relationships with adults is important for at-risk students. The lunchroom is one place where teachers and students can socialize together. Supervisors who work as aides note that student behavior is better when teachers and administrators are present.

Teacher breaks are a separate issue. If we rethink the school lunch as a learning experience, then surely teachers and administrators must be present at least some of the time.

At the policy level, we must take on the accounting system that impedes making the school lunch a curricular experience. The federal school lunch program is up for reauthorization this year, and this is the time to let Congress know that school lunch must be more than a farm-subsidy program. I believe that, if school lunch funds were administered as block grants, educators could plan according to the needs of their school.

Our society has changed a great deal since the National School Lunch Program started 57 years ago. We need to rethink all aspects of the school lunch, especially now in light of the growing health problem of childhood obesity and the mounting pressure to increase student performance.

Is lunchtime as usual the best we can do? I don't think so. We need to make our voices heard about the nutritional quality of school lunch, how lunch can be used to foster positive social behavior, and ways to increase administrator, teacher, and student participation. In today's climate of accountability, we are challenged to make every minute of the school day count, and that includes lunchtime. We need to make a commitment to offering every student a healthy lunch in a healthy environment.

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