SMALL CHILD, BIG CAFETERIA: REALIZING POTENTIAL AND NECESSARY NUTRITIONAL RIGHTS FOR EARLY ELEMENTARY CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Since the institution of the National School Lunch Program in 1946, American society has centered much of its research and practice for childhood nutrition on school lunch programs. However, the autonomy of the child and the basic education of nutrition building skills are often peripheral. This thesis will identify reasoning for the child’s right to autonomy in food choice as well as justify a greater need for nutrition education. A look into childhood development studies will expose the ability of informed decision-making skills in the early elementary ages.

The development and analysis of children’s rights and participation with food choice begins with an examination into the complexity of rights and their role on school grounds. The thesis continues, covering the history of food and government policy, particularly school lunch programs since the turn of the 20th Century. There is then an investigation of what is served in schools and a consideration of successful nutritional programs and revised meals, further exposing perceived complexities that schools can overcome. Finally, a study of child development during this period (children in grades K-3) supports the theory presented that children are capable of making smart decisions and understanding what proper and healthy eating means. Studies of monumental court cases, several historical examples of media’s impact and a personal interview with a
school wellness professional are used to emphasize several of the findings to support this topic.

The history of school food politics and nutritional trends alongside child development and ethics proves that children are both competent and capable to make smart food choices. Conclusions show that it is most ethical to educate children on nutrition, both on food and well-being, and to allow children to control their decisions and learn the best practices. This thesis, by means of historical references and measures of children’s rights, proves that by the time children are eating and purchasing school lunches, they are also suitable to make smart decisions. Policies based on health education as well as close studies of child development and ethical standards will produce the most effective means to healthy children in schools.
In dedication to the wonderful teachers I have had over the past 25 years, whose commitment to excellence, learning and creativity have helped shape the person I am today.

A special thank you to my family and loved ones. Your love and sense of humor will forever be the best thing I could ever ask for.
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BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS: CHILDREN’S RIGHTS IN THE SCHOOLYARD

Everyday, parents and caregivers place their children on a school bus destined for a full day under the care of teachers. Students are growing, learning, sharing, eating, arguing, and contemplating many new ideas, both academically and socially, and are building these skills at school. There exists an inherent trust placed by parents in the guidance given to their children by both educators as well as peers. The moment a parent places their child on the bus, are the choices and rules that define a child different from those offered at home and fully monitored by the school? This chapter will introduce the reader to how rights are defined and what rights children possess if any, when at school. Further, this chapter will analyze what it means to be a child and his or her perceived value in everyday life. To introduce rights with respect to school food, I will also explore the ethical implications surrounding issues regarding the capacity of nutritional choices, or lack thereof. Ethical principles of autonomy and justice will be explored and Utilitarian theory versus Kantian theory will be used.

What are rights?

In their simplest form, rights are defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “qualities (as adherence to duty or obedience to lawful authority) that together constitute the ideal of moral propriety or merit moral approval.” As can be deduced from this broad definition, rights are subject to many different interpretations and are structured

and viewed differently with various cultures, governments and places in time. Many public policy issues, like the childhood obesity epidemic and school food nutrition, which concern rights or attempts to secure what are now generally called “human rights”, have contributed to the idea that rights are a powerful assertion of claims that demand respect and status.\(^2\)

Substantial differences exist between *moral* (or *human* or *natural*) rights and *legal* rights, because legal systems do not formally require reference to moral systems for their understanding or grounding, nor do moral systems formally require reference to legal systems.\(^3\) One influential interpretation of moral rights is based on the work of Immanuel Kant, an eighteenth century philosopher. Kant maintained that each of us has a worth or a dignity that must be respected. This dignity makes it wrong for others to abuse us or to use us against our will. Kant expressed this idea in a moral principle: humanity must always be treated as an end, not merely as a means.\(^4\) An example of this is gay rights. While many people believe these rights are the best for the society and for many people living in such society, they are all not legally bound or defined. This distinction is why, so often what appears to be moral and should be true by the law based on social standards, is often not found lawfully sound. In the school cafeteria, children are frequently victims of this disconnect.

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\(^3\) Ibid.

Currently, the Obama Administration is working to improve the childhood obesity epidemic and reduce the amount of unhealthy foods produced and served in schools. At the same time, the country is experiencing one of the largest economic downturns in the last century, creating a limited and unyielding atmosphere for funding social policies. The idea of moral versus legal rights is seen in the pushback from the Republicans on certain anti-obesity measures. The Republicans have used on agriculture appropriations bill to send several messages: They don’t want the government to require school meals that are more nutritional but also more expensive, they don’t want the government to prod food companies to restrain marketing to children, and they don’t want the Food and Drug Administration to regulate any substance based on anything but “hard science”.

While on the one hand, these policies are clearly for the betterment of short and long term health of a child, when considering legal and moral rights, this is an example of why such rights are not necessarily aligned. In this case, the lawmakers say meals containing more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy will cost an additional $7 billion over five years—money they say the country can ill afford in difficult economic times.

Yet, rights play a central role in ethics. Attention to rights ensures that the freedom and well-being of each individual will be protected when others threaten that freedom or well-being. If an individual has a moral right, then it is morally wrong to

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6 Ibid.
interfere with that right even if large numbers of people would benefit from such interference. 7

**What are children’s rights?**

When considering children, the definition and conception of rights becomes even more complex. It is valuable to recognize that when addressing a child, one must be sensitive to what an “average” child is, noting that no two children are the same. Yet, what is similar for all children is the standard kinds of care they need. It is also valuable to view children positively, as “equal value” humans possessing special qualities of their own, rather than viewing them negatively or lacking qualities as “not yet adults”. 8 This is particularly important with participation rights, which will be discussed further in this chapter.

Children are not formally recognized in the United States Constitution. Unlike several other countries which recognize children, this leaves their constitutional status uncertain despite several Supreme Court rulings in favor of the principle that children are persons. 9 Judge Charles D. Gill, former Connecticut Superior Court Judge has observed, “It is ironic that, although corporations in the United States have long been held to be ‘persons,’ and thus eligible for constitutional protection, the extent to which children, as individuals, have comparable constitutional rights is still not entirely clear.” 10 Therefore,

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9 Ibid., 177.

10 Alaimo and Klug, *Children as Equals*, 177.
the struggle to define what exactly children’s rights are within the bounds of the United States, not to mention on school grounds, has been an uncertain struggle.

Part of the difficulty with defining children’s rights is the dilemma of defining what it means to be a child and when childhood truly concludes. Every society constantly receives an influx of strangers into its midst—children. The concept of childhood has been long discussed by ethicists and philosophers. However, only recently has the philosophy of childhood been recognized as a specific area of philosophy, looking into what are children’s rights and interests, societies’ attitudes toward children, and the role of children in society.\(^\text{11}\)

This then introduces the commonly held belief that children have fewer fundamental and theoretical rights because ultimately, they are under the protection of their parents or caretakers. While there is truth to this theory, the capacities and evolution of an average child’s development, particularly by the age of kindergarten, proves that they have the ability to make decisions without parental guidance. The Greek philosopher from the fourth century B.C., Aristotle, claims that what happens inside families are private matters that are regulated by the head of the family, and not regulated by laws as are public relations between citizens: “What is just for a master and for a father are not the same as [political justice], though they are similar. For there is no

unqualified injustice in relation to what is one’s own, and a man’s property, as well as his child until it reaches a certain age…”  

While Aristotle and his peers believed for centuries that the parent has the ultimate rule and choice over the child, theories have changed over time. During the Enlightenment period, the study of child development and education became more prominent and became an important milestone leading to the twentieth-century concept of the rights of the child. While John Locke is most interested in “habit formation” that would internalize restraint and create the productive self-governing adult--looking on the child as an open slate prepared for a future as an adult--Jean-Jacques Rousseau, reacting to Locke’s assertion that the child is a rational creature, cautioned that “Reasoning should not begin too soon.” Rousseau was generally concerned with the process of growing up and having freedoms as a child. On the whole, the ownership of a child as solely under parents, one with partial individual rights or full individual rights has been contemplated for centuries and affects children as policy makers are weary to intrude upon parental decisions and developmental assessment. As this continues, children have to wait longer to participate as free, right-abiding citizens of the country.

The commonly held assumption is children are not-yets or potential citizens of the future and therefore schools, have the function of preparing these not-yets for their future

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14 Ibid.
status as adult citizens. Another possible reason for rejecting children as citizens is the assumption that children lack the capacities and competencies to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Children can be “partial” citizens but do not have the capacities to make adult decisions or take part in many aspects of intellectual life, i.e. voting and running for office. In an opposing opinion, children should be viewed as equal beings, and should be granted the same liberties and justices as adults. Will Kymlicka, a leading international writer on citizenship, notes, “It is widely accepted that a basic task of schooling is to prepare each new generation for their responsibilities as citizens.” British sociologist T.H. Marshall took the position that citizenship should be understood to mean not only legal membership in a state but also a sense of membership. Citizens are people who not only belong to a state but also feel that they belong: For citizens to be able to feel that they belong, it is important for them to have rights and to know that they have rights.

These different approaches once again place the role of the parent figure in question. While some theorists believe it is the child’s position to have ultimate say and trial-and-error development, others see the school as having the dominant role, and further do not ignore the role of parents in deciding rights and justices for the child. If parents have absolute authority to decide for children up to the time of legal majority,

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16 Ibid., 58.

17 Ibid., 43.

18 Ibid., 45.
then children and adolescents cannot have the right to decide for themselves.  

While this is the standing belief of most United States courts and in consequence, schools, it poses significant ethical questions that affect the child.

**The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

What is currently the status of children in the United States and how can we begin to think of them as citizens in school? Lewis Pitts, the Senior Managing Attorney of Advocates for Legal Services (ACS), a special state project for legal aid in North Carolina, argues that the legal status of children in the United States today is comparable to that of women and African Americans in the past. He further says that children are denied basic rights that, as persons rather than property, they ought to be accorded under the Constitution.  

Just recently, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child celebrated its 20th Anniversary of acknowledging children as citizens with rights across the globe. Within the array of human rights declarations, conventions and resolutions, three are of particular relevance to the issue of childhood obesity: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right to adequate food, and the right to health.  

Traditionally, human rights have focused on the relationship between the State and individuals, with international human rights treaties assuming obligations that are binding under international law.  

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20 Ibid., 165.


22 Ibid.
across the globe were in 1959 and 1989, both under the UN. In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which recognize rights such as freedom from discrimination and the rights to a name and nationality. It also specifically enshrines children’s rights to education, health care and special protection.\textsuperscript{23} Thirty years later, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNRC) as the most comprehensive human rights treaty and legal instrument for the promotion and protection of children’s rights.\textsuperscript{24} The UNRC was the first to make clear the distinction between children and adults while also providing international standards for the rights of the child.\textsuperscript{25} Unfortunately these measures are only significant to states who choose to adopt such measures.

While many States have made significant implementations on the basis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United States has yet to officially recognize it as a governing document. Though it signed the UNCRC in 1995, the United States is the only member of the United Nations that has failed to ratify the Convention. Among other grumblings, the main reason for this resistance is that the UNCRC repeatedly underscores the primary role that parents play in the lives of children and the importance of family life.\textsuperscript{26} While the Convention certainly has influenced awareness and emphasizes basic rights of education and health which are recognized by the U.S., the U.S. has still found it


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{25} Howe and Covell, \textit{Empowering Children}, 25.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 178.
ethically dangerous and non-cooperative to adopt policies that don’t address the parent as the main decision-maker for children.

Although the United States has not decided to ratify the Convention, there have still been valuable take-away messages from the Convention which have spurred positive changes, particularly for schools. Both Article 3 and Article 12 have created awareness about the need to look at children as more active participants in their own lives. Article 3 states, “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” This paper focuses primarily on school food and the ethics surrounding a child’s choice and understanding of food, this Article plays a massive role in addressing each ingredient that is chosen and whether or not financially-beneficial advertisements and gimmicks are both ethically sound and in the best interest of the child. As noted previously, children are generally not granted as many rights or choices as adults, so protecting them and keeping their interests sound is very important for policy and individual practice.

Article 12 encompasses a modern and responsibility-laden trust in children, yet a responsibility which children, at a certain age, are arguably capable of. Article 12 holds that States parties “shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the

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child.”28 This Article addresses the very idea that children do have the capacity to understand, learn and make smart decisions in so far as they are given the opportunity to do so. It acknowledges that children have frequently not been granted the basic opportunity, or right, to speak their point of view or have the opportunity to learn and understand how to convey their point of view. To once again address John Locke’s perspective, the mind is a “blank slate” without innate ideas and all knowledge comes from experience and that “errors in education should be less indulged than any” in regards to his view on the importance of educating the child on all matters.29 If given opportunities and knowledge, children most certainly have the capacity to speak for themselves.

In sum, the UNCRC respects the role of a child in the global, active world. The UNCRC represents the accumulation of expanding notions of children’s rights to protection and provision based on the following factors: their vulnerability due to age, their developmental status, the extent of parental resources, and even parental abilities.30 The Convention persists in recognizing the protective approach to children but also requires that children be accepted as participants in their own right—this participation extends in education, where children should not be just consumers.31 As astutely noted in the 20th Anniversary text of the UNCRC, many of the practices that are most harmful to

29 Alaimo and Klug, Children as Equals, 10.
30 Ibid., 19.
children are part of social traditions and cultural attitudes that have been prevalent for
generations. Simply passing a law is therefore not enough; it must be backed with
ongoing educational and awareness-raising initiatives, capacity-building, sufficient
resources and collaborative partnerships, including children as full participants.32

**Rights at the school house door**

When a student is sent to school for the day, he or she maintains the same “rights”
granted at home and in public society and what differs is simple school rules.
Particularly in the United States, where opinions and control by the parents is far more
predominant than any other influence on a child’s rights, a school is charged to maintain
and continue what is proper by the States’ standards.

Throughout history, children have extended their rights in school, or rather, their
voice and independence as citizens has been less halted by elders and school authorities.
This has allowed the conversation for health education, freedom of choice and healthy
standards to take place. Without the strict rules of the historical schoolhouse where a
child would sit in one seat, learning the standard Math, History and English lessons and
leave to go home to play, school is a more interactive place as well as a locale for growth
and learning opportunities.

While not related to health standards and freedom of choice by children, the case
of **Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District** (1969) provides the most incisive
example of rights on school grounds and a child’s freedom of speech and choice of
action. In this case, petitioners, three public school pupils in Des Moines, Iowa, were

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suspended from school for wearing black armbands to protest the Government's policy in Vietnam. They sought nominal damages and an injunction against a regulation that the respondents had promulgated banning the wearing of armbands. The District Court dismissed the complaint for many reasons, namely, a prohibition against expression of opinion, without any evidence that the rule is necessary to avoid substantial interference with school discipline or the rights of others, is not permissible under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Justice Fortas gave the opinion of the court, noting that, “First Amendment rights, applied in light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to teachers and students. It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate. This has been the unmistakable holding of this Court for almost 50 years.” This case is important because it outlines that despite being under the direction of the school and school rules for eight hours each day, a child maintains his or her human rights. While the age a child becomes an adult and what that means for their rights still remains a question, the rights at school remain consistent with States’ rulings.

School or family?

Considering the role of family plays a large role as far as how much and how necessary it is for schools to take on more of a role as caretaker and provider. There is a vast assumption in policy that holds that parents make the best decision-makers for their children because they know their children best and they have the best interests of the

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
child at heart. On the other hand, the state has a legitimate interest in having healthy, well-educated future citizens, and the state should stand in loco parentis, not only when parents cannot fulfill their obligations but even at times against parents’ wishes, when the well-being of children is at stake, particularly when considering the “natural lottery” of being born into any type of family. It is most certainly the best interest and duty of the school to help recognize these factors or warning signs and step-in to insure that a child’s right to health and education is respected. This is seen daily through the distribution of the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. Children need nannies, so to speak—although they also need to be equipped with the education and skills that will enable them to act independently, and to be granted an increasing freedom (especially in adolescence), so that they can meaningfully practice those skills. This parent/school dynamic is interesting because while parents ultimately have the final say, both government and families rely on schools for so much of their children’s development leading one to believe that both the school and/or child would be granted the autonomy for more decision-making.

**Federal rules with school meals: Federal regulations**

There are specific Federal rules and regulations that every school must adhere to if enrolled in government assistance programs. These regulations date back to the civil and welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Frustrated by the slow pace of

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37 Ibid.

change in school lunchrooms, the Poor People’s Campaign, along with the Citizen’s Crusade, threatened a national mobilization for the “right to lunch” and promised “an endless string of litigation directed at securing a meal for every needy pupil in every community in the Country.” 39 While this was a grass roots movement, it helped gain traction and awareness of the need for federal regulations and recognition. Demanding not only access to government benefits but respect for dignity as well, this movement directly challenged federal bureaucratic offices and regulations. Women on welfare organized the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) to mobilize welfare recipients and to educate women regarding eligibility standards and application procedures for food stamps, Aid to Dependant Children, and other federal benefits. 40

While that was only the beginning of the food-for-all movement, and more detail will be dedicated to the effect on school food history in the next chapter, regulations exist now that are respected by these groups. Today, school boards must exercise their responsibilities in an increasingly complex legal environment. Resources spent defending lawsuits against public schools are resources not available for the education of children. The National School Boards Association offers an array of resources that help schools and school attorneys to understand this legal environment, to keep up to date with new and emerging legal developments, and to anticipate, prevent, and overcome legal


40 Ibid., 143.
challenges. Therefore, schools seeking to receive federal aid use these regulations as a way to maintain and protect the rights of children while at school.

While individual states have specific statewide regulations and expectations for schools and food services, there are a few specific federal regulations that schools must adhere to when receiving federal funds. The two most relevant regulations are those with the National School Lunch Program and with Afterschool Snacks, both within the same umbrella of policy. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the flagship program outlined and tracked throughout this thesis and was recently ratified in 2009. It has become the foremost policy regulation on school food programs in the United States. In the over one-hundred-page *Eligibility Manual for School Meals*, federal policy is given for schools to qualify for this program. Typically, school districts want to qualify as it provides them with the capability to feed more children and better address nutrition and health education. According to the general requirements of the program, state agencies that administer the school meals programs *must* issue free and reduced price policy guidance and any other instructions necessary to local agencies to ensure that they are aware of Federal and State requirements. They also *must* provide free and reduced price benefits to eligible children in accordance with the statutory and regulatory requirements. Further, under the NSLP, a school food authority must operate the lunch

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43 Ibid.
component and the school district must sponsor or operate an afterschool care program which, (a) provides children with regularly scheduled activities in an organized, structured and supervised environment and, (b) includes educational or enrichment activities.44 This program can be ethically unsound in terms of access. Currently, American schoolchildren from households with income below 130 percent of the federal poverty line ($27,560 for a family of four in 2008) are entitled to free meals, and those from households with incomes below 185 percent of official poverty ($39,220 for a family of four in 2008) are entitled to lunches that may cost no more than $0.40 and breakfasts that may not exceed $0.30—if they attend schools that choose to participate in the programs.45 Children just above the threshold, or hungry children whose schools’ do not participate, miss this opportunity and are denied access to foods.

Like any federal regulation, along with new administration, appear complaints from people who both fear a governmental hold on school functioning as well as imposed policies that may affect what a school district deems as appropriate. In January 2011, the Obama Administration proposed new regulations within the National School Lunch Program. The USDA’s proposal calls for schools to add more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat milk to breakfast and lunch menus and to cut down on

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salt and trans fats. Opponents are weary of the details within this proposal; one which would increase for example, a serving of fruit on a food tray from ½ cup to one cup fruit. Though this does not seem extreme, some argue this is asking too much in terms of financial burden as well as the true desire of children. A school principal in Washington State, Debby Webster, thinks that though this is a well intentioned plan, she fears it will lead to more costs and waste of food. She notes, "Some students maybe get two cups, but it's what they want and we know they will eat it. But if we put more on the tray whether the students asks for it or not, that's going to be a big problem." There have been several cases where the traditions and knowledge of individual schools has resisted governmental change.

What kids should know: National Health Education Standards

National Health Education Standards have a goal to develop for schools what would be a framework for “world class” health education in this country. Simply, these Standards are a framework for schools to use to create an instructional program that will enable their students to become healthy and capable of academic success. Over the last decade, the NHES became an accepted reference on health education, providing a

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

framework for the adoption of standards by most states.\textsuperscript{50} While not designated by the federal government as a requirement, it has made impact on school policy and has raised the bar of expectations for what children should be learning and know as growing citizens and caretakers of their own bodies.

For simplicity and tracking of students, there are a total of eight standards to meet for a student to be properly and fully versed in health education throughout their time in school. For each Standard, there are performance indicators for the different points in school (i.e. K-2 Grade, 9-12 Grade, etc). Modified over time, since their inception in 1995, the eight Standards are as follows:

1. Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.

2. Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.

3. Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid information, products, and services to enhance health.

4. Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.

5. Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.

6. Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance health.

7. Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

\textsuperscript{50} CDC’s School Health Education Resources (SHER), “National Health Education Standards (NHES),” National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC), http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/SHER/standards/order-overview.htm (accessed July 5, 2011).
8. Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health.\textsuperscript{51}

To extract one example, for Standard Two, a K-2 student should be able to describe how media can influence health behaviors, and as years progress, be able to explain and teach this idea to others. As will be discussed in a later part of this thesis, simple tasks like this are vital to a child’s ability to decipher and chose with eating and smart decisions.\textsuperscript{52} Not only does educating children on the benefits of health and eating right provide them with the autonomy they deserve at this age, it also benefits the school as they compete to become a top performing school within First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” Campaign. Because schools and the federal government are limited in what they can impose upon students and food behaviors, the Standards are an archetype for what should properly to be achieved in schools, providing justice for children.

\textbf{Public health ethics: Childhood obesity in schools}

What ethical dilemmas and questions are posed in regards to addressing the childhood obesity epidemic and children’s rights at school? Childhood obesity is considered a public health issue across the globe, and has received particular attention in the United States. Public health is a societal approach to protecting and promoting health. Generally through social, rather than individual, actions, public health seeks to improve the well-being of communities and seeks to ensure societal conditions under

\textsuperscript{51}CDC’s School Health Education Resources (SHER), “National Health Education Standards: 2011,” National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC).

\textsuperscript{52} CDC’s School Health Education Resources (SHER), “National Health Education Standards: 2011,” National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC).
which people can lead healthier lives.⁵³ Having healthy and active children affects the surrounding society, contributes to success in school, and longer lives.

An important empirical, conceptual, and normative issue in public health ethics is the relationship between protecting and promoting the health of individuals and protecting and promoting public health.⁵⁴ In other words, when is it appropriate and proper for paternalist measures to be taken, even when it may not be welcome by individuals, in our case, school districts? Among the array of issues surrounding school food policies, the ultimate goal in recent years, has been to create a healthier environment for children, teach them healthy lifestyles and feed them healthier foods. Nonmaleficence has become necessary in the medical field, interpreted as, “Above all, do no harm”, yet can become a more sensitive issue when dealing with young children and schools.⁵⁵ When children have a variety of needs, disabilities, tempers, and body types and schools have a variety of funding levels, addressing this issue can be risky. Yet, at the same time, it is also important to always keep a child’s best interest in mind.

**Health education: The most effective way**

Health education has been found to be the most ethical way for schools to introduce ideas to children. In certain ways, health education is the ideal public health intervention, since it is completely voluntary and seeks to empower people to make their

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⁵⁴ Beauchamp et al., *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, 638.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 24.
own decisions regarding their health once they are equipped with accurate information.\textsuperscript{56} From an ethics perspective, education clearly is preferable to other preventative strategies, to the extent that they are equally effective, because it poses few, if any, burdens.\textsuperscript{57} Yet each educator is unique, and how and what they choose to promote can greatly affect what the child receives overtime, creating a coercive rather than equal platform. Educators who hope to increase healthful behavior will disseminate only information that points in that direction; for example, they cannot be expected to point out that, in addition to causing deterioration of the liver, alcohol helps certain people feel relaxed in social settings.\textsuperscript{58} This idea also addresses the ethics behind food advertisement, an issue that will be discussed in further detail regarding a child’s choice of food. We may believe that we make informed decisions about food choice, but we cannot do so if we are oblivious of the ways food companies influence our choices. Therefore, honest education and basic explanations of why food should be chosen is the ultimate means of communicating to young children. If diet is a matter of individual free will, then the only appropriate remedy for poor diets is education, and nutritionists should be off teaching people to take personal responsibility for their own diet and health—not how to institute societal changes that might make it easier for everyone to do so.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Beauchamp et al., \textit{Contemporary Issues in Bioethics}, 658.

\textsuperscript{59} Marion Nestle, \textit{Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 360.
Schools funded by NSLP are required to promote and facilitate health education and more physical activities during the school day. Further, schools are funded typically because they have a large population of children from poor families, and this is their opportunity to have well-balanced meals. It has therefore become largely the school’s responsibility to provide healthy eating habits but mainly, to educate children on what it means to be healthy and teaching them about different foods and why and how smart choices can be made.

Health education, in its purest pursuit, allows for autonomy of the child, and the chance for a child to make individual decisions, at any stage in their schooling. Using the National Health Education Standards as a guideline for expectations throughout the years, health education is the core of justice for children of all ages and giving them the rightful opportunity to make informed decisions. This thesis will continue to address validity for a child making a choice on their own, and how even with all the recent food awareness and obesity-fighting strategies, that children are often mostly forgotten.
CHAPTER 2

THE 20TH CENTURY FACES NUTRITION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF NUTRITION AND SCHOOL FOODS IN AMERICA

In order to understand the political and ethical issues surrounding school lunch, it is vital to trace American history since the early 20th Century. Lunch politics can be dated prior to 19th Century American history, but for the issue at hand, observing 20th Century and beyond histories surrounding school lunch is most pertinent. More narrowly, school lunch ethics can be observed through the lens of general eating habits of Americans over this period of time, and how this behavior has influenced and shaped the values and provisions of school lunches. Therefore, observing the United States as a purely food nation, one with skewed diet beliefs, one that has been underfed then overfed, is an insight necessary to study ethics and politics of school feeding that occurs today.

Food literacy pre-World War II

In the failing economy of the 1930s, food accumulation and retention among the poorest families in the U.S. became one of the most difficult struggles, both nutritionally and socially, for families and children alike. Nutrition aside, feelings of segregation based purely on food options left many children with feelings of helplessness, a helplessness that was fault of school lunch politics. For such children, the possession or lack of a lunch box served as an easy barometer of economic status. The consumption of the noon
meal was conspicuously public, and yet for the poor student, worker and impoverished unemployed, it was scarcely visible to the broader society.¹

Further, the lack of nutrition literacy and education is rooted in these years, when children were malnourished not only because of family finances, but also due to the lack of parental and societal education. In sum, bad menu planning and skewed food priorities left many families, regardless of wealth, malnourished. A 1920 investigation by the Children’s Bureau, conducted to gain a better understanding of specific populations with regard to school and family life and its effects on children, revealed shocking truths about a mining community in Kentucky. After reports of poor diet and food allocation choices, the message was clear: Kentucky coal miners’ children were gaunt because they lacked sufficiently thrifty and skilled mothers and therefore cooks, since healthy family meals could be made for pennies.²

**WWII: The bridge of depression and awareness**

Food rationing and education were misunderstood in light of the Great Depression, yet the misconceptions greatly contributed to the social welfare of the American people during the war years and beyond. Though poverty led many families to believe that a healthy diet was unattainable or unrealistic (a theory that has continued today), the lack of literacy drove much of this belief. This is not to say that financial factors have not driven a massive dividing factor among families and in the school lunch room, a considerable ethical burden, but there was no realization that lunch programs and


general nutritional guidelines could be attained regardless of income. School lunch programs existed dating back to the early 1920s, far before they were mandated by the federal government, and proved successful where funding was attainable. Food reformers, whether within the United States Department of Agriculture, (USDA), or in other arenas, however, never resolved the fundamental policy tension that underlay their work: Should nutrition education and food programs target people who were economically needy, that is, people who literally did not have enough to eat, or should they target the nutritionally needy, people who might have plenty to eat but who did not understand a balanced diet? School lunch programs neatly combined the two goals.\footnote{Levine, \textit{School Lunch Politics}, 11.} The question of financing this program nation-wide and making food literacy a priority became, itself, part of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

It is important to look back to World War I, when the first accounts of physical deficiencies and malnutrition relating to the ability of young men in military service became apparent. Later, according to nutritionists, World War II truly reawakened the country to the importance of a well-fed, physically fit population. The growth of the school lunch program in the 1920s most likely reflected an awareness of problems in World War I in which large numbers of young men were unable to fight because of malnutrition.\footnote{Josephine Martin and Charlotte Oakley, eds., \textit{Managing Child Nutrition Programs: Leadership for Excellence}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett, 2008), 60.} Therefore, by the 1940s and a second World War, nutrition became a priority rather than an afterthought for the soldiers. This very quickly trickled down to the school lunch and federal welfare awareness.
After the drastically declining health of many soldiers in World War I to the brink of World War II, it was easier for scientists to convince the American people as well as federal government on the importance of nutrition and its long-term health effects. More specifically, the nation’s leaders heard an alarm sound when the military rejected 40 percent of the first million men drafted because of physical defects. Brigadier General Lewis B. Hershey, addressing the National Nutrition Conference in 1941, stated:

America must be strong, but she cannot be strong when one-half of her sons are substandard physically. America needs whole men, not half men. She must develop vigorous and healthy youths...The Selective Service by its very nature will play a vital part in the solution of this all important problem. It dedicates itself to a participation in the movement for better and healthier bodies for all the citizens of America.\(^5\)

During and soon after this address, and throughout the 1940s, the value and literacy of nutrients and health became more predominant, and malnutrition lessened, even for the poorest. Increased literacy and public awareness, as well as a looming war and need for drafting healthy men, kick-started the United States into thinking more seriously about health programs. As seen in Figure 1, at the start of World War II, nutrition reformers became key figures in United States planning for food policy, both military and civilian, inspiring awareness through advertisements.\(^6\) The Food and Nutrition Board was formed in 1940 and soon the committee expanded to include nongovernmental groups, with an interest in wartime mobilization, including the Red Cross, the American Home Economics Association, and the American Diabetes Association. Harriet Eliot applauded the group’s ability to work together, saying, “All of

\(^5\) Lautenschlager, *Food Fight!*, 123.

\(^6\) Levine, *School Lunch Politics*, 63.
us have a major defense job to do—the job of improving our standard of living and of keeping ourselves strong and physically fit.”\textsuperscript{7} This trend would continue for several years, but effective literacy and smart use of food programs for children would not. A child’s relationship with food, and the nation’s trust in this, was not in line with the effectiveness of World War II movement and policy.

\textbf{A breakthrough: President Truman mandates school food program}

Of course with any new program, came the financial hurdle, worrisome to many proponents of school lunch programs. Since 1900, the probable date of the origination of the food and nutrition awareness revolution, lunch programs did exist in several states, yet the funding was not federally mandated and therefore, both its significance as well as its prominence was at risk each fiscal year. Although both State and local legislation authorized local school districts to provide meals for children through various means, it

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{7} Levine, \textit{School Lunch Politics}, 63.}
soon became evident that local governments and school district boards could not provide adequate funds necessary to carry the increasing load. The necessity for aid from federal sources became inevitable.⁸ While appropriated federal aid is ideal and most reliable, it also meant the beginning of governmental regulations, regulations which were rarely updated with the changing times.

On June 4, 1946 President Harry S. Truman, presented the bill outlining the original National School Lunch Act (NSLA), an Act that is still referenced today as current policy and can be the cause (for better or worse) of school regulations, welfare arguments and malnutrition debates, all of which will be discussed in later chapters. Its stated purposes are as follows: “as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States, through grants-in aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs.”⁹

Yet what was accomplished was groundwork achievement for nutritional awareness for children in the schools. While many families were still recovering from the Depression or coping with wartime woes, this Bill offered the first step in attempting to ensure that no child was malnourished or unfit to do well in school. Along with the expansion of the National Institutes of Health, executive leadership brought this issue to


⁹ Ibid.
the forefront. President Harry S. Truman’s 1950 Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth focused on cultivating healthy and broadly conceived human development—intellectually, emotionally, physically, creatively, and spiritually. Although few of the recommendations at the conference became law, several did by the 1960s, such as expanding federal support for child health and school-based nutrition programs.\(^\text{10}\)

Essentially the goal of the NSLA was to ensure equality and food at lunchtime for every child, regardless of their background. Yet from the beginning, there was a trend of serving rather than teaching that was not addressed until the turn of the century. For several years after the Bill was implemented, very few amendments were added, and none significant enough to actually alter what the children were eating but rather smoothing out financial standards and ways to allocate funding. And even so, this funding scheme perpetuated issues of inequality and segregation, those that would grow even stronger during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The ultimate cost came in the hunger and shame suffered by the children who could not pay for their meals. Even though the original act had specified that children should in no way be segregated based on their ability or inability to pay, it appeared to investigators of the Chicago school lunch program, in the 1960s, that discrimination still flourished at the hands of “some unsympathetic school administrators” who “insisted on” such “humiliating practices” as requiring students to wear red tags around their necks that said “Free Lunch,” making

\(^{10}\)Andrew L. Yarrow, “A History of Federal Child Antipoverty and Health Policy in the United States Since 1900,” *Child Development Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (March 2011), 68.
these students work for their food, or placing them at the end of the cafeteria line.\textsuperscript{11} The NSLA, while a breakthrough measure, became one of ethical roadblocks and one that desperately needed consistent revisions and close tracking.

\textbf{1966: Extension but no progress}

The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 attempted to extend as well as mend the NSLA. Recognizing that maintaining a healthy child meant more than simply consumption of food, the USDA expanded this funding to support nutrition programs and awareness. As noted, it “declared it to be the policy of Congress that these efforts shall be extended, expanded, and strengthened under the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture as a measure to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children, and to encourage the domestic consumption of agricultural and other foods, by assisting States, through grants-in-aid and other means, to meet more effectively the nutritional needs of our children.”\textsuperscript{12} This Act was a hybrid of food and physical fitness perspectives on nutrition and wellness, and through regular revisions over time, could have been the ideal measure of success for nutrition policy.

This Act was a breakthrough as it provided for a school breakfast program as well as non-food assistance for the purchase of food service equipment, particularly in low income areas. While addressing the issues from the 1940s alone was a major policy change in the United States, this Act, twenty years later, truly put the wheels in motion and sparked the different ways schools could obtain access to nutrition funds rather than

\textsuperscript{11} Lautenschlager, \textit{Food Fight!}, 170.

merely providing a skeletal purpose for action. For example, breakfast has consistently been considered the most important meal of the day, particularly for children. Children need the additional energy and fuel for brain power at school as well as for their constantly active bodies. Therefore, the NSLA was feeding children during the most critical school hours, yet not addressing the majority of children who receive no food, or very little, at home. There have been strong feelings that the breakfast program provides key nutritional benefits to schoolchildren, perhaps even greater than those provided by the lunch program. In part, these feelings reflect the fact that the lack of breakfast can adversely affect student performance until lunch is served at school. However, no known studies have established a firm basis for this conclusion. It is difficult to determine statistically significant outcomes but the fact is, that breakfast or food in general, is better than the minimal food the children are receiving at home, particularly for poor children.

While physical activity programs may have increased by slight numbers across the country, an amalgam of targeted advertisement and commercial food products producing financial benefits for the schools, turned the tides once again for food quality, but this time, to overfed children. Additionally, economic gaps and feelings of isolation by the poorest children continued to exist, and still exist today. Providing food for children at school became an ethical dilemma for most principals, and as a result most principals favored the foods that would just slip by the nutritional standards while still not breaking the bank on the school budget. In fact, it can be argued that the economic

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awareness of the importance of food grew deeper once people started to feel more comfortable post-war. Americans were now gloating in the wake of a successful return from war and the increased access to and affordability of foods. The new TV dinner eaten in front of the new TV prominently centered in front of the just-installed picture window of a new suburban living room prompted many postwar Americans to congratulate themselves as the best-fed people on the planet. That smugness ignored the perils of a high-fat diet. In a climate of renewed reform activism, it also spurred questions about the hungry left behind.  

**America gets fat and greedy and the children suffer**

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the free love movement of the 1970s encouraged liberalism and expansion in the food industry, and Americans felt liberated once again to afford to be able to make choices about food and frankly, eat whatever they wanted. And while the NSLA and 1966 Act and succeeding amendments revised and organized the food lunch policy to feed more children, the idea of a child’s autonomy was lost among these policies entirely. The disconnect between a child’s best interests and healthy education and a money-making system which benefits the school in the short-term began, as early as the 1960s, to lead school leaders to misinformed choices. Advertisement and intensive Washington, D.C. lobbying campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s would ultimately drive the nation from one that was trying to guide nutrition to one that was taken over by profit-hungry food industries. More specifically, the original idea earlier in the century embodied in the 1966 Amendment aimed at

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increasing nutrition consciousness for American’s youth was completely lost with lobbying of competitive foods.

It is important to distinguish the practices of advertising and lobbying in two ways: historical and ethical significance. In continuation of this chapter, the historical significance will be noted, and later an ethical perspective will be described. With more awareness of health benefits and the drawbacks related to certain foods (i.e. increase in grains versus meats in abundance) in the late 1980s, the USDA began publishing documents and guidelines encouraging the cutback of certain foods, notably the first published Healthy Eating Index of 1989; a general opposite effect than the post-World War II state of eating to abundance because it was available. This, naturally, angered and threatened many food industries, and hostilities toward government agencies developed. Healthy eating became an issue of politics rather than nutrition.

In attempt to give the public advice that would not cause a political backlash, the USDA and the agency that succeeded the DHEW (the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), jointly released the Dietary Guidelines for Americans in February 1980. Its seemingly innocuous recommendations were to “Eat a variety of foods; maintain ideal weight; avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol; eat foods with adequate starch and fiber; avoid too much sugar; avoid too much sodium; and if you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.”15

The overabundance attitude of post-World War II America would have been more advantageous for children; with fewer demands and greater freedom, children and

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15 Nestle, Food Politics, 46.
families were able to be more liberal with choice and ways of eating. Never before had the food industry seen such a hold from lobbyists and politicians as it did in the 1980s and 1990s. Within months of the release of the *Dietary Guidelines*, the National Academy of Sciences’ Food and Nutrition Board issued a counter-report stating that healthy people should not have to restrict intake of fat or cholesterol. It later was revealed, embarrassingly so, that this report came from scientists with demonstrable ties to the meat, dairy and egg industries.\(^\text{16}\) Further, based on the Farm Bill of 1977, the USDA was granted control of nutrition and food policy, though having it housed with nutritionists under the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW) may have seemed more logical.\(^\text{17}\) This was a conflict of interest by the USDA when aiming to protect the Department of Agriculture and advise the public about diet and health issues. This battle of wealthy lobbyists versus logical, fact based decisions—a familiar battle in Washington—most negatively affected and confused the education as well as understanding of nutrition for young children.

In 1991, the recently appointed Secretary of the USDA, former Congressman Edward R. Madigan, had just blocked the printing of the Department’s latest food guide—the *Eating Right Pyramid*—because it was “confusing to children.”\(^\text{18}\) Madigan (and pressuring lobbyists) preferred the older guidelines which promoted equality among food groups and portrayed the image that all food groups are equally vital and should be eaten in the same volume. Conversely, the *Eating Right Pyramid* (Figure 2), one that has

\(^{16}\) Nestle, *Food Politics*, 47.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 51.
been most familiar to Americans until very recently (MyPyramid, Figure 3, in 2005 followed by the current, MyPlay, Figure 4), has distinct and calculated measurements and recommendations, namely encouraging grains, fruits and vegetables, and only a few meats and even fewer fats, daily.\(^{19}\) While evolving and “hip” diets have been a common trend throughout 20\(^{th}\) and early 21\(^{st}\) century United States’ culture, the *Eating Right Pyramid* has served as a solid teaching tool for children, despite what various (money-hungry) nutritionists have argued.

The USDA could not possibly have been acting in the interest of schoolchildren as that age group never had been the designated audience for federal food guides. Instead, the USDA was responding to meat and dairy producers complaining that the placement of their food groups in the narrower, “eat less” sectors of the *Pyramid* caused their products to be “stigmatized”.\(^{20}\)

As noted, very recently, on June 2, 2011, the USDA's new food guidance icon, MyPlate (Figure 4), replaced MyPyramid (Figure 3) as the government's primary food

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\(^{20}\) Nestle, *Food Politics*, 52.
group symbol. MyPlate is an easy-to-understand visual cue to help consumers adopt healthy eating habits by encouraging them to build a healthy plate, consistent with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.21

Figure 4: MyPlate (2011)

Schools as the drop-box for commercial pressure

Whether directly consequential or not, for at least thirty years, the amount of commercial advertisement, lobbying and pressure on school settings has been a source of further mixed messages to children. Whereas the food pyramid is aiding health education and ideally teaching young students to eat correctly and learn to lead a balanced lifestyles, tempting and “tastier” foods from profit-hungry corporations are sending the wrong but convincing messages to the schools. Current school lunch and school breakfast program rules prohibit the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value (primarily, sodas and candies) in competition with school meals in school food service areas during meal periods. Other competitive foods may be sold in food service areas during mealtimes only if all the income accrues to the benefit of the school or student

organizations. Yet these policies are flexible and states can impose looser or stricter enforcement of this rule. There are no federal standards governing the offering of competitive foods outside of food service areas during mealtimes or relating to competitive foods that are offered for free.\textsuperscript{22}

Competitive food sales, while typically unhealthy (i.e. Coca Cola, Frito Lay and Nestle) provide a large incentive for schools to sign-on. In the late 90s, the term “pouring rights” became more prevalent. This term refers to a development in food marketing: large payments from soft drink companies to school districts in return for the right to sell that company’s products—and only those products—in every one of the district’s schools. And because soft drinks raise nutritional issues that place them at the forefront of present-day dietary concerns, pouring-rights contracts illustrate some of the more disturbing consequences of “eat more” marketing imperatives.\textsuperscript{23} Both the school and private company benefit from a relationship with one another, and in a hurting economy with slim school budgets, the occasional sale of vending machine snacks or chips alongside sandwiches is tempting to even the most health-conscious superintendants.

Thankfully, in a study of a representative sample of enacted state legislation from the 2010 state legislative sessions, it was found that although some schools have come to rely on supplemental revenue from foods and beverages sold in competition with full meals and have resisted legislation to regulate those foods and beverages, studies generally indicate that school food revenue remains steady or increases when schools

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\textsuperscript{22} Joe Richardson, Donna V. Porter, and Jean Yavis Jones, \textit{Child Nutrition and WIC Programs: Background and Funding} (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2004), 27.

\textsuperscript{23} Nestle, \textit{Food Politics}, 197.
offer healthy foods. Further, federal school meal reimbursements to states actually may increase.\textsuperscript{24} Yet despite improvements, what is often lost is the right and ultimately honest improvement of student nutrition.

CHAPTER 3

SCHOOL: A FARM-FRESH HAVEN OR RENOVATED FAST-FOOD JOINT?

**Food: The main culprit**

A focus on food and feeding serves as an ideal avenue to elicit the issue of ethical standards and necessary changes discussed throughout this paper. Often noted as the symbol of love and comfort, food has become something of a target in U.S. schools, a war between federal standards, financial crisis, school choice and often lastly, child nutrition and awareness. Food has become a source of income for school programs with commercial products competing for assets and thus a source of increasingly unhealthy eating tendencies in elementary schools across the United States. Our spectacular failure to provide fresh, appealing, healthy meals for all our children is the result of a series of specific and identifiable social choices that we have made: a massive disinvestment in our public schools, an industrialized food system, an agriculture policy centered on subsidies for large-scale commodity production, a business model rather than a public health approach to school food programs. Concern about obesity among American children and adolescents, however, has created an opportunity to transform the way we feed our children at school.¹ In sum, what can and should be a simplistic process has been swallowed by outside influences and schools have lost touch with what healthy and appropriate feeding means in the 21st Century.

¹ Poppendieck, *Free for All*, 2.
Government impact on food choice: Obstacles begin

As with most programs in public schools, there are federally mandated regulations for schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). As a federally assisted program, it is no surprise that the NSLP operates in over 101,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions, as it provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day (in 2009).² School systems who wish to participate, receive cash subsidies and donated commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve lunches that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price lunches to eligible children. School food authorities can also be reimbursed for snacks served to children through age 18 in afterschool educational or enrichment programs.³ An undeniably breakthrough program of the 20th century, NSLP has provided many opportunities and funding for schools, particularly the ability to serve breakfast, a meal schools would not typically be able to afford. Unfortunately, the balance of federal regulation of foods and temptations from outside sources of funding often halt the progress and ideals of the NSLP program.

The food guide was first prominently used in U.S. schools in 1992, with a more broad, and some would say, forgiving, allocation for all the food groups. While a useful tool for health education classes and as a visual understanding for children, the Food Guide Pyramid (Figure 2.3) has not been void of political and economic influences. Meat

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³ Ibid.
and dairy lobbyists have had serious issues with the progression of the food pyramid, primarily in the early 1990s when the original Pyramid was released. In April of 1991, the Pyramid was temporarily withdrawn because of heavy political influence. In a meeting with then Secretary of Agriculture, Edward Maddigan, the cattleman complained that the Pyramid would cause people to eat less meat because it was displayed so close to the fats and sugars. They joined the National Milk Producers Federation in demanding that USDA withdraw the Pyramid.4 Their influence temporarily prevailed, until protests from other government agencies changed the tide and it was published. While most would agree that the fruit and vegetable allocations are fair and balanced, this was a major revelation that lobbyists had and continue to have a massive impact on government decisions for food allocation.

While intended to do the opposite, another example which has exposed limitations and loopholes to proper eating and school feeding is the nutritional standards required by the NSLP program. School meals must meet federal nutrition standards in order to qualify for reimbursement under NSLP. This recommends that no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories come from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. Further, regulations also establish a standard for school lunches to provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories. School lunches must meet Federal nutrition requirements, but decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school

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4 Nestle, *Food Politics*, 57.
food authorities.\textsuperscript{5} It is important to note that this applies to the meal as a \textit{whole}, and meals on \textit{average} throughout the week. Therefore, as long as some sort of combination of fruit, vegetables and other healthy offerings are provided at some point throughout the week, schools can still serve and please everyone on “Chicken Patty” day and “Friday Pizza” day.

\textbf{Nutritional reality vs. moral principle}

In a study of public schools across the U.S., nutritionist Janet Poppendieck used a 2004 School Nutrition Association survey which revealed preferred meals by elementary aged children. Pizza was the favorite entrée, for almost half (49.1\%) of respondents, and it had been the best-selling entrée every year since the polling began in 1998. The runner-up was “chicken (typically chicken nuggets)” (32.2\%), and among vegetables corn had the highest tally (23.1\%), and french fries were a close second (21.3\%).\textsuperscript{6} And why do children continuously choose these items and identify them as their food of choice and why do schools continue to serve these foods, foods which obviously lack any nutritional value? Finances, ease of preparation, satisfaction for the children, and finally, fear and uncertainty that any other way just wouldn’t sell.

These lasting excuses of ease of service, lesser financial burden and just making a child happy have perpetuated ongoing food issues as well as starkly contrasted the very moral principles of utilitarianism, which guides public health issues such the obesity epidemic in schools. Morally, governments, schools systems, and marketing companies

\textsuperscript{5} United States Department of Agriculture, “NSLP: Fact Sheet,” Food and Nutrition Service.

\textsuperscript{6} Poppendieck, \textit{Free for All}, 84.
who are aware and capable of altering menus and means of promotion, know that for measures of success in school and healthy weight of children, a better fed and nutritionally educated schoolchild is indispensable. From a utilitarian point of view, providers mentioned above should be doing as much positive change and making healthy changes in order for the community and world as a whole to suffer less from the bad consequences of improper eating. Kant would want the providers to fully understand and believe what they would want change, making their reasons and purpose of genuine duty from rules of reason, and not because the federal government is hammering down on them to do so.⁷ While there are alternate moral viewpoints, and because this is such a broad public health issue, one must consider the greater common good and long-term effects of decisions made from the top (federal government regulations) to the bottom with creation of meal menus (school nutritionists). Children are capable of their own autonomy with food choice if the options given to them would be universally understood to be morally sound and benefit not only their own bodies, but the trust and well-being of all.

A healthier school: The reauthorization of the Women, Infant and Children Program

The average school cafeteria environment does not encourage children to develop preferences for low-calorie nutrient-dense fruit and vegetables (FV) yet consumption of these foods is associated with better long-term health and reduced risk for obesity. Acquiring a personal taste for FV is important for children because early choices have a central role in subsequent food selection. It is important to teach children to like FV

⁷ Beauchamp et al., Contemporary Issues in Bioethics, 15.
because insufficient intake of these foods has been reported to be a risk factor for being overweight.  

Although fewer states enacted legislation on promoting healthy communities and preventing childhood obesity in 2010 than in 2009, there was increased activity on government bills that may have the greatest effect in reducing or preventing childhood obesity. More states took action, however, in the two most prominent policy areas of school nutrition and physical activity/physical education. Since 2004, there has been a massive increase in programming, largely in part due to the Reauthorization of the Women, Infant and Children Program. This is essential because in addition to consuming proper FV, it is also important to educate children in the classroom and in the community about the value for what they are eating.

Established initially as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children in 1974, the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) federal grant program (with a name change under the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act in 1994 to emphasize its role as a nutrition program), has a mission “to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and

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8 Georgianna Tuuri et al., “‘Smart Bodies’ school wellness program increased children’s knowledge of healthy nutrition practices and self-efficacy to consume fruit and vegetables,” Appetite 25 (2009), 445.

9 Winterfield, Shinkle, and Morandi, “Reversing the Trend in Childhood Obesity: Policies to Promote Healthy Kids and Communities,” 3.
referrals to health care.”

This program has enabled many states to apply for more funding for both food vouchers to women and for nutrition programs. The WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 created a huge surge for nutrition programs in schools and expected better and higher standards for schools participating in the NSLP.

According to the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, each school division that participates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) shall establish a local (school) wellness policy (LWP) no later than the first day of the school year beginning after June 30, 2006, to cover all NSLP schools in the school division. The LWP must include 5 components: (1) goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities to promote student wellness; (2) nutrition guidelines for all foods available on each school campus; (3) assurance that reimbursable school meals are not less restrictive than existing guidelines; (4) a plan for measuring implementation; and (5) involvement of school nutrition representatives, parents, students, administrators, and community members.

Further, reauthorization required NSLP schools to form committees and establish policies governing physical activity at school and foods sold or served on campus. “Wellness” has become a watchword, and the wellness policy process has drawn many new stakeholders into the school food arena.

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encourage better eating, more physical activity, and general measures to reduce the risk of childhood obesity.

**“Team Nutrition”: A notable WIC program**

A notable USDA healthy lifestyle program which has developed out of the WIC Reauthorization is “Team Nutrition”. Team Nutrition is an initiative of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service to support the Child Nutrition Programs through training and technical assistance for foodservice, nutrition education for children and their caregivers, and school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity.\textsuperscript{13} Among several initiatives, Team Nutrition has created the HealthierUS School Challenge. Award winners have incorporated basic, and gradual steps to make their school programs healthier without burdening staff, finances or the children. This has included provisions such as:

- **For Creating Healthier Menus:** In eighteen different schools across Rosemount, Apple Valley and Eagan Independent School Districts in Minnesota, school cafeteria’s began with a 50/50 romaine and iceberg mix for salad then gradually moved toward a 70/30 blend. In shocking but effective change, the Gooding Elementary School in Idaho won a Gold Award of Distinction for replacing \(\frac{3}{4}\) of the fat in baked goods with pureed beans, and the students did not notice.

- **To Energize the Students:** Willamina Elementary School in Oregon involved the principal to be the role of leader and role model, to ensure that kids are physically active. She instituted the ‘Morning Mile,’ where students and faculty go out on

the track and walk a mile ever morning before school. This school also used
hands on activities with the students, such as making edible arrangements of fruits
and vegetables, to make nutrition education fun.\textsuperscript{14}

When the belief that small changes and gradual adjustments (i.e. substitutions in
recipes, simple engagement and encouragement of students, initiatives of teachers and
community to model health behavior) are worthy, similar changes like these can begin to
occur. As Angela Baumann, Child Nutrition Director at Gooding Elementary School in
Idaho noted, “We decided to make changes simply for the purpose of doing what is best
for the children.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Media’s influence on food choices}

As noted in Chapter Two from an historical perspective, the power and influence
that advertising has developed promoting unhealthy eating in a positive light, can be of
partial blame for the downfall of a child’s understanding of eating properly as well as the
disconnect between what is morally justified and desired by the individual. Individuals,
in this case, marketers, often respond to a government and community plea to change the
way foods are promoted with language of liberalism: they have a right to do these ads or
decline to care what healthy eating means, as a matter of freedom and justice on their part
(even if they know it is morally wrong).\textsuperscript{16} While advertising is quick to be blamed for
the rise of drug and alcohol use, the increase of prescription drugs, and the sale of

\textsuperscript{14} United States Department of Agriculture, “HealthierUS School Challenge: Team Nutrition,”
Food and Nutrition Service.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Stephen Peckham and Alison Hann, \textit{Public Health: Ethics and Public Policy} (Portland, OR:
Policy Press, 2010), 42.
millions of unnecessary goods, to name a few, the food industry’s targeting of elementary aged children taps into the decision capacity and daily choices that young children must make. Among many other temptations, food is of greatest appeal to young children.

Advertisers have studied in depth the power of psychology and what will truly influence a child’s decision to think that orange soda is similar, and even better, than orange juice. Research indicates that children respond best to fun, friends, and nurturance (in that order). Further, prior to age 9 or 10, children do not readily understand the difference between commercials and programs. After that age, most children grasp the purpose of commercials, but there is still substantial blurring of distinction. When companies use famous athletes or cartoon characters to promote a particular food, children are inclined to choose something associated with an idol or “cool” celebrity. They do not understand the profitable market, or the thousands of dollars that for example, Michael Jordan, is paid to promote Coca Cola. If the same celebrities were promoting Florida grapefruits, a choice in that direction would be made. Recently tagged as the ‘nag factor’ by a study in the August 2011 issue of the Journal of Children and Media, the term is used to explain how 3- to 5-year-olds get their parents to get them foods they might not otherwise want to purchase. While overall media use didn't seem to influence the amount of nagging, researchers found that a familiarity with

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17 Nestle, Food Politics, 181.

18 Ibid.
certain commercial TV characters did. Mothers cited three factors -- product packaging, cartoon characters and exposure to commercials -- as main contributors to nagging.\(^{19}\)

Parents, and school administrators, have also been guilty and fallen victim to convincing advertisements and foods that will be “easy” and “loved” by children. Many times for parents, the goal is simply getting their children to eat, and the simplest way to do this is to feed them foods they will like. When 7-year-old students at Naches Valley Primary School located in central Washington, a hub of agricultural growth, were asked what they thought about cutting potatoes from the school menu their reaction was, “No potatoes?...That would be bad. That would be so not cool. I love tater tots.”\(^{20}\)

Mothers, who are often noted as the figure at home to prepare the lunch, are constantly influenced by media, and this trend has developed over time. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was common for the women to prepare whole meals, and even freeze for later use. Yet, through the 1980s and 1990s more women entered the workforce and time became a restraint in making healthy, and well-developed meals. At the same time, the male figure, or father, has remained in the work force. While there has been a rise in stay-at-home-dads—a record 7.4% of fathers in married-couple families with children under 18 were home in 2009 while their wives worked—men still maintain the stigma


and perception as breadwinner and not to be in the kitchen.\textsuperscript{21} As in previous decades, lunch packing articles in magazines continued to assume that the wife and mother was also the chief lunch packer. “Lunches Kids Will Love,” in the September 1989 issue of \textit{Parents} magazine, offered ideas for ways to increase the child appeal of boxed lunches. While the article posted the importance of easily prepared foods that were still nutritionally beneficial, it was interestingly juxtaposed beside a full-page advertisement for ready-made Jell-O Pudding snacks. With a cute child, and funny slogan in which the boy has clearly attempted to manipulate his parents by invoking the authority of the school board, it shows that the child would now hold the power in the purchasing decisions of the family.\textsuperscript{22}

The Oscar Meyer Lunchables, introduced in 1988, are a brilliant example of the changing, and convenient-yet-grossly unhealthy choices for lunch. These packs can be viewed as a microcosm of school lunches—they appear to be healthy by adding a small scoop of applesauce or a few mini carrots but the bulk of the meal is high in fat, sodium and sugars. To its defense, a Lunchable is still healthier than an average homemade lunch. A 1999 survey of home-packed school lunches in Fairfax County, Virginia, revealed that the lunch provided by the school cafeteria was the most nutritious option for students, and the dietary intern who conducted the study found that when competing against most home-packed lunches, the Lunchable was actually superior in nutrition. The typical home-packed lunch was: a ham sandwich on white bread with mayonnaise, a bag

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\textsuperscript{22} Lautenschlager, \textit{Food Fight!}, 195.
\end{flushright}
of pretzels, a six pack of peanut butter crackers, and a Capri Sun brand fruit drink.

According to the intern, a child with a home-packed lunch was “no better off than with a Lunchables.”

**Can schools change the tide of media?**

Once again, the responsibility of nutrition education seems to be heavily placed on schools when observing trends of individual parental and children decisions. Unfortunately, schools enable these types of false media everyday because the school, practicing pouring rights, benefits from the sale of commercial products. Children are already exposed to advertisements at home—according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children are exposed to more than 7,600 commercials on candy, cereal and fast food in any given year—and additional vending machines or bags of chips sold each day further promote the idea that eating these foods is okay. Vending companies are savvy, and strategically spend millions to promote learning with foods.

In 1998, the premier U.S. fast-food restaurant, McDonald's, spent just over $1 billion on advertising. Fast food and candy advertising is tightly woven into movie and TV promotions, sporting events -- and even education. Reese's Pieces offers a promotional book that encourages children to use pieces of candy to learn to count.

Marketing professionals have indicated concern about advertising targeted at children.

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23 Lautenschlager, *Food Fight!*, 196.


26 Ibid.
When interviewed, 35% of marketing professionals consider the general ethical and moral standards in the industry to be “lower than in the past,” with 40% believing these standards are about the same—thus, only 25% believe the standards are improved.27

Yet companies, and school administrators alike, can and should be involved with policy and regulations surrounding current advertisements. In Europe, soft-drink companies have developed self-regulatory measures to stop advertising junk food and to help tackle child obesity. To avoid stricter laws, soft-drink companies have pledged to stop marketing to children under 12 years old, and have also pledged to limit soft-drink sales at schools.28 As more countries begin to implement stricter regulations, marketers and food companies alike will need to alter how they promote their foods, and ideally, include healthier options. Children are capable of deciphering “fun” and “boring” foods, as noted previously with the tater-tots example, and if efforts are made to make healthier foods “fun”, choices by children will reflect that.

70,000 children. Four hours. Feed them!

It is not shocking that school cafeterias across the United States, particularly in large, urban populations, are overwhelmed not only by the amount of food they need to serve each day, but also with the management of nutritious and balanced items which they must offer. And there is not much refuge inside the school cafeteria, though the USDA would like that to be the situation particularly in cases where proper food is not available at home. The lunch lady serving a government-approved hot lunch is but a


28 Ibid.
dusty icon. The most popular school lunch is a small pepperoni pizza, nachos, a peanut butter cookie and a diet soda—a dietary bomb, containing 1,116 calories and 51 grams of fat, all of which can be pre-packaged and easily frozen and re-heated.\textsuperscript{29} When this amount of food is being produced at a rapid speed, often in a central kitchen, the easiest and most obvious thing to do is heat and re-heat as much as possible.

By controlling the menu to meet nutritional standards and to feed so many kids, the task of also making all meals nutritious becomes daunting. Yet this sense of “impossibility” has limited many school districts. They conclude that as wealthy or poor a district may be, making positive changes to school food and enriching education both through healthy eating and physical well-being, would involve too much time and cost for everyone involved. Further, by serving the predictable meals and satisfying the underlying USDA and NSLP standards, at least they are certain that children are fed and not going home hungry. But, when a child can’t self-identify what a cucumber looks like or that chicken breast does not actually look like a chicken patty, it becomes the school’s responsibility to educate, and set standards, and this begins in the school cafeteria.

\textbf{A decision-making force}

Creating and implementing weekly and daily menus is no easy task. Unlike most activities in the school where students register for class or decide on their locker at the beginning of the year, the decision they make about participating in the school meal program is made each day. Constant awareness that participation is voluntary should be

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29} Severson and May, “Growing up too fat: Kids suffer adult ailments as more become dangerously obese,” \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}.}
a stimulus for the school nutrition team to strategically think about how to keep the program fresh, appealing, and most of all, relevant to the 21st Century customer.  

Expectations from the broad community and government also play a part in decision-making. While parents and communities are quick to judge what is being served on school grounds, and criticize choices made, it is often found that they are serving the same foods in their homes—chicken fingers, mac n’ cheese, french fries. They expect that because schools are funded along with federal regulations, the product and quality of foods should be of a higher standard. Changing what people feed their children at home strikes many observers as beyond the appropriate reach of public policy. The school lunch menu, on the other hand, seems fair game. So not only are government officials feeling pressure on school food models (i.e. Food Guide Pyramid), local school cafeterias feel the pressures from different sets of activists. Animal rights groups want vegan options; parents of children with peanut allergies want peanut-free schools; members of various religious communities want menus—or at least options—that conform to their dietary laws. 

Yet the most common critique seems to always be nutritional standards, perhaps maybe because parents know that given the choice, children are not, and have not been allowed the chance, to be well versed in what nutrition decisions mean.

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31 Poppendieck, *Free for All*, 85.

32 Ibid.
Snapshot of a lunch week: Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, CA and Scituate, MA Public Schools

In order to gain an understanding of what is being served, a brief a snapshot of lunches today in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and a Boston suburb, Scituate (found within Plymouth County median household income of $70,868) Public Schools, offers a quick understanding of what is being served, as well as programs supporting these decisions and areas for growth.\(^{33}\) LAUSD is the second largest school district in the country, after New York City, and during the 2008-2009 school year, it served 688,138 students, and had 40,514 support staff and administrators.\(^{34}\) In a smaller, yet similarly economically and ethnically diverse district, DCPS serves 45,000 students, 4,000 teachers and about 2,500 other employees.\(^{35}\) And finally, Scituate Public Schools serve about 2,600 students, and then only a few hundred teachers and other employees.\(^{36}\) These numbers give one a general idea of variety of sizes of school districts, all with the same similar challenge of creating a healthy, nutritious and enjoyable menu.

The population and economy of Scituate compared to D.C. and L.A is deceiving as one would believe that this would imply greater options and opportunities with a smaller mass to feed. Yet, funding and distribution is all relative, and often it is the


\(^{36}\) Greg Ranieri, interview by author, Scituate, MA, Aug. 11, 2011.
activism of the school district and allocation of the budget that seems to play the largest role, no matter what spectrum of income or corner of the country the school district may be in (which is why a smaller town was chosen for comparison). While often described as one of the worst large-city school districts in the U.S., DCPS currently has an exceptional school lunch menu, and one that has clearly changed with the times. In the hub of policymakers and activists, in addition to the home of First Lady Michelle Obama and her Let’s Move! campaign, it is no question that DCPS would both adopt and adapt to new food policies. DCPS has partnered with programs such as Revolution Foods’ and DC Central Kitchen to create unique and tasty lunch menus that mirror the fatty foods kid’s love. These programs also favor fresh, locally grown foods. As seen in Appendix A, the October 2011 lunch schedule still features hot dogs and grilled cheese as most kids expect yet with a healthier twist, and chicken patties are replaced with grilled chicken on a whole wheat bun, and chicken and biscuits is served with local vegetables and a whole wheat biscuit, to name a few.37 Also, as part of the Let’s Move! campaign, eleven DCPS elementary schools also partner with local chefs to help educate students, teachers, and administrators about health and nutrition.38

While Scituate does not currently partner with any outside food organizations to provide both consultation and meals, recent menus show improvement in creativity and


healthier alternatives, quite like DCPS. Yet a lack of partnerships or heavy changes results in a less nutritious meal, with fewer options, particularly healthy options. As seen in Appendix B, the menu varies from offering salad with low fat dressing and fruit on the side of each meal, to Sal’s pizza Friday (with no healthy changes to the ingredients), fried chicken tenders (with baked fries… an oxymoron in nutrition) and pudding with a topping.39 While the district has done an excellent job working within its budget and making gradual changes, it is difficult to imagine that with the abundance of unhealthy options still available, that children would choose the healthier ones unless they were educated to do so. Scituate has adopted its own program which provides a guide for parents and staff on rewarding students for birthdays, holiday celebrations, fundraising and classroom achievements. When these typically would be events that would honor students with candy, ice cream parties or bring-in-your-own-dessert affairs, the schools are trying to emphasize alternative options to food. With four goals in mind—1) Re-energize with nutritious food options, 2) Recognize students with non-food alternatives, 3) Reward students with movement or special activities and, 4) Reduce the size of treats with little nutritional value—the community hopes to promote academic excellence along with happy and healthy children. Some ideas include allowing the rewarded child to choose the next craft, let the birthday child be a special assistant for the day, or plan special party games.40 So while the cafeteria may be still trying to adapt, the community


40 Greg Ranieri, interview by author, Scituate, MA, Aug. 11, 2011.
has been making small changes that contribute to healthier eating habits, and teach children that junk food is not a reward-worthy item.

Los Angeles is a unique case study. For one of the largest school districts and public education systems in the U.S., it is difficult to navigate their web presence for a school lunch menu. There is a desperate need for a both apparent and vibrant nutritional uplifting in LAUSD. It most recently came under attack after an April 12, 2011 airing of the new healthy-eating manifesto show, Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution. Jamie Oliver is a British-born food-enthusiast who has a passion for nutrition awareness and ideas, specifically to wake-up the necessary changes needed in schools. His food programs are explicit and honest. In one episode Jamie opens Jamie's Kitchen in Westwood (because he was not allowed into the schools), demonstrates his disgust for the state of Los Angeles public school lunches ("airplane food"), and rallies parents in his effort to reverse the school board's decision to not allow him into the schools to sample and taste the food. Jamie saw his inability to gain access to the schools as the ultimate “war” between he and a school district and continued with the show, inviting LAUSD parents and students to bring in food from the school cafeterias to his test kitchen. The most shocking display was his flavored milk demonstration. Saying that he is “…trying to make it dramatic, because I want people to care,” Oliver demonstrated how much sugar is


added to the flavored milk in L.A. schools every week by filling up a school bus with 57 tons of white sand. Though L.A. and Oliver sparred over this episode and his intrusion and lack of relevance of LAUSD’s shortfalls, the peer-pressure may have encouraged change to happen fast. On June 14, 2011, shortly after the debate subsided, LAUSD voted a new dairy contract, becoming by far the largest district in the country to remove flavored milk from its menus, part of its effort to make school food healthier and help combat childhood obesity.

**What am I eating? Incorporating food education into school hours**

Wellness education has tended to be devalued with all that must be taught in within a seven-hour school day. While schools constitute a vitally important setting in which to combat the trends in childhood obesity and related health concerns, barriers are met because the primary mission of schools is the proverbial “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” There is pressure from other federal programs and legislation (i.e. No Child Left Behind), to focus on preparation for standardized testing. Schools are perennially short on time, person-power, resources, and money. Not only is it important that schools are trying to update and make healthier food and menu options, but educating the students and helping them understand what each food is, or at least, build their

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43 Barco, “‘Food Revolution,’ L.A. Schools Spar over Lunches,” *National Public Radio.*


vocabulary and comprehension, is immensely valuable and essential to their freedom of choice.

With an estimated 55.6 million children in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools in 2009, schools remain a logical place for policymakers to focus on childhood obesity prevention efforts, especially because children often eat both breakfast and lunch at school. And because meals are at a lower cost, or free, these over 31 million children in 2009 receiving this benefit were most likely purchasing most of their “nutritious” and balanced meals while at school as it was cheaper than purchasing fruits and vegetables at the store. Because they are not exposed at home, it is common for a child not to be able to identify various fruits, vegetables and other fresh ingredients that are readily available in an average grocery store. School nutrition programs are generally mandated by their school systems to operate on a sound financial basis. Burgers and pizza sell, as do french fries, pastries, and other foods that are traditionally high in fat, sugar and sodium. Because students want foods that they know and like, it is not surprising that students may prefer fast-food-type meals.

Natalie Miano, a nutrition educator with the Network for Healthy California, said parents' misconceptions remain a challenge, with many assuming fresh ingredients are

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48 Martin and Oakley, Managing Child Nutrition Programs, 375.
more expensive or avoiding fruits and vegetables they do not recognize.\textsuperscript{49} The same article also highlights a poll funded by the California Endowment, which surveyed 1,005 California voters in late 2010 noting that nearly two-thirds of those polled said supermarkets should be encouraged to open in low-income neighborhoods. Although 61\% of those polled said it was very easy to find fresh fruit and vegetables locally, just 19\% of parents in six low-income communities the endowment polled agreed.\textsuperscript{50}

Alongside physical education, nutrition education needs to be as imperative as the food on the plate. As previously noted in this thesis, education is the least invasive implementation of public policy measures and a school has such potential for both educating impressionable children as well as implementing nutritionally sound practices each day. While not to take away liberties of the cafeteria employees or restrict school budgets, an education and development of nutritional policies, particularly targeted early, grades K-3, would vastly improve the autonomy of the child at that particular age as well as food and consumers understanding for the greater community and world in the long run.

\textsuperscript{49} Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “Childhood obesity is ‘very serious’ problem in California, poll finds,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Feb. 8, 2011.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

OBESERVING CHILD DEVELOPMENT: UNDERSTANDING HOW CHILDREN ARE CAPABLE AND SUITED TO MAKE DECISIONS

Child autonomy and decision-making cannot simply be viewed in a rights-based lens. It is now important to consider the effects, both positive and negative, of childhood development studies for children age four to eight years old (early elementary). In schools, this formative time includes learning about nutrition and choosing foods and integrating actively without parental guidance. The more modern research and practice driven evidence on the maturation for the capacity and competency of children at this age is often neglected in policy-makers decisions. This chapter will describe these capacities and competencies as children enter kindergarten through their first few years of elementary school, and how these seminal years in life demonstrate that more food-choice autonomy should be granted. The chapter will also address the barriers to a child development, and how they have distorted and can even change the capacities of children.

The developing child

Prior to age ten, a child experiences some of the most, if not all of the, critical developing stages and experiences in his or her growing self. What occurs in the womb, to the first months of life to the first days in elementary school is vastly important and foretells how the child will develop and grow later in life. No two children are the alike in their development, which makes the study of child development both intriguing and complicated.
There are three major theories of development sequences which have been identified over time. First, maturationists believe that development is a biological process that occurs automatically in predictable, sequential stages over time. This perspective leads many educators and families to assume that young children will acquire knowledge naturally and automatically as they grow physically and become older, provided that they are healthy. Second, environmentalists believe the child's environment shapes learning and behavior; in fact, human behavior, development, and learning are thought of as reactions to the environment. This perspective leads many families, schools, and educators to assume that young children develop and acquire new knowledge by reacting to their surroundings. Finally, constructivists believe young children initiate most of the activities required for learning and development. Because active interaction with the environment is necessary for learning and development, constructivists believe that children are ready for school when they can initiate many of the interactions they have with the people around them.\(^{51}\)

Regardless of theory perspective, it is clear that as days and years progress, a child changes more rapidly than it will in its adult life. And because no two children are the same, it is only ethical to conduct a study in development through the lens of all theories. Age grouping may be another pitfall in the classification of children. It may be better to group children according to their developmental level rather than their age, because descriptions of what children are able to do depend not only upon age but also on

the culture in which they grow up.\textsuperscript{52} While this often does align with age, one must be careful about making large generalizations when observing a child and relying too heavily on developmental models, and more so on true observations and capabilities. David Archard, the author of \textit{Children: Rights and Childhood} agrees that developmental stages and a developmental model are essential and a necessary precondition of progress from one year to the next, but also points out the endogeneity (or possible measurement error) in the fact that much of development is based on the uncontrollable, genetically inherited or biologically fixed features of a child that make him or her who they are.\textsuperscript{53} This is important to keep in mind for all developmental studies.

A child is a sensitive being with much potential. It is worth while to look at a child through this lens to understand that as they grow and develop, they often can make decisions beyond what policymakers and society gives them due credit for. Too often parents and teachers are making decisions on behalf of their children while, if raised in a “normal” trajectory, these same children are fully capable of doing this themselves. We do not know, but there may be reason to speculate that, provided the situation is familiar to them and that the alternatives are made in clear language they can understand, young children might be more competent to give consent and make choices than expected. Overprotection can be as limiting as underprotection, while a good balance leads to

\textsuperscript{52} Alaimo and Klug, \textit{Children as Equals}, 1.

\textsuperscript{53} David Archard, \textit{Children: Rights and Childhood}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 43.
healthy development. When the child has the experience of being competent, this leads to feelings of achievement, accomplishment and self-respect.\textsuperscript{54}

Children are the biggest agents and creators of their own development and learn from both their surroundings, their peers and do this as their brain and motor functions develop. Given the drive of young children to master their world, most developmentalists agree that the full range of early childhood competencies can be achieved in typical, everyday environments. A cabinet with pots and pans, for example, seems to serve the same purpose as a fancy, “made for baby” musical instrument.\textsuperscript{55}

Inherently, by the time they are in elementary school, studies have shown that the brain has developed enough and basic experiences have occurred for both socialization and decision making to occur.\textsuperscript{56} This chapter will further explore the relationship between the brain, nature and natural development of a child and how this relates to their food choices.

**Brain functionality: The prefrontal cortex**

Studies of the brain are both the most complex yet basic way to understand a child’s comprehension level at certain ages. Despite significant gains in the fields of pediatric neuroimaging and developmental neurobiology, surprisingly little is known about the developing human brain. This is particularly the case during early and late childhood—a time when significant leaps in social and cognitive learning take place. In

\textsuperscript{54} Alaimo and Klug, *Children as Equals*, 79-80.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
part, this is due to low mortality rates across this age range in addition to the rare occurrence of autopsies on this population.\textsuperscript{57} The most informative studies to date are those based on carefully quantified volumetric measures with large sample sizes of 50 or more subjects. The most consistent findings across these studies include: (1) a lack of any significant change in cerebral volume after five years of age; (2) a significant decrease in cortical gray matter after 12 years; and (3) an increase in cerebral white matter throughout childhood and young adulthood.\textsuperscript{58} While all regions of the brain play vital roles in the development of children, the most distinct region of the brain with age-related changes in young childhood is the prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex, in the front part of the brain, is the location where problem-solving and related functions are housed. Cognitive control, or the ability to override inappropriate thoughts and behaviors, is associated with this part of the brain.\textsuperscript{59} This type of cognitive control is very important for young children to develop as it allows them to make appropriate decisions and decipher what is right and wrong. By the time children reach elementary school, they are expected to socially adapt and to reason out simple ideas. Cognitive processes underlie cognitive and social skills such as the ability to ignore distracting events inside and outside the classroom and to focus on one task.\textsuperscript{60}

While children are capable of retaining a significant amount of information at this age,


\textsuperscript{58} Noble, Tottenham, and Casey, “Neuroscience Perspectives on Disparities in School Readiness and Cognitive Achievement,” 243.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 72.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 73.
proper development of this region is essential as it helps them sort and decipher to make smart decisions. In most regions of the brain, no new neurons are formed after birth. Instead, brain development consists of an ongoing process of wiring and re-wiring the connections among neurons. In early childhood the brain is genetically programmed to produce more synapses than it will ultimately use and therefore childhood is essential to prune and re-wire this abundance. Some regions, like the pre-frontal cortex, become less malleable, or “plastic,” once the pruning is over so this short time window is very important for development.  

### Nature vs. nurture: Foundations for development

A growing child is a product of both nature and nurture. The dichotomy between inherited capabilities and environmental incentives and pressures has guided human self-understanding in Western and Eastern thought, acknowledging the interaction of heredity and environment. Nature is the different bodily chemistries and functions the child is born with, including any disabilities or gene malfunctions. Nurture involves families, communities and schools and their treatment and offering of quality care that the child needs as it grows. For example, a child raised in an unstable climate with a low socioeconomic status will most likely have different developmental experiences than a child raised with a variety of resources and in a comfortable climate. While some shortcomings are irreversible, including birth defects or disabilities created in the womb, others like proper education and training can be altered over time. Once again, this is

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why childhood is so important in all steps of learning and why early intervention is essential in acquiring decision-making skills and stopping the course of substandard, yet controllable, development.

The developmental integration of nature and nurture enables humans to grow and adapt as a species in a manner unequalled by any other (i.e. fruit flies don’t have books, movies, radio, or television from which to learn, and the only webs available to them are dangerous ones), permitting unparalleled flexibility in behavior and development.63 New experiences also help to trigger new brain growth and refine existing brain structures, quite like the pruning discussed previously. These “experience-dependent” developmental processes are vital for children to learn, memorize and to register new ideas for the future, and contributes to the brain’s lifelong plasticity.64 Many of these experiences occur during the young childhood period, simultaneously and not coincidentally during the most vital periods of brain development and organization.

Among siblings, for example, shared environmental influences make siblings alike independent of their genetic similarity, while non-shared environmental influences make siblings different independent of genetic factors. An example of this would be divorce; while all children are experiencing the divorce and the changing environment, all can be affected differently by the same event. This is why increased research in behavioral genetics helps explain environmental influence on individual differences.65

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64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 47.
Executive functioning and acquiring self-regulation

Optimally, a two year-old demonstrates basic, yet alert, executive functioning. Though it is difficult to establish a clear definition of executive functioning, there is a growing consensus among researchers about what it entails: self-regulation, sequencing of behavior, flexibility, response inhibition, planning, and organization of behavior. Behavior is often controlled by the ability to initiate, shift, inhibit, sustain, plan, organize, and strategize.\(^{66}\) Further, virtually all children develop the capacity to understand causality, adopt the perspective of another person, and sort objects by categories. But children arrive at school with different levels of executive functioning--some children are far more capable than others of the self-regulatory, sequencing, planning, and organization—and deficits here result in a downward snowball effect if not targeted early in the first few years of school.\(^{67}\) Most striking examples of growth occur in school, which is typically after the child turns five years old. Although children from birth to age three engage in complex reasoning, it is well documented that major developments continue into early schooling and well beyond. Learning and early sequence development demonstrate a major shift between the ages of three to seven, particularly in children’s understanding of social relationships, in their understanding of biological principles, capacity to be self-reflective, and their capacity to self-regulate.\(^{68}\) Trained ideas and important concepts can best be grasped during these formative years.


\(^{67}\) Ibid., 149.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 151.
This idea touches upon another core concept of development as described by Shonkoff and Phillips. This states that the growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior.\textsuperscript{69} As children mature, their capacity to exert their own autonomous control over key regulatory functions is essential. Cognitive and emotional maturation signals a greater ability to delay gratification, to sit still to read a book, and to cope with the stresses of separation or loss. These adaptive behaviors differ with age (i.e. crying at age one versus in first grade) and therefore children must process and learn in different stages of life.\textsuperscript{70} Based on this principle, by kindergarten, children are capable of leaving their home and attending school, on their own, and making decisions (as simple as they may be, for example, where to go the bathroom or when to raise your hand) on their own.

**The adult effect**

The student-teacher relationship is very important to children, especially those who are most vulnerable. The student-teacher, decision-making process makes it possible for the student to acquire increased self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-confidence; and as a result, to develop a healthier and more positive self-concept.\textsuperscript{71} When a child has this confidence, he/she is more comfortable making decisions alone. As Shonkoff and Phillips note, once children have that self, and have built up emotional memory from other events, they begin to respond to experiences—good and bad—on


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.

behalf of the self. \(^{72}\) An adult’s role in emotional regulation at this age is vital. Children often measure their worth and understanding of a situation based on how the adult reacts. While there could potentially be a very traumatic or confusing situation for a child, if a trusted and alert adult is near, the reaction can actually shape how a child will manage his or her emotions and remember feelings about the situation in future conflicts. This also connects to the *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child* theory on positive stress, which demonstrates a very mild change in body’s stress hormone levels, and is a normal part of life. Adverse events that provoke positive stress responses tend to be those that a child can learn to control and manage well with the support of caring adults, and which occur against the backdrop of generally safe, warm, and positive relationships. \(^{73}\)

It is valuable for the educator to teach and guide important concepts, because young children are forming opinions and judgments based on a lot of what they are learning in school. The teacher should also be aware of the idea of “options” when teaching and also that students are capable of forming their own decisions and opinions. For this to happen, the teacher creates an educational atmosphere in which the students are provided with numerous opportunities in which to identify and articulate pertinent questions, issues and problems. \(^{74}\)

\(^{72}\) Shonkoff and Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 111.


A recent study (September, 2011) of various television programs and their impact on young children’s executive function found that immediately following a fast-paced, and non-lifelike television cartoon slowed the executive functioning of most four-year-olds. Coined as the “SpongeBob effect,” as it followed episodes of watching “SpongeBob SquarePants,” the study provides empirical evidence that watching a 9-minute episode of a fast-paced television cartoon immediately impaired young children’s executive functioning relative to watching an educational television show or coloring on their own. Children in the fast-paced television group scored significantly worse than others despite being equal in attention at the outset and that fantastical events, unfamiliar to children but depicted in these shows, are not encoded normally and deplete cognitive resources. Therefore, simple, realistic and repetitive lessons prove more powerful and useful for children at this age than colorful, fast moving cartoons. In young children, cognitive control tasks are associated with diffuse patterns of prefrontal cortex activity, whereas by adolescence the pattern of activity is both more focal and more intense. In regards to choosing a meal, if taught the proper reasons and associations, healthy food choices can be simple. Otherwise, with mixed messages and temptations surrounding them, it is easy for children to be swayed to not decipher differences and go based on acquired taste.


76 Noble, Tottenham, and Casey, “Neuroscience Perspectives on Disparities in School Readiness and Cognitive Achievement,” 73.
Competency and capability

Because children are developing from the moment they are born, they have acquired many capabilities and are competent in most aspects of life. As described in Chapter One, while they may be denied certain rights or access due to their age, by the time they reach elementary school, they are expected and inclined to achieve certain goals, and are therefore capable of doing so. Further, children understand that with rights come responsibility. With the right to go to the movies at age five, for example, there is a responsibility to behave in an appropriate way. Children thrive on responsibility, because it can help them feel wanted and needed.

Again, we see an opportunity as well as understanding here that schools play a vital role in playing-out and enabling children’s competencies, and therefore, capabilities. The ingredients for healthy development can be summarized as the “five C’s”. These positive attributes encompass: competence in academic, social, and vocational areas; confidence or a positive self identity; connection or healthy relations to community, family and peers; character or positive values, integrity, moral commitment; and caring and compassion. The focus is on wellbeing, rather than just on problems. Schools are places that have the capability to make up for these qualities lost in many homes. Many of the above needs can only be met after primary needs for safety, food, and shelter have

77 This is based on the assumption that the child is generally healthy and well-developed and does not have a disability.

78 Alaimo and Klug, Children as Equals, 82.

been met satisfactorily. A child who comes to school hungry or worried about being
abused by a parent may not be able to attend to a spelling or reading activity or have
trouble making friendships, to name a few.80

School has therefore become the main target and provider for nutrition supply and
education. As noted throughout the thesis, children with the lowest socioeconomic status
and poorer home lifestyles are desperate for school intervention, particularly because they
are biologically capable at this age to learn, decipher and promote ideas and habits. This
is why education on nutrition is vital at this age as children can make the smart decisions
in the cafeteria during their first at-school lunch. Findings suggest that the payoff to early
intervention is greatest for the most disadvantaged children. They also suggest that
factors such as being at risk of abuse or neglect, lack of maternal education, and limited
English-language proficiency should be taken into account when defining
“disadvantage,” rather than focusing only on family income.81

Parents should be aware of these competencies and value them as the true and
honest work of any human. Often children are doubted about their capability which then
leads to falsified policies as well as stunted growth in a child. The “helicopter parent”
has become more frequent in the 21st Century: The parent who has trouble trusting that
their child is capable of making decisions on their own, or creating on their own, and
wants to be overly-involved in almost every aspect of the child’s life. In fact, a

80 Kostelnik et al., Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning, 7th ed. (New York:
Wadsworth, 2009), 6.

A provocative new study published by the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* suggests that parents who closely monitor their children during outdoor play discourage them from engaging in high levels of physical activity. Dr. Jason Bocarro, associate professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at North Carolina State University said, "Many parents are worried about the safety of their children, so they tend to hover. The worry is—especially as we are seeing childhood obesity become an epidemic in this country—hovering is keeping kids from running around and playing with their friends and neighbors, and instead maybe sitting in front of the computer or television."82

Development is epigenetic and continuous. New manifestations of development evolve out of what is already there: Children develop a sense of autonomy only after having established an adequate sense of trust. Further, soon after kindergarten, children free themselves from their primary identification with adults and move toward greater interaction with a peer group.83 With education, practice and elemental progress, children are capable of making decisions and leading a safe life by the time they are in elementary school.

**The media drug: Stunting development**

One artificial developmental block, worth mentioning once again, is the affect on media in proper child development, particularly with regard to children making and being

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83 Kostelnik et al., *Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning*, 4-6.
able to make smart decisions about food. Psychologist Gordon Neufeld and physician Gabor Mate state in their book *Hold Onto Your Kids,* that children and teens need strong bonds with their parents (and others who play parental roles in their lives) in order to develop self-esteem, independence, and identity. When parent-child bonds are breached, children are put through serious behavioral and emotional difficulties. For children relying on school authorities to serve as parental figures, this also rings true. Yet child marketers make an art of breaching bonds between children and parents: Their real credo—the one that truly explains their ambitions and behavior—is not “let kids be kids,” but rather “let us get at your kids.”

As outlined in this chapter, children are gaining self-awareness and by early elementary, are able to grasp concepts, memorize and make decisions with this knowledge. What is unethical about this scenario is that marketers know that children are impressionable and while they are able to make smart decisions, they make these based on the way things are portrayed, taught and presented to them. If targeted in a way to truly increase knowledge about healthy foods and associate famous cartoon characters with exercise and positive food choices, children would choose these foods by default. By the age of seven or eight, most children are *sophisticated* shoppers; they can shop independently, ask for information about what they want, and show off what they have bought to other children.

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86 Nestle, *Food Politics,* 177.
Children also influence what food is acquired in a household. Past research has shown parents yielding to children’s food purchase requests 45% to 65% of the time, partly reflecting change in trends of parenting style away from authoritarian to permissive.\textsuperscript{87} Children bring what they learn from the media and advertising, and statistics show they can easily coerce parents into their decisions. In a social environment where food-marketing messages far overshadow public health messages, and where parenting styles may favor children’s consumer decisions, parents’ influence over children’s food behaviors have come to question.\textsuperscript{88} In the end, parents make choices about what their children should eat, but they do so in conditions strategically engineered, with billions of dollars worth of effort, to pressure them toward choices that favor industry’s interests at the expense of children’s health.\textsuperscript{89} Education and positive messages must come from all angles, namely school, media and home.

**Giving children due respect**

By the time children enter kindergarten or first grade, and are entering the lunchroom for the first time, they are aware of what is around them. They are aware of what the other children are doing, they are aware of what the teachers are doing and they are aware of the options being served to them. While children at this age are capable of


\textsuperscript{89} Bakan, *Children Under Siege*, 56.
deciphering what is “good” or “bad” foods, often based on association with things they have learned over time, their opportunity to make these decisions are greatly diminished by the decisions by school authorities as well as gaps (or lack thereof) of teaching at school and at home. It is often found that schools operate on the faulty adultcentric assumption that children are future citizens to be molded rather than citizens of the present to be respected. Children’s rights education is a necessary corrective and a means to arriving at an understanding of citizenship in which children are recognized not only as ‘becoming’ citizens but also as ‘being’ citizens with rights and responsibilities of citizenship.90

Children are often rejected as decision-making citizens because society believes they do not have the competencies and capacities mentioned previously. There are several flaws in this argument, and children should be given an equal opportunity for basic choices, because as we have now learned with more modern research and findings, children can make intelligent decisions if given the means to. From the perspective of developmental psychology and neuroscience, and apart from the issue of economic dependency, it is both simplistic and misleading to draw such a sharp distinction between childhood and adulthood. While there are clear differences, it is unfair to distinguish an exact moment when a child becomes an adult, as development is a life spanning process. Rather than characterizing children as having limited capacity for responsible decision-

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90 Howe and Covell, *Empowering Children*, 44.
making, it is more accurate to describe children as having ‘evolving capacities,’ using the language of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁹¹

CONCLUSION: CHILDREN, RIGHTS AND POLICY NOW

By studying the history of school food politics and nutrition trends alongside child development and ethics, it is clear that these are not distinct topics, but rather, must be considered within the same analysis. So often, the elements of morality and ethics are lost in translation or not considered when financial benefits are at stake. It is of critical importance for public health ethics as well as for the maturation of the younger generations, that the obesity epidemic to come to a halt. School proves to be one of the best locals to address this issue. Child physical well-being is and should always be on the policy agenda.

By the time of World War II, Americans recognized the necessity for both policy change and increased resources for child nutrition. The government realized that with the need for a healthy and strong army as well as a prospering younger generation, food needed to be a priority. It decided that the best place to target this pressing issue was in schools because parents were uneducated or lacked the ability to provide key elements for a nutritional lifestyle. As this thesis has captured, while years progressed, policy expanded and more children were fed. In 1969, 15.1% of lunches through NSLP were free or reduced price, compared to 65.3% in 2010 while the total amount of lunches served almost doubled, from about 3 to 6 billion.92 Unfortunately, at the same time

regulations waived and both lobbyists and advertisers gained traction and infiltrated this sector. Healthy messages were distorted, financial gains persuaded schools and a stifling economy was too often blamed for poor food choices provided to children.

While it is difficult to pinpoint a “normal” child, as no two are alike, it is not difficult to draw conclusions and make decisions about children as a whole based on both ethical reasoning as well as the capabilities of children today. Once again, a focus (or re-focus) upon educational standards is necessary if society wants to treat children as abiding citizens and expects them to maintain responsibilities. As we look deeper into the 21st century, changes as appropriate with the time must be considered. By segregating and protecting children, public policies were originally implemented to protect children from abuse and neglect. The turn of the 20th century aided in the creation of a dependent childhood, characterized by children’s loss of autonomous action, highly regulated by adult guardians. 93 A few decades later, there was a phasing from parental rights to parental duties, followed by the emergence of children’s rights after World War II, and even more so in the 1980s with the enactment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Now, we must look at children’s rights through a more extensive lens, one which acknowledges the developmental capabilities for children to make decisions and not be dependent on an adult far longer than necessary. Further, children deserve the same justice, and simply, a chance, to develop their comprehension and decision-making capabilities.

93 Alaimo and Klug, Children as Equals, 16.
Moving forward, policy and practice must continue to adapt and change. While a detailed focus on specific policies is necessary both in the United States and globally, this thesis will conclude with four key areas of improvement which policy practice should draw from. In a critical yet insightful view of policy makers, Jack Shonkoff comments in an article in *Child Development* that while researchers and practitioners are guided by a cumulative knowledge base that is subjected to ongoing scrutiny, policymakers are persuaded by compelling stories and the selective use of evidence.\(^{94}\) The areas of development below can be addressed with or without specific governmental policy, and should be referenced by families, schools and communities in ways that don’t necessarily involve expenditure. With more focus on key areas of improvement, policy makers will ideally look to adapt and create effective and ethical measures that address children as contributing citizens.

**Key areas for improvement**

While most policy areas and issues for improvement have been noted extensively throughout this thesis, they will be briefly summarized in four major areas. Key areas for improvement for quality of life and ethical standards for children in regards to healthy eating are as follows:

1. **Healthy food options at every meal that children recognize and enjoy**

   For habit to be solidified, and change to be made, schools must maintain a focus on the root of all policy: the food that is served. As noted, many children do not recognize that, for example, a chicken patty is not actual chicken breast.

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And beyond an apple or orange, most fruits are kept foreign to children, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds who do not believe they can afford to eat healthily. Beyond educating, the actual food choices must be made healthier. First Lady Michelle Obama has taken this cause as her own, with the Let’s Move! campaign, among several other grassroots yet widespread programs which have sprouted tremendously throughout the country. And because most children are getting their nutrition at schools, it is more important then ever to demonstrate what healthy food choices are.

To bolster healthy eating habits and school achievement, policymakers are working to improve the nutritional quality of school foods. With an estimated 55.6 million children in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools in 2009, schools remain a logical place for policymakers to focus childhood obesity prevention efforts, especially because children often eat both breakfast and lunch at school.95 Introducing healthy foods must begin in elementary schools, and continue as years progress. Children are born with a preference for sweet, salty and energy dense foods and when foods without these characteristics are introduced they are likely to be rejected. When given the opportunity, children can learn to like many of the foods they initially reject.96 Whereas the school serves as a role model, food chosen to serve impressionable children must be deliberate and promote a healthy lifestyle.

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96 Tuuri et al., “‘Smart Bodies’ school wellness program increased children’s knowledge of healthy nutrition practices and self-efficacy to consume fruit and vegetables,” 446.
2. **Early, widespread, and plentiful educational interventions and experiences**

   The development of the young child’s brain is so rapid and impressionable and it is essential for these formative years to be targeted. Studies have proven that teaching anything (language, habits, etc.) in the early years is the most effective way for the child to absorb concepts and behaviors. During early childhood, the brain retains the ability to re-learn sounds it has discarded, so young children typically learn new languages easily and without an accent. After about age ten, however, plasticity for this function is greatly diminished; therefore most people find it difficult to learn to speak a foreign language as well as a native speaker if they only begin to learn in adolescence or adulthood.97

   Children who have poor home environments can still overcome developmental shortfalls in this brief period of time. If not just for this reason alone, pre-school, kindergarten and all early education classrooms must recognize that children have the capability to learn structured, planned lessons and they can apply these lessons to daily life. If healthy habits are not targeted during this impressionable time, it is much more difficult to sway children from the tasty yet unhealthy foods which would become “normal” and habitual to them. Ideas such as the Morning Mile (Chapter 3) or experimenting with different foods and MyPlate, are easy, affordable and understandable ideas for this age group. These programs should also include parents, as they are the primary educators for their

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children, and often do not believe or understand that they can support and maintain a healthy lifestyle for their children, no matter their income level.

3. **Stricter regulations for food marketers and advertisers**

Young children will always be an impressionable age group and children of the 21st century are additionally influenced by numerous media outlets. These outlets have thoroughly researched the developing brain, as well as social norms for children as they grow, and have strategically created advertisements and stigmas around foods and habits which are detrimental to healthy growth and cognitive understanding. The main harm, among other issues, is that these companies are teaching a lesson which is opposed to the healthy eating and smart-decision initiatives that schools, parents, and the government is emphasizing. Yet because corporate foods and advertisements financially benefit schools, the regulations have been more flexible than should be permitted. This double-standard is hurting children and there need to be stricter regulations.

As noted in Chapter 3, in Europe, soft-drink companies have developed self-regulatory measures to stop advertising junk food and to help tackle child obesity. To avoid stricter laws, soft-drink companies have pledged to stop marketing to children under 12 years old, and have also pledged to limit soft-drink sales at schools.\(^98\) This is one example of many ways through which schools can gradually eliminate the influence of marketers. Once the trend becomes popular,

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and nutrition education is solidified and ease of access to healthier foods is understood, marketers will have no choice but to promote healthier options. Trends like McDonalds offering the option of juice and carrots over fries and soda at no additional cost are small, but effective leaps, in the everyday American child’s understanding about what are “fun” versus “boring” foods.

4. **Funding and curriculum adjustments for schools participating in NSLP**

The National School Lunch Program, the core funding source for nutrition policy in school, must adjust to the present time and re-allocate funding and emphasis for both food and education standards. As previously noted in this thesis, education is the least invasive implementation of public policy measures and a school has immense potential for both educating impressionable children as well as implementing nutritionally sound practices each day. While not to taking away liberties of the cafeteria employees or restricting school budgets, an education and development of nutritional policies, particularly targeted early at grades K-3, would vastly improve the autonomy of the child at that particular age. Additionally, these changes would improve food and consumers’ understanding for the greater community and world in the long run.

While most of the funding is concentrated on the food served in the cafeteria because food is the primary purpose for the NSLP, more emphasis should be given to health and physical education, particularly in elementary
Elementary age students are most capable in learning and adapting to new ideas, and because schools are targeted as the place for change, achieving the National Health Standards should be made more of a priority. By educating the children, they are given the equitable opportunity to understand and learn for themselves, which would grant them more rights to their own bodies and food choices. A major gap in the school food system is the lack of education, and consequently, a failure to elicit smart choices obtainable by children.

**Conclusion**

The perfect array of food served, education provided, funding reallocation and strict limits set would create a proper foundation to address school food policy. While parents must make changes in the household, despite socioeconomic status, the schools must really set the pace and standards for what children should be eating. Further, as the locale of education, schools should provide their students with the opportunity to understand why some foods are good while others are poisonous, and provide them the resources, and trust, that they can move from classroom to cafeteria and make these smart decisions. Habits form early and children learn best young. Targeting this age group will provide to be the most ethical, efficient and beneficial way to end the childhood obesity epidemic and misconceptions about school food.
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http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Beyond+the+Classroom/Food+Services/Menus+and+Nutritional+Information/Menus+and+Nutritional+Information+-+Elementary+Schools (accessed Oct. 1, 2011).


### Elementary (K-5) Lunch Menu

**October 2011**

*The cost of a paid student meal is $1.55. Per the Healthy Schools Act, there is no charge for reduced meals. Full student lunch includes choice of entrée (meat or meat alternate w/grain/bread accompaniments), 1-2 vegetable sides, 1 fruit side dish, & choice of 1% or skim white milk.*

#### Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Monday</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grilled Chicken &amp; Local Beans, Topped w/Shredded Cheddar Cheese</td>
<td>Broccoli Stir-Fry Over Whole Wheat Noodles</td>
<td>Stir-Fried Fresh Vegetables w/Light Ranch Dressing</td>
<td>All Natural Chicken Nuggets w/BBQ Dip</td>
<td>Homemade Grilled Three-Cheese Sandwich on Whole Wheat Bread w/Tomato Dipping Sauce</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Red Chili w/Sweet &amp; Spicy Beans</td>
<td>Whole Wheat Noodles</td>
<td>Whole Wheat Dinner Roll</td>
<td>Seasoned Local Collard Greens</td>
<td>Whole Wheat Dinner Roll</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Fresh Carrot Sticks w/ Light Ranch Dressing</td>
<td>Locally Grown Pear</td>
<td>Locally Grown Garlic Lemon Broccoli</td>
<td>Locally Grown Tomato Salad</td>
<td>Locally Grown White Bean Salad</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Chilled Pineapple Cup</td>
<td>Locally Grown Pear</td>
<td>Locally Grown Cheese</td>
<td>Locally Grown Apple</td>
<td>Chilled Peach Cup</td>
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#### Columbus Day

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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Crispy Pancakes Fried Fish Sandwich w/ Whole Wheat Roll w/Romaine &amp; Homemade Tarragon Sauce</td>
<td>Freshly-Made Cheese Pizza on Whole Wheat Crust</td>
<td>Locally Grown Garlic Lemon</td>
<td>Locally Grown Garlic Lemon</td>
<td>Locally Grown Garlic Lemon</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Chilled Pineapple Cup</td>
<td>Locally Grown Pear</td>
<td>Locally Grown Pear</td>
<td>Locally Grown Pear</td>
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#### Alternate Cold Menu Choices

- **Mondays:** Grilled Chicken Breast 
- **Tuesdays:** Grilled Chicken Breast & Salad 
- **Wednesdays:** Grilled Chicken Breast & Salad 
- **Thursdays:** Grilled Chicken Breast & Salad 
- **Fridays:** Grilled Chicken Breast & Salad

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*There’s a lot going on in October! Check it out:*

- **DC Farm to School Week, October 1-7:** The D.C. Farm to School Network is pleased to announce that the third annual D.C. Farm to School Week will take place October 1-7, 2011. Join the celebration as local, seasonal food in school meals, and engage students in the farm-to-table process.
- **Food Day, October 26:** Food Day seeks to bring together Americans from all walks of life to push for healthy, affordable food produced in a sustainable, humane way. Our Food Day menu features all natural, sustainably produced beef, meat, and vegetables grown in the mid-Atlantic region.
- **Nordic Food Day, October 26:** We’re partnered with the Nordic Embassies based in DC to plan a distinctly Nordic menu to be featured on all school meals at breakfast, lunch and supper. The days will also feature cultural events and promotions!
## Appendix B: Sample Menu: Scituate (Plymouth County, Massachusetts) Public Schools, 2011

**SEPTEMBER 2011  Scituate Public School Lunch Menu ALL LUNCHES ARE $2.50**
**THERE IS NO MORE CHARGING OF SCHOOL LUNCHES**

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<tr>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MILK OFFERED DAILY:</strong></td>
<td>1% WHITE MILK</td>
<td>LOW-FAT CHOCOLATE</td>
<td>SKIN MILK</td>
<td>1% WHITE MILK</td>
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<td><strong>LABOR DAY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>chicken patty on a whole wheat bun</td>
<td>pasta w/ meat sauce</td>
<td>seafood side salad</td>
<td>hot &amp; crispy sal's pizza</td>
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<td></td>
<td>lettuce and tomato</td>
<td>garden fresh salad w/ low fat dressing</td>
<td>rice-corn noodle cream &amp; salad</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low calorie mayonnaise</td>
<td>whole wheat rolls</td>
<td>apple crisp</td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>green beans</td>
<td>peach crisp</td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cheese sticks</td>
<td>fresh fruit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CRISPY TENDER CHICKEN NUGGETS</strong></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>grilled cheese or grilled ham &amp; cheese on wheat bread</td>
<td>mac &amp; cheese with crispy topping</td>
<td>hot &amp; crispy sal's pizza</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cooked carrots &amp; 1/2 oz bag of chips</td>
<td>garden fresh salad</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fresh fruit</td>
<td>whole wheat bread</td>
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<td></td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>POTATOES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>popcorn cheddar knit</td>
<td>dana roll</td>
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<td></td>
<td>baked fries, side salad or veggie sticks w/light ranch dressing</td>
<td>Choice of milk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fresh fruit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EASY RELEASE K-12</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>bagel w/ cream cheese, yogurt + a banana</td>
<td>penne w/ sausage, pasta</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cheese</td>
<td>&amp; GATES</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lite lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CHICKEN PATTY ON A WHOLE WHEAT ROLL</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>burgers on a whole wheat roll</td>
<td>choose ravioli w/ sauce, side of salad</td>
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<td>hot vegetable and 1/2 oz bag of 49% reduced fat cheese and edges</td>
<td>whole wheat rolls</td>
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<td></td>
<td>side salad with fat dressing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fresh fruit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>choice of milk</td>
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Available daily: hot soups, ast sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly, salads and a fresh salad bar with ast. toppings and low calorie dressings, subs made to order & ast. toppings grilled cheese and pizza