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Dollars, Calories, and the Reinvention of the Lunch Lady

by Julie Kendrick on April 6, 2009



Courtesy of St. Paul Public Schools Nutrition Services

The jiggly arms. The hanky corsages. The hair nets. One dry scoop of mashed potatoes thunked onto a Melmac plate, followed by the barked order: “Keep the line moving!” Most of us have an image of lunch ladies that harks back to the antediluvian days of our childhood. But times have changed, and the lunch ladies of old are now known as food service directors. Often responsible for multi-million dollar budgets, they are empowered to feed everyone at school — the picky

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eaters, the clean plate club, the chronically obese, and the habitually underfed — all within the tightest of budget allocations.



A prime example of the new breed of lunch lady is Allison Bradford (left), who recently returned from Washington, DC, where she attended the School Nutrition Association Legislative Conference, including a hearing on the Senate floor before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. If the image of an old-time lunch lady lobbying Congress seems incongruous, it's worth noting that Bradford's district, Anoka-Hennepin, is the state's largest, with 41,500 students. As the child nutrition director for this \$19 million operation, she is hopeful that additional reimbursement for school lunches will be forthcoming from the Obama administration. "He has stated that his goal is to reduce childhood hunger by 2015," she says, "and the only way to do that is to start major funding now." Bradford, who is supportive of a movement to eliminate all lunch costs for economically disadvantaged students, says she is hopeful, but not overly optimistic. "I have been telling people that the initiative has feet, but not legs — at least not yet."

Even in her prosperous district, with only 25 percent of students receiving free and reduced price lunches, Bradford still sees a strong undercurrent of economic despair. "In my district, there are students who eat lunch on Friday and don't have another meal again until they return on Monday morning." And when they get to school, the price of lunch may be out of reach, Bradford comments. "A reduced price lunch is 40 cents, or \$2 a week, and we have parents who just can't pay that." The issue of unpaid-for meals is a mounting one nationwide, with the Albuquerque Public Schools recently joining districts in California, Florida, and Washington to institute of a "cheese sandwich policy," serving that cold meal to children whose parents don't pay for their kids' lunches. Bradford says that while her losses are not as high as the uncollected \$140,000 the Albuquerque district reported for the first five months of the school year, "We lose \$86,000 annually for meals served to students that are unpaid," she says. "We have many lunch ladies who pay for kids' meals out of their own pockets."

For the current year, the leader of "Lunch Lady Land," as she laughingly calls it, is Jean Ronnei, president of the Minnesota School Nutrition Association. The group has 2,700 members and industry partners statewide. Ronnei is also director of Nutrition and Commercial Services for St. Paul Public Schools. She carries a \$20 million annual budget, has 350 employees, and offers breakfasts, lunches, after-school snacks, and summer meals to the 40,000 students in her district. The challenges in St. Paul are significant, with 70 percent of students eligible for free and

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reduced-price lunches. “Our enrollment is declining,” Ronnei notes, “but the federal reimbursement doesn’t match rising food costs. Just keeping a positive bottom line, while meeting nutritional needs, is a challenge.”

Ronnei points to a Feb. 19 Op Ed piece in the New York Times by chef and healthy food advocate Alice Waters. In the article Waters insists: “We need to scrap the current system and start from scratch. Washington needs to give schools enough money to cook and serve unprocessed foods that are produced without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. When possible, these foods should be locally grown. How much would it cost to feed 30 million American schoolchildren a wholesome meal? It could be done for about \$5 per child, or roughly \$27 billion a year, plus a one-time investment in real kitchens.” Waters’ piece complains of underfunding by the United States Department of Agriculture, which currently reimburses public schools only \$2.57 for a free lunch, \$2.17 for a reduced-price lunch, and 24 cents for a paid lunch.

School food service continues to come under sharp criticism from many sources, not just picky fourth graders who don’t like mushy peas. The February 2009 issue of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association charges that despite some improvements, US school meal programs are still laden with unhealthy fat, salt, and sugar, prime factors in the current childhood obesity epidemic. Mary Ford, professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, and author of the journal editorial, insisted: “Schools need to do even more to reduce the availability of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and make school meals more nutritious.” The article surveyed nearly 400 school districts nationwide and reported that only 6 to 7 percent of subsidized meals met all nutritional standards, and 42 percent offered no fresh fruits or raw vegetables in their lunch programs.

Even with the economic and nutritional challenges facing them, most lunch ladies still manage to find bright spots in their work. Jean Ronnei recently worked with neighborhood ethnic communities to develop large-scale-adapted “home cooking” from Hmong and Somali moms’ recipes. “When we serve healthy food that kids get excited about eating, or ethnic menus that taste like home to them, that’s when the job is fun,” Ronnei remarks. Like her counterpart in St. Paul, Anoka’s Bradford also maintains energy and enthusiasm for her job. She laughingly refers to her “Stealth Health” initiatives, in which kids willingly choose food without knowing its secret healthful properties. She points to a popular pizza entrée made with higher fiber flour that looks and tastes like refined, paired with turkey pepperoni and lower fat cheese. Another sign of improving quality is the MSNA-sponsored Farm to School program, which seeks to expand efforts already in place in 60 schools statewide, including those in Hopkins and St. Paul, to offer local, sustainably grown, and healthier foods in their school operations.

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Getting kids excited about good food seems to be a motivating factor for many of food service directors. Brenda Braulick, who runs the food operations for Sartell-St. Stephen schools, located near St. Cloud, is a strong believer in involving kids in their own meal choices. She visits student council meetings and asks for input, then tries out recipes in her home kitchen before adapting them to her operation. Her staff of 46 responds to her ideas with enthusiasm, as do the students. “They’ve loved our Beef Stroganoff with Dill, Asian Stir Fry Rice, Cheesy Potato Soup, and Homemade Baked Beans,” she happily reports. “I noticed that the students really enjoy new shapes of pasta, so we just had a big success with Southwestern Chili Gemelli, with sour cream, picante sauce, bell peppers, and onions.” If these seem like sophisticated offerings for such a young crowd, Braulick notes that modern kids are savvy, restaurant-aware diners, and they expect new and varied offerings, even from the lunch lady.

While her smaller district has an annual budget of \$1.4 million, with only 13 percent receiving free and reduced price lunches, Braulick still feels the economic and emotional pressure of kids who often eat their only meals at school. Speaking of her free and reduced price customers, she comments, “I feed those kids like they were my own. They deserve nutritious and healthy lunches regardless of the status of their family. I need to get them fed in a healthy manner, so they can be full and happy and go on to learn something the rest of their day.”



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