

12-27-1998

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Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, Robert and Mascarenhas, Michelle, "In Reforming Schools, Don't Forget Students' Stomachs" (1998). *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*.

https://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty/723

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The State

In Reforming Schools, Don't Forget Students' Stomachs

December 27, 1998 | Robert Gottlieb and Michelle Mascarenhas | Robert Gottlieb is professor of urban and environmental policy at Occidental College. Michelle Mascarenhas is the director of the Occidental College Community Food Security Project

"You are what you eat" is a time-worn admonition, but in the public schools, a more compelling way to state it might be: "You learn by what you eat."

The connections between eating and learning are multiple. When kids arrive at school hungry, they have difficulty learning. They are prone to catch colds and the flu, and they may even be subject to more serious health problems.

But there's a flip side of the problem: When kids eat lunch at school, they may not be consuming the most nutritious foods. Increasingly, school lunches consist of high-sugar, high-caffeine and high-fat foods. Such a diet can shorten attention spans and impede learning. More lasting health problems also can arise if children consistently eat the wrong types of foods at school.

Early next year, Gov. Gray Davis will convene a special session of the Legislature to consider a wide range of education issues. For many legislators and school officials, students' low test scores are the prime indicator of public education's woes. As remedies, they will propose, among other things, higher pay and better training for teachers. But even good teachers can't reach students if they can't hold the students' attention. Which brings us to the powerful link between eating and learning.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's school lunch and breakfast programs were established after World War II to stave off health and learning problems caused by inadequate nutrition. Through these and other programs, school districts are reimbursed for providing low-income children with free or reduced-price meals, which also are supposed to help children stay healthy. But are all schools providing these meals? Even if the food programs are available at school, are they helping children stay healthy?

Unfortunately, legislators and school officials are not focusing on the eating-learning link. Far too many children are either arriving at school hungry (not enough calories) or are not eating healthy meals (the wrong kinds of calories) at school. For some children, especially low-income children, both problems exist.

A large percentage of school districts have yet to institute breakfast programs that encourage participation. This occurs even at schools where as many as 90% or more of the students qualify for a free or reduced-price meal because their parents' income is at or below the poverty level. Though participation in the school lunch program is far higher, it's a matter of what the students eat as well as if they eat. Despite the continuing need to improve children's health through school meals, a decline in state education funding has forced many school-district food services to put revenue generation above child nutrition. Cash-strapped administrators have turned to corporations such as Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola and McDonald's to generate revenue. School food-service publications are filled with stories about privatizing lunch programs through fast-food deals or offering exclusive rights to fast-food companies to promote their products on campus. As a result, some school-lunch menus incorporate fast-food offerings or reflect the influences of a fast-food culture.

When children are not offered healthy choices, it's not surprising that both learning and health suffer. Preliminary findings from a recent UCLA School of Public Health survey of student health at 14 low-income schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District indicate that more than 50% of the children are obese or overweight. These findings reflect both the wrong kind of calories as well as a lack of physical activity.

Other studies suggest that too few calories, as well as the the wrong kinds of calories, can lead to diet-related problems such as obesity, diabetes, anemia and susceptibility to lead poisoning. In contrast, children who eat significant quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables can get a head start in reducing their future risk of certain cancers, heart disease, hypertension and other chronic diseases.

The new Legislature will have an opportunity to return schools' food services to their original mission of looking after the health of students and making nutrition a priority. It should study a number of innovative programs, many initiated by parents and school officials, for clues on how to proceed.

At McKinley Elementary School in Santa Monica, where about 50% of the students are low-income, children can choose a salad-bar lunch of seasonal fruits and vegetables, low-fat legumes, meats, cheeses, breads, pastas, and milk. The school district buys the salad-bar food from regional farmers in partnership with local farmers' markets.

The Occidental College Community Food Security Project, which co-sponsors the program, found that a farmers' market salad-bar meal was actually less expensive than a typical hot meal composed of a hamburger, pizza, hot dog or other processed item. The project does require more labor at the school sites to prepare the fresh fruits and vegetables each morning. But this need has brought parents back into the cafeterias, as volunteers or paid staff, so that they can begin to understand and influence the food choices available to their children.

Parents and students help decide what items are offered at the salad bar and how they are prepared so that meals will be culturally appropriate and more appealing to the children. Heeding their suggestions has led to a significant increase in the number of children choosing to eat a salad-bar meal. Thus, through a cost-effective program in which community involvement is central, child nutrition is improved.

Says one 4th-grader from 59th Street Elementary School in Los Angeles after tasting food from the farmers' market: "If we had this food in our school, I'd eat vegetables every day. And that would be good." Good for the kids, good for the schools.*