

Junk food in schools essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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Schools, it seems, always need more money. One way many of them found funding for things they needed was through corporate sponsorship. While there have been stories about school gymnasiums named after Pepsi, there was a much less noticeable way that corporations sponsored schools and that was through the food that schools provide for the children. The law that says schools must provide children with breakfast and lunches if the kids' parents cannot afford to pay for them, made it so that schools had to come up with a lot of food for poor kids and that is expensive. Food corporations stepped in and offered their products to schools and schools accepted even if they were not the healthiest of foods. Now, because of things like Pizza Hut pizza, and Smucker's Uncrustables, without meaning to, schools are contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic by including junk foods in lunches and vending machines. However, thanks to people like Michelle Obama, the unhealthy food has started to be replaced in many schools through some innovative programs and new government rules about what kind of food can be included in school lunches have helped to keep kids healthy.

Most people would agree that offering unhealthy meals to kids at school does not seem like the right thing to do. It is bad enough that many children do not get adequate nutrition at home, but to have the same type of food offered to them at school also seems like a hypocritical thing to do especially when schools are responsible for also teaching healthy life behavior such as eating a healthy diet and getting plenty of exercise. The reason a law was made that required schools to serve healthy lunches and breakfast is that

lower-income children may not get enough to eat at home. Not only that with many single-parent households and working families, there may not be anyone to fix meals for children. The law was made so that children would not go hungry. It is a shame that schools then would feed children unhealthy food and allow vending machines that sell junk food.

Another reason schools offer meals to children is that children who have eaten breakfast and lunch do much better in school. That has recently been proven by many studies, but that is not the only reason school lunches have been given to children. Nick Confessore of the *New York Times* says, “ It was the U. S. military that first advanced the national-security implications of a healthful lunch. . . . Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, a former school principal . . . told the lawmakers that as many as 40 percent of rejected draftees had been turned away owing to poor diets” (Confessore). That is how the original National School Lunch program came about. During the 1980s, it was cut along with most other social services by the Reagan administration. Schools began to rely on food from corporations who were competing for the attention of schoolchildren. Of course, there were those federal laws that schools had to comply with, but one way they got around the federal law was to offer unhealthy vending machine products. “ Some districts even struck deals with McDonald’s, Chick-fil-A and other fast-food chains to sell versions of their commercial products directly to school kitchens” (Confessore). That was how Pizza Hut pizza ended up on school lunch trays across the country.

Some corporations even drastically reduce the cost of their products for schools. It makes healthy food like fresh fruits and vegetables difficult to serve because they cost so much more than what the corporations provide

for free. To compete, the USDA subsidizes school lunch programs. In the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* Bree Dority, Mary McGarvey, and Patricia Kennedy explain that the USDA compensates those schools who serve lunches through the National School Lunch Program that meet the 1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (205). If a school relies too heavily on corporate sponsorship, they may not get the government money and the breakfast and lunches they serve to children will not be as healthy as those that do receive the government subsidy, but they may actually spend less on food per student. The cost is that those students have a greater risk of becoming overweight or obese and of being not as healthy as children who attend schools where the lunch program is government supported. Most people do not even know that some schools opt for the corporate sponsorship over government sponsorship. Most parents do not look into whether or not their children are served lunches at their school subsidized by government or corporate money. Most probably assume that if there is a free or reduced-cost lunch program that it is through the government.

If a person were to ask a group of parents what they thought about the different ways that school lunch programs are funded, those parents would not know that one of the ways is through allowing corporations to provide processed, high in calorie foods for lunches and junk foods in vending machines to schools. Some if not most of those people would say that it is wrong to give children junk food and they would probably find it especially wrong that junk food should be available in schools. Even parents who prepare a lunch at home for their children are having their efforts challenged by the presence of vending machines that offer junk food to children. The

presumably healthy food that children bring from home can easily be tossed out and the child can fill up his/her stomach on the empty calorie food found in vending machines. Some people like Phebe Gibson and Lily Swartz are calling for updating the policies concerning junk food at the federal level. Not every school has them because states often oversee school policy and not all states show as great a concern over the health of their children as others. Eliminating junk foods from school cafeterias makes children healthier though. Gibson and Swartz explain that many people all over the country want to remove junk foods from schools. "A recent poll in California indicates 96% of voters support serving healthier foods and beverages in schools, and a study conducted at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln found that banning junk food from a la carte lines would result in an 18% reduction in overweight or obese students" (Gibson and Swartz). Not only will children be healthier if junk foods are removed from school cafeterias and vending machines, but the childhood obesity problem may be stopped.

The argument against the federal government setting guidelines about the types of food that are served in school lunches comes from people who believe the government should not intervene in the lives of people to the extent that they tell them what to eat at school or otherwise. Some say that people should be free to eat what they want even if it is unhealthy. They say that it violates a person's freedom when the government tells people what they can and cannot eat. Parents should be the ones who decide what their kids eat. Lindsey Tanner of the *Huffington Post* cites many obesity experts who worry that legislating what people eat may backfire especially where schools are particularly dependent upon food corporation dollars for survival

(Tanner). Yet studies show that schools that do ban junk food have fewer overweight and obese students.

The same people who want government out of their food are often the ones who say that the presence of junk food in school lunches and vending machines is not the cause of the obesity epidemic. Not every child who eats junk food will become obese. Even those children whose parents are obese may not become obese from eating junk food, even if it is more of a risk for them. The school lunch funding programs that exist help to fund other activities at schools that will help to prevent overweight and obese children such as after-school sports, dance and cheerleading. Linda Gorman also notes that when things like soda are banned, then products like fruit juice, which frequently has just as much sugar as soda, is allowed. Parents and students alike think they are getting healthier foods, but they are not. Gorman says that many feel that banning junk foods will not stop the obesity epidemic (Gorman). For those who believe this, education about the dangers of junk foods is a better policy.

Another argument they use is the cost of food. Jan Christensen of CNN says that schools in the more expensive districts such as San Francisco spend, on average, \$2.74 per child per lunch. To serve a child a healthy lunch, most experts agree that it costs about \$5 per child per lunch (Christensen). Many parents cannot afford to spend that kind of money on their kids' lunches and many legislators do not want to give that kind of money to schools. Without the corporate sponsorship, it costs too much to provide healthy food in schools. Unfortunately, companies do not give fresh fruits and vegetables to schools. Even if they did, critics of government involvement in school lunch

programs point out that the fresh food does not have a long shelf life. Fresh fruits and vegetables become inedible in just a few days. When they go bad, they must be thrown out and that wastes money. The processed food that corporations provide never goes bad, or at least not for a very long time, so there is little waste.

Perhaps the real problem is the cost of healthy food and the presence of junk food everywhere in the American culture. Perhaps the regulations should be placed on corporations advertising practices instead of banning them from schools. If kids and their parents saw more promotion of healthier foods, they may be more likely to buy and consume them. Children who eat healthy at home would not develop a taste for empty-calorie food. Then kids would go to school looking for healthy foods and not junk foods and schools would have the opposite problem on their hands: that of turning down sponsorship from companies who want to promote junk foods to children. Either way, school lunches are subsidized by government dollars, and if they are, those dollars should not be adding to the obesity problem that will cost more money down the road to battle. Even if it costs more to put healthy foods in school lunches and in vending machines in schools, it is the right thing to do for the health of children.

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