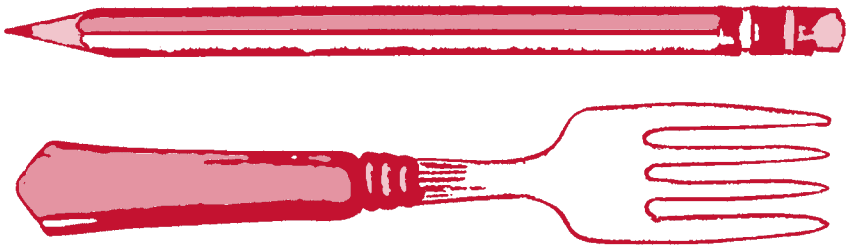


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# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL LUNCH



In order to consider how your school or district might change school meals, you need to understand the big picture of how school meals are funded and the rules and regulations schools are required to meet.

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*Right there, in the middle of every school day, lie time and energy already devoted to the feeding of children. We have the power to turn that daily school lunch from an afterthought into a joyous education, a way of caring for our health, our environment, and our community.\**                    *—Alice Waters*

\*From the forthcoming book, *The Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea* by Alice Waters and Daniel Duane, with permission from Chronicle Books

# PRINCIPLES OF AN EDIBLE EDUCATION: A VISION FOR SCHOOL LUNCH

**Food is an academic subject.** A school garden, kitchen, and cafeteria are integral to the core academic mission of the school, so that ecology and gastronomy help bring alive every subject—from reading and writing to science and art.

**Children learn by doing.** A hands-on education, in which children do the work themselves in the vegetable beds and on the cutting boards, awakens their senses and opens their minds both to their core academic subjects and to the world around them.

**Schools provide lunch for every child.** From preschool through high school, every child is served a wholesome, delicious meal, every day. Good food is a right, not a privilege. Providing it every day brings children into a positive relationship with their health, their community, and the environment.

**Schools support farms.** School cafeterias buy seasonally fresh food from local, sustainable farms and ranches, not only for reasons of health and education, but as a way of strengthening local food economies.

**Beauty is a language.** A beautifully prepared environment, where deliberate thought has gone into everything from the garden paths to the plates on the tables, communicates to children that we care about them.

## FOREWORD

Nearly every week the Chez Panisse Foundation receives a call or an email from a parent, school board member, principal, or community member asking: How can we change our school meal program? How can we introduce an “edible schoolyard” into our school or district? *What You Need to Know about School Lunch* is a first resource for community members, parents, policy makers, and educators who are frustrated with what children are being served for lunch every day in our public schools and who want to do something about it.

The guidance in this booklet is based on our efforts to reinvent the meal program in the Berkeley public schools. Three years ago, school lunch in Berkeley looked and tasted like that of most lunch programs in America: frozen grilled cheese sandwiches, nachos with processed cheese, fruit cocktail, and chocolate milk. In just three years, we have completely transformed the meal program. We have removed all of the processed foods, and all of the meals are now freshly prepared. The district now provides free breakfast to all students and serves fresh fruit and vegetables at every meal. There are salad bars in every school. Organic milk is served at lunch, and grass-fed beef hamburgers, locally made burritos, and roast chicken are typical meals. All of the produce is purchased from a regional corridor—from Washington State to California—and 30 percent of that produce is organic and from farms within 150 miles of Berkeley.

While our work in Berkeley is far from finished, we have certainly made significant progress. Besides making changes to what children eat and where it comes from, we have put equal emphasis on how children learn about food. We have supported the Edible Schoolyard for over a decade, and most of the schools in Berkeley now have kitchen and/or garden programs. This hands-on education is critical to helping shape children’s eating habits. Early data from a three-year evaluation being conducted on our work by the Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley suggests that the more students are exposed to these programs, the more likely they are to eat fruits and vegetables both at school and at home. We are encouraged by this finding and hope this book helps you lead a Delicious Revolution of your own!

Carina Wong  
*Executive Director*  
*Chez Panisse Foundation*

## INTRODUCTION

The alarm over the current childhood obesity and associated diabetes epidemics has created a great deal of interest in changing school food and nutrition policies. Statistically, more than 65 percent of all Americans are obese or overweight.<sup>1</sup> Now the most commonly diagnosed medical condition of childhood, obesity is an independent risk factor for many other diseases, including high blood pressure, asthma, and type 2 diabetes.<sup>2</sup> While all of the related conditions are problematic in both childhood and adulthood, the Centers for Disease Control has stated that because of type 2 diabetes, the current generation will probably be the first in American history to die at a younger age than its parents did.

This national crisis has prompted concerned parents, teachers, and leaders to think about how to create healthier options for children at school. More than 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program, and the federal government spends \$8.7 billion of our tax dollars each year on school lunch.<sup>3</sup> Yet what most schools offer students is often not appetizing and only marginally nutritious. Dozens of states and districts have now passed legislation banning sodas, limiting fat content, or increasing nutritional requirements in an attempt to curb the development of obesity by improving the diets of children.

This booklet is for anyone who cares about what children eat for lunch. We answer the most basic questions about how school lunches are funded and why the food is so bad. We provide an overview of the complex set of issues involved in changing school lunch and advice on how to begin to make changes.

We have found that it takes steady pressure—relentlessly applied—as well as leadership within the school system to make change happen in a community. The dramatic changes to school lunch that have taken place in the Berkeley public schools are a result of a committed coalition of stakeholders, from parents to politicians to grassroots organizations, working together for over a decade.

CHAPTER 1:

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# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Part of the reason that school lunch is so hard to change is that it is funded by a complex web of multiple sources. In addition, attitudes and perceptions about food are hard to change: the food industry ensures this by spending \$20 billion a year marketing foods of little or no nutritional value to our children.<sup>4</sup>

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## HOW ARE SCHOOL LUNCHES FUNDED?

The school lunches served in public schools are monitored and subsidized by a federal program called the National School Lunch Program. The National School Lunch Program is a 62-year-old federal meal program that serves 30 million children a day, and which presently spends \$8.7 billion of our tax dollars each year.<sup>5</sup> Through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the program provides reimbursement to schools for each meal they serve. In addition, it provides free and reduced-price meals to eligible families.

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*To qualify for free school meals, a family of four must be earning an income of no more than \$27,560 per year.<sup>6</sup> This number is the same nationwide.*

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### There are three main sources of funding:

**Federal Funding.** Schools are reimbursed for each lunch they serve. The 2008 reimbursement rate for a free lunch is \$2.57 (which includes money for required milk and fruit purchases). The reimbursement rate for a reduced-price lunch is \$2.17 and 24¢ for a paid meal.<sup>7</sup> When you do the math and build in labor and equipment, it's not very much money to work with.

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*After labor and other costs are factored in, schools have less than \$1 per student to spend on food for lunch.*

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**State Funding.** Your state may also provide reimbursement. For example, in California the 2008 reimbursement is 19¢ for lunch or breakfast. From 2005 to 2007, the pilot Fresh Start Program provided an extra 10¢ for fresh fruit or vegetables per child for breakfast or snack—however, this was canceled due to state budget cuts in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

**District Funding.** The Berkeley Nutrition Services Department receives a very small percentage of the district's general fund. In 2008–09, the contribution was \$240,000 (.022 percent of the district's budget). Eventually, the Nutrition Services Department plans to eliminate this reliance on the general fund.

## WHY ARE THE LUNCHES SO BAD?

School lunch is made on the cheap and consists primarily of commodity or surplus foods. The government allocates the commodity ingredients to schools on the basis of 18.5¢ per meal. Examples of these foods are frozen chicken nuggets and other processed and nonorganic matter. Schools use these often-unhealthy items because they cannot afford to buy higher quality products on the open market. Some districts buy food as part of commodity cooperatives rather than purchasing directly from the USDA, which also limits their access to whole, raw products.

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*State procurement policies are also often a barrier to better food because they force districts to focus on the lowest bid rather than on the highest-quality food.*

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## WHAT QUALIFIES AS A HEALTHY LUNCH?

The USDA has established guidelines for school meals, which may be updated every five to seven years. It allows all sorts of items that are today known to be unhealthy for kids. These include trans fats, hormones, antibiotics, chemicals used for processing, preservatives, and high-fructose corn syrup and a wide range of other processed sugars. The guidelines will come up for review in 2009.

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*Foods that qualify as part of a healthy lunch under current guidelines include chocolate milk, chicken nuggets, canned fruit cocktail, Tater Tots, and corn dogs.*

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## HOW MUCH IS IT GOING TO COST TO CREATE A BETTER LUNCH?

There is no simple answer to what creating a better lunch will cost, because it takes more than better ingredients to create a better lunch. For example, there are costs for equipment and personnel. Canned, processed food can sit on shelves for months, but quality fresh ingredients require refrigerated storage. Does your school or district have a place to store fresh fruits and vegetables? Does anyone on the staff actually know how to cook?

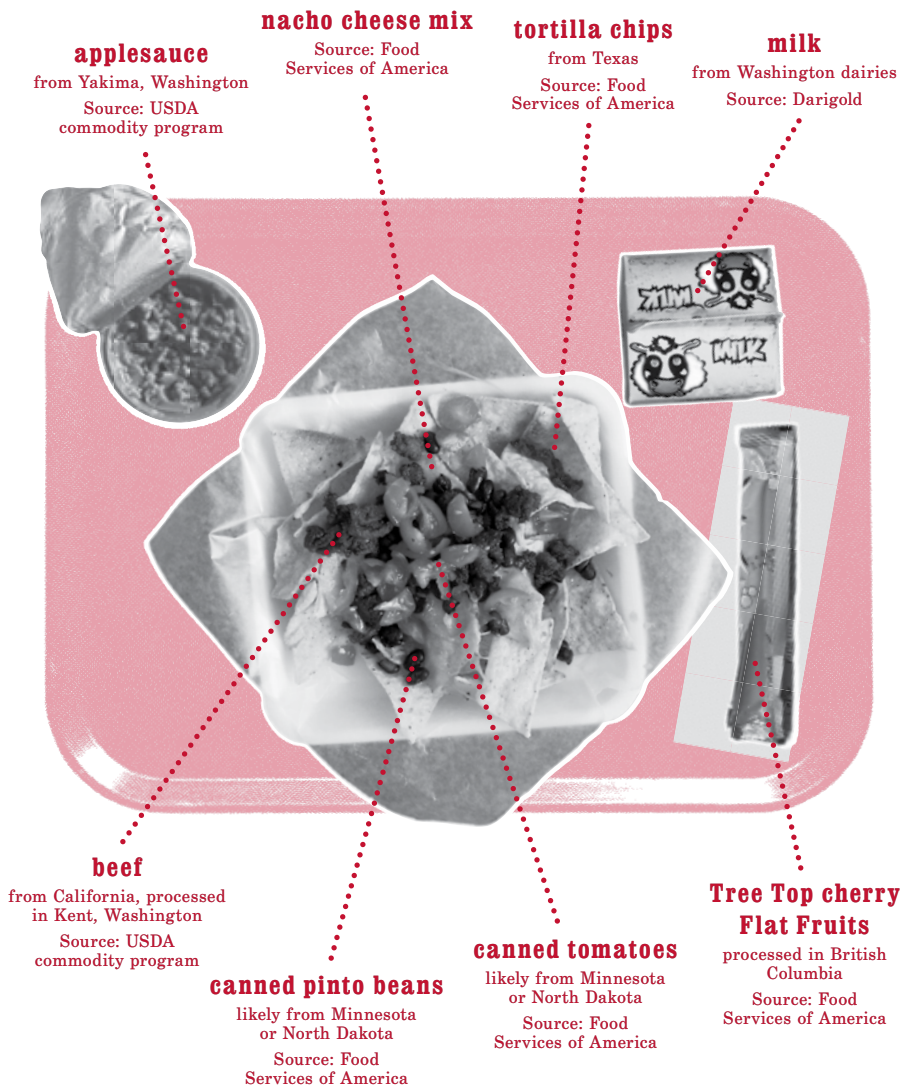
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*Schools these days don't have the facilities or the trained staff to deal with ingredients like whole produce or fresh chicken.*

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# WHERE DOES YOUR FOOD COME FROM?

When the Berkeley Unified School District began to take a fresher approach to school lunch, it faced purchasing challenges similar to those seen by the Seattle public schools. As the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* outlined, the “anatomy” of a school lunch is more complicated than one might first imagine. The ingredients in a lunch like this one travel 7,500 miles from their source to the school lunch room.



CHAPTER 2:

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## ARE YOU READY?



The guiding questions in this chapter will prepare you for some potential obstacles and help you determine how ready your school district is to change school lunch. There are five areas of readiness to consider: financial readiness; structural readiness; purchasing ability; staff capacity; and level of community support.

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# IS YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT READY FOR CHANGE?

## Financial readiness

*What percentage of the students at your school and district qualify for free and reduced-price lunches?*

If *any* of them qualify, then your school and district receive subsidies based on the percentage of students who are eligible and participate in the program. Any changes to lunch will require that you follow USDA nutritional guidelines. There is no way around this unless you completely reject USDA funding, which is hard to do.

*How much money are your school and district spending per meal?*

Most districts spend only what they receive in reimbursements, or about \$3.50 per meal. This is probably not enough to make major changes in the meal program unless the district invests additional funds, the federal and state reimbursements are increased through legislation, or your community passes a special bond or tax to support the meal program.

## Structural readiness (facilities)

*Is there a kitchen on site that has the capacity to prepare lunch for all (or some) of the students in the school?*

What kind of equipment is available at your school? Are there cold storage and a stove? If you have a small kitchen on site, the district might be persuaded to allow a pilot lunch program. You might start with a supplemental salad bar or a farm-to-school program ([www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)) to introduce fresh fruits and vegetables.

*If you're trying to change the meals in more than one school, does the district use one central kitchen?*

If preparing hot meals daily and using raw ingredients are part of your vision, you may want to find out more about what is cooked directly at the central kitchen and what equipment exists to support this model.

## Food readiness

### *Where does your food come from?*

Does your school use a vendor for its meals, such as Sodexo or Aramark, or does the district cook the meals itself (often called a self-operated program)? If your district has a vendor, then you will want to know more about the contract and terms of agreement. If there is a vendor, changes at an individual school are impossible to make without consulting the terms of the district's contract; perhaps healthier food could be negotiated.

### *Is any whole, fresh food being served now in the district?*

How will you find new vendors for the district? It is essential to have reputable vendors that can provide foods that are organic and/or sustainably grown. Search locally!

### *Are you willing to use government-subsidized commodity foods in your school?*

No district is able to withdraw completely from the commodity food program, because it is an inexpensive source of food. Not all commodity foods are processed foods—you can buy pasta, beans, and raw chicken, for example. Even if you don't use the commodities, you'll still need to use recipes that meet USDA guidelines.

## Staff readiness

### *Who is the food service director and what kind of staff does he or she have?*

Many of the Nutrition Services directors are nutritionists or have experience managing food systems, but very few are trained chefs. Most of the staff are part-time workers without backgrounds in cooking. If you want to change the meals at the district level, you need to have a staff who knows how to cook.

### *Is there a chef who is willing to work at the school?*

Cooking lunch every day for even 25 percent of the children at a school is more than a volunteer job. You'll need to find stable funding for a cook, assuming that the district will allow you to pilot a school-based lunch program.

## Community readiness

### *Who else is backing changes to school lunch?*

It is necessary to have at least 50 percent of the parents and teachers at your school and the superintendent committed to making the changes. Without their support it could be difficult.

### *Have you passed a good wellness policy at the district level?*

According to the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, all districts are required to have a wellness policy that sets goals for nutrition education, physical activity, campus food provision, and other school-based activities. A well-written wellness policy can be a way to hold the district accountable for changes and to build a strong coalition of supporters.

### *How will you get the students to try the new foods? Are they ready?*

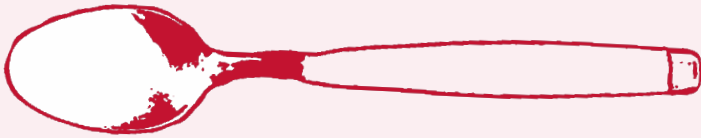
If there isn't a strong marketing effort directed at the older students and strong educational components in the early grades, it will be hard to just "take the bad things out" and have kids think the new food tastes good. Students need choices. For ideas about how to interest students in new foods, see the "Nora's Notes" section on Chef Jamie Oliver's website at [www.jamieoliver.com/schooldinners](http://www.jamieoliver.com/schooldinners).

CHAPTER 3:

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# GETTING STARTED



While we don't have all the answers, we certainly have learned a great deal about what it takes to engage students in eating new foods and overhauling a meal system. Based on our work in Berkeley at the Edible Schoolyard and through a district-wide effort to change lunch, we offer these key recommendations.

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## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **It's not just about changing the food.**

If you change the food in a school, you have no guarantee that children will eat what is offered. Our philosophy is that changes in the food system must be supported by hands-on education in kitchens and gardens. *When they grow it and cook it, they'll eat it.* Find ways to engage students in a garden or kitchen classroom as part of your school lunch program.

### **Integrate recycling and composting into the program.**

Teach students about waste. In Berkeley, all of our school kitchens recycle, and we use a compost pile in the Edible Schoolyard to show students what happens to their food waste and how it can replenish the soil. We are also trying to remove the harsh chemical cleaning agents used in school kitchens and replace them with more environmentally friendly products. In the cafeterias, we serve milk in dispensers instead of individual containers, a change that translated to financial savings and less waste. We use the saved funds to purchase organic milk.

### **It's about the experience.**

At the Edible Schoolyard, we take the time to make a shared dish a beautiful experience. We have students set the table with a tablecloth. They use real forks and plates and they place flowers from the garden on the table. Boys help do the dishes. Girls cut onions. Teachers set the table. We eat together. For many students, the kitchen classroom is the only place they eat in the company of others. The experience strengthens community through teaching simple rituals such as passing food, waiting until all are served before eating, and participating in group conversation.



## **You'll need a real chef.**

If you want real food for your school or district, you have to hire someone who knows how to cook. Without knowledge of food preparation, it is virtually impossible to reorganize a school food system to make from-scratch meals.

## **Start with salads.**

Children love choices. Salad bars are a good way to provide choice and make fresh fruits and vegetables readily available. In Berkeley, we put a salad bar in every school and it's always the most popular station. We also use salad bars to teach about seasonality and to introduce students to new foods.

## **You don't have to cook it all yourself.**

Given the lack of kitchen equipment and limited cooking facilities in most schools, we found that it is critical to create partnerships with other local vendors to cook meals or menu items that we cannot. We rely on vendors like Acme Bread, All Star Tamales, and FullBloom Baking Company to make freshly prepared rolls, Mexican food items, and pizza crust, respectively, each week.

## **Evaluate your wellness policy.**

Find a critical mass of community members, parents, teachers, and school board members who might want to form a committee to improve your wellness policy if it isn't good enough. It is an important way to hold a school district accountable for changes to the food system.

## **Use the media to help you.**

Almost every couple of weeks there is an article about children's health in the newspaper—leverage that coverage and focus it on how school lunch can play an important role. Write an op-ed or have a reporter cover a story on what's being served in your child's cafeteria.

## NOTES

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## A Word of Gratitude

Many thanks to longtime funders such as Mark and Susie Buell, who have encouraged us to develop materials for parents. Carina Wong wrote this booklet with Carolyn Federman. Special thanks to Ann Cooper for her tireless efforts to reinvent school lunch in Berkeley and to Beth Collins, who helped shape the contents of this book. Bora A. Lee and Joanna Kim helped review several drafts before this book was published. And thanks to the California Endowment, Jan and Larry Birenbaum, and Steve M. Silberstein, for their support of this document.

## About the Chez Panisse Foundation

Founded by Alice Waters in 1996, the Chez Panisse Foundation develops and supports educational programs that use food traditions to teach, nurture, and empower young people. The Foundation envisions a curriculum, integrated with the school lunch service, in which growing, cooking, and sharing food at the table gives students the knowledge and values to build a humane and sustainable future.

The Edible Schoolyard is a thriving one-acre garden and kitchen classroom for all 950 students at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School. Through the Edible Schoolyard, students experience all aspects of growing, cooking, and sharing food at the table. Garden classes introduce the origins of food, plant life cycles, community values, and the pleasures of work, while kitchen classes allow students to prepare and eat delicious, nutritious, seasonal dishes made from produce they have grown in the garden. The Edible Schoolyard is a program of the Chez Panisse Foundation.

For more information about our work and other publications, please visit our website at [www.chezpanissefoundation.org](http://www.chezpanissefoundation.org).

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*A school lunch curriculum is not a quick fix for the obesity epidemic. But by bringing kids into another kind of relationship with their food, we can bring about a deep and lasting change in the way they feel about themselves. Offering food is about caring. Our children need to feel like we care about them. This is what is most essential for their good health. And since so many kids don't eat at home with their families anymore, the public schools must take on this responsibility. When they do, students will learn where food comes from, about the importance of stewardship of the land, and about the civilizing and humanizing effects of sitting and eating together at the table.*

*—Alice Waters*

CHEZ PANISSE FOUNDATION



*Cultivating a New Generation*

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