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Should government impose restrictions on what kinds of foods

can be served in school cafeterias?

There are many reasons and justifications which support the government restrictions on the types of food being served in school cafeterias. The major reason is about the promotion of children's health. Second, it is all about fighting obesity. Third, this is also about fighting the rampant commercialism in food advertisements. Other reasons include parental consent, among others.

This paper explores the various reasons why the government must impose restrictions on the foods served in their schools' cafeterias. It gives full support and justification to the various policies and regulation being implemented by national governments in their educational institutions. It also includes the different benefits and advantages of having such rules imposed in schools. It shall also trace some positive effect and impacts of the law and how each school carry out the policies for the good and/or welfare of their students.

According to the World Health Organization's 2006 Report (p. 1), interventions for good nutrition should occur in the period between early childhood and puberty so as to avoid the adverse effects of poor eating habit and obesity. The organization stressed that the said period is the crucial period for highly nutritional food intakes as the physical needs is tantamount to the energy requirement of these youth (p. 1). Also, these stages are the onset of the development of either healthy or poor eating habits which the

children and youngster will bring to their later lives. As such, the schools are the perfect venue to provide them with the best opportunity to imbibe healthy and proper eating habits and prevent malnutrition and obesity. This is because the schools are the most effective institutions which can give the highest effective reach of any nutritional campaign or health programs as they reach out to a larger audience, especially the young ones, their families and even the entire members or staff of the educational institutions, and even the whole communities (Ibid.).

Therefore, a well meaning government must place the schools as a high priority policy venue for the beneficial effects they aim to produce out of these young people. Of course, aside from being healthy, they also want to develop healthy citizenry through the well-being of the children and youngsters, their enhanced learning capabilities and their improved academic performances, which are all positive effects of good nutrition (Ibid.).

Promoting Children's Health

Generally, the school meals are regulated by the federal government. Hence, it is but easy for them to apply rules and policies about food matters that can promote health and nutrition for the children. Because of health related problems, the government is challenged to address the problem with the use of public utilities such as schools in order to effect real and effective changes in food and sanitation. As they prepare public health references and guidance for schools, they have the foremost well being and health of the children on top of their minds.

According to the results of the international study Health behaviour in school-aged children showe that, on the average, only 69% of boys and 60% of girls have breakfast every morning on school days (Hawkes, p. 1). The reasons for not having breakfast include: lack of time, a stressful atmosphere in the morning or a lack of appetite (p. 1). In skipping breakfast, students suffer from a lack of concentration resulting in poor academic performance and psychosocial functioning. Most of the time, students eat junk food as sweets, potato chips and high sugar soft drinks since they did nt have breakfast. These are sad realities since school cafeterias are the only available option and these are the foods they serve there. Hence, these must be taken care by the government.

Also, they regulate school cafeterias because their contituents always place their trust on their educational institution, especially for the nutrition of their children. In the United States, for instance, since their schools feed more than 27 million children daily, the government must be extra mindful of the food they are serving their citizens (Stewart, p. 1).

As Long-Shan, et. al. (p. 1) puts it, the health of primary and adolescent students can play a leading role in propelling national development or the succes of a nation. Schools act as a perfect place to inscribe a positive and healthy lifestyles which centers on what the children eat every day during their school breaks. Schools have the maximum prospect of influencing children's health. However, they are also responsible for many other development and institutionalized goals. In this regard, the community as well as the families must support the government's effort in instituting healthy lifesyles and nutritional choices of the children. The authors also

emphasized the need to prioritize health problems which can be addressed in schools.

The Problem of Obesity and Poor Diet

Haskins, Paxson & Donahue (p. 1) stated that childhood obesity is really a pressing national problem way back 2006. They admonished the federal, state, and local policymakers and enforcers to urgently address the issue with firm action. They asked them to make public schools as the central stage to launch nutrition and health programs to address the problem of obesity among young people.

The logical justification for the government's intervention is that the problem of obesity is substantially accruing to the exploding national budget on health care. The American Cancer Society recorded obesity cost at \$75 billion in 2003 (Drinkwater, p. 48). This is due to the prolonged and extensive treatment required of obesity related medical problems. The National Institute of Health estimated that about \$75-\$125 billion was spent on direct and indirect costs of obesity-related diseases in the United States (Ibid.). In England, obesity related diseases have caused from £479. 3 million in 1998 to £4. 2 billion in 2007 (" The Economic Burden of Obesity," p. 2). Estimates of the indirect costs (those costs arising from the impact of obesity on the wider economy such as loss of productivity) from these studies ranged between £2. 6 billion¹ and £15. 8 billion (p. 2). The total social costs of obesity in Scotland was rounded up between £600 million and £1. 4 billion in 2007 and 2008 (Ibid.). As the dynamic growth of health and disability expenditures, it is a must for every government to reduce costs related to obesity. Hence, obesity reduction is a crucial part of the national programs.

Fighting Unhealthy Food and Lifestyle Advertisements

Hawkes (p. 2) reported that in World Health Organization's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (DPAS) admonished governments, private sectors and consumer sectors to act against marketing which promote unhealthy dietary practices. Hence, what the government does in restricting kids in their school cafeterias is about this mandate as well. The said report stipulated that food marketing to children must be highly regulated. It is but an imperative of national government to ensure that the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children is eradicated.

According to Sustain (p. 1), a nutrition related website, there are wide and rising concerns about food advertising during children's television viewing hours. This is true in any country around the world. The website's survey of advertising to children in 13 countries showed that Australia has the largest incidents of television food advertisements per hour. These advertised foods are relatively lower in their nutritional content and they contradict the recommended daily allowance by the food regulatory board (Sustain, p. 1).

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (p. 423), children are very prone to believe any strong message which they see out of their televisions portrayed through television advertisements. It also means that the food advertisements affect their choice and the amount of food they take.

Basically, children must be protected against unhealthy advertisements such as confectionery and unhealthy fruit juices whose advertisements are often viewed during the broadcasts of children shows. Most of these foods do not contribute to a healthy diet for children. Fast foods are as being shown to them during their viewing time. It is but right that the government take on

the food regulations of the schools together with addressing the problems of media advertisements.

Wha Governments Do

Changes in school meals have been happening throughout the world. Schools in Europe, specifically in Finland, France, Sweden and the UK provide lunch everyday. In Ireland, Austria and Norway, the schools have a choice to offer lunch meals or not. To exemplify, Scotland offers hot school meals daily while in Greece, Denmark and the Netherlands schools do not provide lunch (Hawkes, p. 1). The German schools have also been improvising their meal systems to give better opportunity for healthier approach to nutrition among children. The Finland's unique style of free lunches in primary and secondary schools has served as a good model for Europe. Their governmental laws specify that they provide lunches that have met one third of the student's daily nutritional requirements (Ibid.).

- ensure of at least one balanced meal per day, especially children from underprivileged families;
- provide an opportunity for students to learn how to enjoy food and eating;
- give an an opportunity for students to practise healthy eating habits and try out new foods; and
- provide an opportunity for children to practise social skills.

Guidelines on how school lunches must be served vary from different countries. For instance, the United Kingdom has a compulsory national nutritional standards for school lunches since 2001 (p. 1). They require that

certain foods such as those with starches, vegetables and fruit, milk and dairy products, meat, fish, and alternative sources of protein. All schools must provide these in their meals.

Aside from lunches, governments also set standards to provide breakfasts in their schools. Studie showed that eating breakfast at school can provide students with the opportunity to be peaceful, to communicate well, have pleasure, and obtain social skills. The government and school administrations also require pupil and parental involvement in breakfast clubs. Breakfast systems may also require the participation of local farmers and food companies i. e. supply of products such as milk and bread.

Governments also regulate the use of vending machines which supply unhealthy food choices for children. Vending machines are criticized because it promotes unhealthy snack foods and soft drinks. It promotes obesity, in a greater sense, and the government should be stern about it. As it is, students who consume ample quantities of softdrinks, which are rich in sugar, are more likely to gain excess weight (Hawkes, p. 1). Vending machines that have soft drinks and fruit flavoured drinks should be prevented by government. They could use it, though, to sell healthier options such as water, milks, juices and low-fat snacks (Ibid.).

Some European countries have also established local partnerships and promote fruit

and/or vegetable consumption through subscription schemes in schools. For instance, in the Netherlands, nearly 100% of pupils in 70% of schools participate in the School Gruiten programme (p. 2). In Norway, they also have a School Fruit Programme which is a subsidized subscription scheme

where each pupil gets an apple, pear, carrot, banana or orange each day in school (Ibid.). This program was initiated to respond to the fact that only 2 out of 10 Norwegian students take fruit and vegetables to school to eat during the school day. Governments also increase the awareness levels in schools to provide more water in their vicinities. Studies showed that students concentrate better when they have drank enough water. Ensuring free access and promoting regular intake throughout the school day should be promoted in schools as water is the best choice for meeting daily fluid requirements.

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