

PRINCIPLES OF
AN EDIBLE EDUCATION
A VISION FOR SCHOOL LUNCH



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CHEZ PANISSE FOUNDATION



Cultivating a New Generation



ON MAKING SCHOOL LUNCH PART OF THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Adapted from a speech delivered by Alice Waters

Forty years ago we had a preview of today's obesity crisis: A presidential commission told us that children weren't fit—and we made a resolution to do something about it. The country responded at great expense. We launched a physical fitness program in the public schools. We built new gymnasiums, tracks, and playgrounds. We bought new equipment. We trained new PE teachers. And we made physical education a mandatory part of the curriculum from kindergarten through high school. Students were required to participate and were graded on their performance.

Now it's time for kids to start getting credit for eating a good lunch. I know from experience that a lunch-centered curriculum can change lives. I know this because I've been involved in a decade-long experiment at a middle school in Berkeley, California. I believe we need the same kind of interactive program at the center of the curricula of every school district in the country: not just serving school lunch, but teaching it, in a hands-on way, as an academic subject.

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.



FOREWORD

The Chez Panisse Foundation envisions a school curriculum and school lunch program in which growing, cooking, and sharing food at the table is fully integrated into the academic day. For over a decade, we have been working to make this vision a reality in public schools across America.

Our vision for school lunch is not simply about upgrading the quality of school meals. It is a fresh approach to education by which the kitchen, garden, and cafeteria provide a rich, interactive context for learning—from kindergarten through high school.

Ultimately, our vision requires increasing funding for public schools in America. Schools need to be rebuilt to include kitchens, dining rooms, and gardens; staff need to be trained to teach courses about food, to weave food concepts into the academic curriculum, and to cook freshly prepared meals for all children. We hope the work of the Foundation is the catalyst for this change.

Carina Wong

Executive Director

Chez Panisse Foundation

“In school cafeterias, students learn how little we care about the way they nourish themselves—we’ve sold them to the lowest bidder. Soda machines line the hallways. At best we serve them government-subsidized agricultural surplus; at worst we invite fast-food restaurants to open on school grounds. Children need only compare the slickness of the nearest mall to the condition of their school and the quality of its library to learn that they are more important as consumers than as students.”

—Alice Waters

INTRODUCTION

Twelve years ago, Alice Waters' vision for a change in public education began to take shape at a middle school in Berkeley, California. The moment, the setting, and the resources were ripe to plant a garden—a plot of vacant land, an enlightened school principal, a core of engaged teachers and parents, and 850 students, all in an urban environment. The vision was to engage children in growing, preparing, and serving fresh, seasonal food. In 1996, the Edible Schoolyard was created.

The Edible Schoolyard links an organic garden, a teaching kitchen, and the school's curriculum. The garden is a hands-on learning laboratory where lessons in math, history, writing, and other subjects come to life. The kitchen classroom provides a place where preparing and eating what students grow in the garden clarifies the connection between nature's cycles, the seasons, where our food comes from, and our relationship to food.

The original vision for the Edible Schoolyard included an organic lunch program and the garden would create a connection to the food served in the cafeteria. While we have made much progress over time, our vision for school lunch as described in this document has yet to be fully realized.

In this document, we outline the five principles that have guided our vision for school lunch over the last decade and continue to guide us today. Through these principles, we hope to inspire community leaders, educators, and parents to think beyond merely upgrading food in schools and to make food a central part of the academic day.



I.

WEAVE FOOD INTO THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM.

“What better way to learn about geography than by combining 27 aromatic spices to make an Indian curry?”

Too often, school food is thought of simply as fuel rather than as central to our history and culture. Food can also be a vehicle for teaching to academic standards. Why not use food to make learning about math, reading, writing, history, and science more interesting? At the Edible Schoolyard, teachers bring to life classroom science lessons on cycles and systems through the example of the compost pile; they enliven studies in the history of ancient civilizations by growing, harvesting, winnowing, preparing, and eating ancient grains such as amaranth and quinoa. Those same grains can be used to make a 10-grain cereal and teach a lesson about health or on math and proportionality. The possibilities of integrating the garden and kitchen with lessons from across the curriculum are endless.

The lunchroom is a natural classroom as well. Students participate in cooking while solving real-life problems that appear naturally in the cafeteria: How much waste does one school produce? Where does the waste go? What does it cost to create a delicious, healthy meal? Where does our food come from? Does it matter? Who decides what children eat for lunch? Each of these questions could be the basis for a hands-on assignment that begins in the cafeteria, enters into the academic classroom, and solves a real problem within the community.



II.

LEARN BY DOING.

“We need to create a new curriculum, and we need to teach it with interactive, hands-on techniques, and not just to kids sitting behind desks.”

At the Edible Schoolyard, we engage children’s senses at every level.

In the garden, children choose their tasks. They actively participate in everything from planting mustard greens or radish seedlings to composting food scraps. In the kitchen classroom, we expect the same kind of engagement. Students are excited to prepare delicious dishes—using produce from their garden—whether it’s a tomato salad or vegetable curry. Working with cooks, children are encouraged to taste, touch, smell, look, and listen—to hear the difference between a simmer and a boil, to recognize the color of a perfectly cooked vegetable or the smell of basmati rice just before it is taken from the pot.

And they all sit to eat the food they have made, together. We have learned at the Edible Schoolyard that “if they grow it and they cook it, they will eat it.”

Following the meal, students participate in all aspects of recycling and cleanup. This kind of engagement is critical to shaping children’s interest in food. We believe that when you engage them in these kinds of activities from the earliest age, they’ll be excited for life about salads, greens, and beans.



III.

ONLY SERVE FOOD THAT IS SEASONAL, LOCAL & DELICIOUS.

“If you decide to eat fresh food in season—and only in season—that is locally grown by farmers who take care of the earth, then you are contributing to the health and stability of local agriculture and local communities. When I buy food from farmers’ markets, the food is alive, and it is irresistible.”

We believe that you must start with pleasure: make food taste so good that children fall in love with it. We want to change their lives forever with the first bite of a juicy peach or a simple carrot. Food should be seductive—the aroma of fresh-baked bread or a tortilla on the *comal*, for example, should make you hungry!

School food doesn’t have to be institutional food. Well-made meals are uncomplicated and pure, with an emphasis on fresh, seasonal, local ingredients. Seasonal foods simply taste better, whether it’s a sweet ear of corn in the summer or a crisp, juicy apple in the fall. Delicious food doesn’t have to be strange to students—even a hamburger or a hot dog made from grass-fed beef can be a part of a healthy meal.

Finally, good food doesn’t have to be expensive. What better way to end a meal than to eat a sweet tangerine or a soft ripe pear grown at home or in a community garden?



IV.

HAVE ALL CHILDREN EAT TOGETHER AT THE TABLE.

“The students take their places at family-style wooden tables set for ten. Fresh bread and a salad with cucumbers and peppers are already on the table, along with real dishes, and real glasses and silverware. The hot dish today is, let’s say, a roast chicken with herbs and garlic, and polenta or small potatoes. The dessert is a sherbet from satsuma tangerines.”

The ritual of a shared meal has all but disappeared in many families, but it could be reinstated in public schools during lunch. We envision school meals served family-style, at long tables, where students sit side by side with teachers and adult volunteers. We don’t want to offer a healthy lunch in a take-it-or-leave-it way, because we know those who need it most might not take it. Instead, we want to engage all students at the table. Imagine if all students ate together and were engaged in conversation. Maybe it’s talk about where all this food comes from—it’s a geography class or a study of California history. Maybe they are trying to guess what herbs are in the chicken, or they are asking, “What is polenta?”

The table can also be a place where students make personal connections. We envision a lunch program where cafeteria chefs collaborate with garden teachers so that lunch includes seasonal fruits and vegetables from local farms. The cafeteria should also be a place where teachers are cooks and cooks are teachers. Students are not being “catered to” at lunch from a vendor they don’t even know. They are serving each other food made by people they know, or even, in part, made by themselves.



V.

MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL.

“Everything is open—as you walk in you see counters filled with seasonal fruits and vegetables, cooks working at freestanding islands and baking tables beyond, and, at the end of the room, a fire burning in the wood oven. It’s light and airy inside, and filled with the smells of delicious food.”

Paying attention to what the physical environment looks like shows the students that we care about them. We want the cafeteria to be a clean, cheerful room, filled with the scent of good food. Furnishings should be handsome, built to withstand constant use, and in good repair. Tables are set, there are real plates and silverware, maybe some flowers, displays of seasonal produce or student work. Something as simple as a bowl of fruit could decorate a table in a way that shows care.

The surroundings should be pleasant. Cooks and chefs are engaged. Teachers are at the table with students. Children are greeted by name. There is no chaos around the meal, because eating is part of the learning experience. The students understand that their food is precious and requires care and nurturing, that it comes from the earth, that it can be beautiful, delicious, wholesome, and affordable, and that there is enough of it for everyone.

CONCLUSION

In 2004 the Chez Panisse Foundation provided a three-year grant to the Berkeley Unified School District to hire an innovative, committed Nutrition Services Director to overhaul the school meal program. Since that time, the district has established a school meal program based on fresh, whole, and, whenever possible, organic produce. School meals are made from seasonal foods with a focus on buying locally or regionally. Foods are free of trans fat and high-fructose corn syrup, and the district no longer relies on processed foods.

The Berkeley demonstration is a start, and if we have learned anything, it is that the whole system must change for such an initiative to work. Our effort began with one school in mind and quickly became a district-wide initiative involving changes to the meals and educational programs in 16 schools. We are far from finished, but we have learned a great deal along the way. The following are some key lessons from our experience.

Introduce salad bars in your school lunchrooms.

A salad bar enables children to see and choose from a variety of healthy foods for themselves, and engages them in the meal service. Students enjoy the variety and surprises that come with seasonal salad bars.

Take advantage of Universal Breakfast.

Universal School Breakfast is easy to implement and has the potential to involve your whole school—staff, students, administration—and parents in choices around school food. All 16 Berkeley schools provide a free breakfast to students regardless of income.

Source ingredients locally.

Changing the way your central kitchen orders, handles, and stores food can be a daunting task. Start small by establishing a relationship with one or two local farms, and contract with them to provide items that are easy to add to the menu, such as fresh, seasonal, organic fruit.

Hire a real chef.

To make even the smallest of changes, you will need a trained chef who is committed to innovation and simplicity. By and large, nutrition services staff in public schools are not trained chefs.

Involve local businesses.

Cooking from scratch doesn't mean doing everything yourself. Every community has great local eateries. If your school district is not equipped to create delicious meals from scratch, find a local business that prepares delicious, high-quality products, such as tamales, salad dressings, pasta sauces, or sushi.

A word of gratitude

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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.

For more information about the work of the Chez Panisse Foundation, please visit our website at www.chezpanissefoundation.org.

The quotes presented in italics throughout have been selected from various speeches and presentations given by Alice Waters since the inception of the Edible Schoolyard.

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