

Beyond Jello

Senator Harkin Joins Local Groups to Push for a School Lunch Revolution

BY steve cooperman & linda desmond

Sloppy joes, tater tots, Texas toast, Jell-O, corn dogs—just a few of the members of the School Lunch Hall of Fame. But now a new, healthier lineup of food has aspirations of creating a different legacy. And you may be surprised to find out that Iowa (let's face it, not the first place that comes to mind when you think of healthy food) is far more than an innocent bystander in this trend.

Nationwide, there is a rapidly growing movement to provide healthy food to school children grades K-12. In Iowa, many schools have jumped on the bandwagon; Senator Tom Harkin has led the charge to create national legislation for better nutrition for school children; and one local non-profit organization has launched a campaign to create healthier school meal programs.

Health Crises Among Our Kids

Probably the biggest impetus for healthier school meals comes from the rise in childhood obesity and chronic diseases, particularly diabetes. Obesity among adolescents has doubled over the past three decades and tripled for children ages 6 to 11. Other motivating factors include the proliferation of ADD/ADHD and an increased understanding of the impact of food on behavior.

Last year, Harkin introduced legislation (enacted as the HeLP [Healthy Lifestyles and Prevention] America Act) that requires all school districts with federally funded meal programs to develop healthy nutrition policies by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. Among the requirements are establishing nutritional guidelines that meet national standards and offering nutrition education.

“We have to do a better job of educating students early on about the benefits of a healthy diet and physical activity, and then help them make healthier choices,” says Harkin, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry committee, which has jurisdiction over federal food assistance programs.

In 2002, Harkin created the Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program, which allocated \$6 million to provide fresh produce free to children in 107 elementary and secondary schools, including 25 in Iowa. Last year, based on its success, the program was made permanent, and 28 new Iowa schools were added to the list.

Better Vending Machine Snacks

One of the most common changes schools are making is to the products sold in vending machines—even though they turn down financial rewards that corporations offer in return for selling their soft drinks and snack food. Harkin, for one, believes that junk food in schools undermines the school lunch program and wants Congress to take action to stop it.

Many schools are not waiting for Congress to act. At Indian Hills Junior High in Clive, Nutrition and Kitchen Manager Cindi Carr reports that, in addition to changes made to the lunch line food, juice drinks have replaced sodas in all but one vending machine.

In Iowa City, according to Susie Poulton, the school district's Director of Health Services, the alternative high school has no food vending machines, while all other junior high and high schools have switched to a minimum of 40 percent healthy foods in their vending machines; added milk, water, and juice choices; turned off machines during lunch; and replaced some machines with dairy vending, offering healthier options like cheese and yogurt.

Students Grow What They Eat

Still other schools go further. Scattergood Friends School in West Branch is one of a number of schools nationally that serve organic, locally grown and farmed foods as a way of providing fresh food and giving students a greater connection with the source of their meals. The school has a farm operated primarily by farm crews of students, teachers, and administrators, according to Dana Foster, and many students get involved in food preparation.

“We have 3-1/2 acres in organic gardens, 35 acres of unsprayed pasture, 35 acres of conventionally grown corn and soybeans, and 35 acres of restored prairie with a small wetland,” says Foster. “Last year the farm delivered about 3000 pounds of produce to the school.”

Getting Students Involved

According to Foster, student involvement is key to the success of the program. Not only do they learn a lot about food, food preparation, and nutrition, they also see that food is “a wholesome part of the community life, a celebration of life.”

Scattergood Senior Moriah Spicer agrees, saying the school's food program is unique because of “the fact that you can see, feel, and understand where your food comes from and have an opportunity to look at what you're putting in your body.”

At Maharishi Lower School in Fairfield, the lunch menu consists of all vegetarian, non-genetically modified (GM), fresh food, of which 90 percent is organic, according to Director of Food Operations Tom Siegel.

“We grow 100 percent of our own vegetables from June to September, and during winter months, local Amish farmers, along with four small campus greenhouses and one campus farm acre, provide fresh produce,” explains Siegel.

Worth the Extra Cost

When setting up the current meal program in 1999, Siegel faced a challenge many schools face — sourcing healthy food. Siegel had to conduct extensive research, scouring the shelves at the local health food store, as the first step in finding suppliers that would provide organic, non-GM,

whole foods in bulk.

The school also faced another common challenge—increased costs. However, according to Siegel, parents, teachers, and administrators alike understand the importance of healthy food to the overall well-being of the students and are willing to bear the additional cost.

At Scattergood, some of the increased cost is offset by selling produce to New Pioneer Co-op in Iowa City as well as to area farmers.

A number of organizations, including the Organic Consumers Association, Healthy Schools Campaign, Slow Food USA, and Community Food Security Coalition, have developed programs to assist schools in their efforts to provide healthier food to their students. The Institute for Responsible Technology in Fairfield recently launched its GM-Free School Campaign to support schools in removing genetically modified foods from school meals by providing how-to guidance, materials, and alarming evidence as revealed in a self-produced DVD entitled Hidden Dangers in Kids' Meals.

Institute Executive Director Jeffrey Smith argues that the need to remove GM foods from school meals is critical because children face the greatest risk from the potentially irreversible dangers of GM foods. “The young, fast-developing bodies of children are more susceptible to the potential toxins, allergens, nutritional and other problems associated with genetically engineered foods, and to potential problems related to increased hormones in milk from cows injected with GM bovine growth hormones,” Smith says.

Fortunately, parents, teachers, school administrators, even government officials—in Iowa and nationwide—are making healthier food at school a high priority. As one parent puts it, “I don't want to have to apologize to my children 25 years down the road.”

For more information see: <http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/>

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

<http://www.slowfoodusa.org/>

<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>

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