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Why School Lunch is “Nasty!”

by **Liam Julian**

Commodity surpluses and policy shortcomings

IN NOVEMBER 2003, William Grimes, then the restaurant critic of the *New York Times*, reviewed the Biltmore Room in Manhattan and gave it a rave. “The Biltmore Room,” Grimes wrote, “may be the best restaurant ever to come out of far left field.” Its chef, Gary Robins, restless and itinerant but undoubtedly gifted, was sampling ingredients and flavors from Japan, Thailand, and India, with occasional detours to Italy and Morocco. His culinary mingling yielded dishes that Grimes found “dazzling.” The critic awarded three stars, and the Biltmore Room went on to have a refulgent if fleeting life at the forefront of New York’s dining scene.

The Biltmore Room was cofounded by two men, of whom Jeff Mills is one. Mills grew up in rural Ohio and encountered serious, good cooking at a young age. Food mattered to his family. “When they were young, my grandmother and grandfather dated for a long time, but he wouldn’t marry her and she couldn’t figure out why,” Mills told me. “She finally realized it was because she couldn’t *cook* as well as his mom.” So Mills’s eventual grandmother moved in with her boyfriend’s family and spent a year essentially apprenticing in their kitchen. After that year (and presumably after some scrupulous technical evaluation and taste-testing) the couple finally married. “So you see, food was important,” Mills said. “And I was always just surrounded by good, wholesome foods, and that sort of became a value of mine.” As a student at Boston College, he worked in restaurants and bars, and when he moved to New York after graduation he did so with the express goal of opening his own place. The Biltmore Room was the result.

Mills has since left New York and the restaurant world entirely. Today, he is the director of food and nutrition services for Washington, D.C.’s public schools — which is to say, he’s the guy in charge of school lunch. Throw in school breakfasts, snacks, and fare for the district’s school supper program, and Mills is responsible for providing tens of thousands of meals everyday. He has been on the job for just ten months (the position was left unfilled for over a year after his predecessor was fired), and those months compose the sum total of his relevant experience. Mills has never previously worked in or with a school, let alone managed a school-food program — let alone managed a school-food program that feeds some 30,000 students, the vast majority of whom are eligible for free-and-reduced-price lunch and 43 percent of whom are either overweight or obese (the ninth-highest rate in the country). This is not the scale at which Mills is used to operating, nor are DCPS pupils the type of eaters to whom he has, in the past, catered so successfully. To put it bluntly, nothing in Mills’s résumé suggests that he is capable of running food services for DC Public Schools; certainly nothing suggests that he would be able to *improve* the program. Yet improve it is precisely what he is doing.

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Mills is 36 years old. He's a tall, fit-looking guy with intense blue eyes, whose sideburns and mild pompadour give him a vaguely Blues Brothers-ish air. His small, windowless office is on the eleventh floor of a building a short walk from the U.S. Capitol. When I met him there one morning, he was sitting sideways in his desk chair, his tie already loosened at 10:30. The walls were bare other than a taped-up, poster-sized map of the city. On his sparse desk was a bowl of apples ("I usually have a sign next to them that says where they're from"). Asked how the new job was going, Mills replied, "It's been awesome. The work has been awesome."

It's work he has confronted with vigor. Since January, Mills has been on the move, doing his best to escape from DCPS headquarters and observe how food services is working inside the schools themselves. He has also done his best to see how innovative approaches work in other schools in other places. Early this year he visited Baltimore's Great Kids Farm, a vegetable farm owned by the Baltimore school district that exists to teach students where food comes from and how it is planted, cultivated, harvested, and cooked. Mills has also flown cross-country to Berkeley, California, to check out the chef Alice Waters's famed Edible Schoolyard. Unsurprisingly, one of his main concerns is procuring more local produce and meats and introducing kids to them. In June he organized a Strawberry and Salad Greens Day throughout DCPS: Students were served salads with greens from places like Godfrey's Vegetable Farm in Maryland, and fruit from Butler's Farm in West Virginia, Westmoreland Berry Farm and Lois Produce in Virginia, and Hess Farms in Pennsylvania. According to Mills, some of the students had never before seen a strawberry.

Spurred by passage of new citywide school-nutrition laws in May, Mills's office solicited proposals to run two pilot programs: one to upgrade the district's standard box lunch (for students whose schools are, for one reason or another, currently cafeteria-less) and the other to develop a central production kitchen where meals would be freshly cooked and from which they could be delivered to schools. The food-related stipulations in the two requests were stringent, as they now are for all district schools. DCPS wants all food to be as local and fresh as possible. Meals are to meet enhanced nutritional standards from the Institute of Medicine; be free of artificial preservatives, colors, flavors, and sweeteners; and contain no high-fructose corn syrup or trans fats. Milk must be either skim or one percent; every meal must contain fruits and vegetables (which, if canned, cannot be packed in oil or syrup); and juices must be 100 percent juice. Fried foods are verboten.

SCHOOL LUNCH LESSONS

FOR ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH SCHOOL FOOD, DCPS'S STIFF new requirements will be startling. Today's typical lunchroom landscape is one filled with the processed and the reheated: pizza, French fries, and chicken nuggets rule the land. Such fare is what young people want to eat, and thus it is what schools provide. A 2004 survey by the School Nutrition Association found pizza and chicken ("typically chicken nuggets") to be the most popular cafeteria entrees, and potatoes and corn to be the most popular vegetables.

The United States Department of Agriculture, which administers the school food program, does maintain nutrition regulations, albeit anachronistic and frequently

counterproductive ones. But the food sold in lunchrooms is not all necessarily part of the federal food program. Much of it is part of school-run “a la carte” vending that is not nutritionally regulated. A la carte lines — which schools open in order to generate extra cash and which hawk a variety of fast-food-cum-junk-food options — are humming along in 90 percent of middle schools and high schools and 75 percent of elementary schools. Students may buy as much as they like of whatever they like, a bizarre freedom that leads to the composition of disturbing menus; in school cafeterias across the land, a bag of Doritos and an ice cream sandwich is not an atypical noontime repast. The success of a la carte lines, however, can drag down sales of the traditional school lunch, which, unlike a la carte items, qualifies for federal reimbursements. School food-service directors want that federal money, so they’ve made the components of the reimbursable meals as similar to the a la carte items as possible while still adhering to USDA nutrition standards. Pizza and chicken nuggets, and French fries and corn to satisfy vegetable requirements, are the results.

The national school lunch program is big. On an average weekday during the 2008–09 school year, over 31 million American children ate a federally subsidized school lunch, and more than 19 million of them paid either a reduced price or nothing for their food. Every year, the U.S. government spends some \$11 billion on the lunch program, which includes subsidies for not just lunches but also breakfasts and after-school snacks. State funds are meager, and most school districts operate their food services by supplementing the federal subsidies, which often cover less than half of a district’s total costs (food, labor, facilities, etc.), with a la carte sales and vending machines, and by increasing the meal price for students who do not receive discounts.

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The history of the school lunch program is laden with the political wrangling and compromises that usually beset massive government initiatives, and as with other government initiatives, the results of the wrangling and compromises have tended to be sadly durable. The school lunch program has consistently been viewed and managed not primarily as a way to provide healthful meals to American children but as a salve for any number of national crises of the moment. When big changes are made to it, they reflect not so much common sense but political expediency. It can be downright striking just how few adjustments related to school food are actually catalyzed by concerns about *food*.

It all began in earnest during the Great Depression. Hunger and malnutrition were serious and growing problems, and some state and local governments had begun using state and local tax dollars to provide in-school lunch for students. The federal government became involved by way of agriculture. During the Depression, American farmers had drastically increased their production in order to compensate for the falling prices of goods; this overproduction pushed prices down even faster. President Franklin Roosevelt therefore developed a plan for the U.S. government to in effect set prices and make use of the surplus farm products by purchasing them and distributing them to the needy. This program was eventually taken over by USDA, which began transferring the extra food to schools. Janet Poppendieck explains in her book *Free for All* that “in keeping with its fundamental mission to expand the income of farmers and the market for their products, USDA’s regulations governing the receipt of surplus

commodities focused on making sure that the foods donated to schools would not reenter the market or displace other food sales.” Schools could receive USDA foodstuffs, then, but only if they agreed to keep and use all the commodities they got. Poppendieck continues:

The focus was on using the available foods, not on a balanced diet. The USDA staff who developed these regulations did not think they were setting up the parameters for a permanent national school food program. They had commodities; they needed a morally and politically acceptable outlet, and they established rules and procedures that reflected their farm income agenda. In fact, the regulations they established set the tone and structure for the program and have endured, in updated form, until the present.

Schools today order their USDA commodities from lists provided by their states (the states develop these lists by selecting products off USDA’s main inventory of some 180 items). Most of USDA’s commodity-purchasing power is still used to intervene in food markets — buying up tomatoes to help Florida farmers get through a rough winter, for instance — and so the commodities that USDA offers to schools still are not, for the most part, selected for their nutritional or food value. As in the 1930s, they are selected on the basis of agricultural markets. “The USDA on one hand manages the school food program and on the other hand they also manage agriculture,” said John Turenne, president of Sustainable Food Systems. “So school menus are in lots of ways determined by big business.” The White House chef Sam Kass noted last year that in 2003 the USDA spent almost a billion dollars on commodities for school lunch: “Two-thirds of that bought meat and dairy, with little more than one quarter going to vegetables that were mostly frozen; and we should not forget that potatoes are the top selling vegetable in our country.”

The USDA’s meal requirements and nutrition standards are also something of a relic. In 1944, an examination of the health of young men rejected for the draft found that large numbers of them suffered from significant nutrition deficiencies. Lewis B. Hershey, who directed the selective service at the time, said that such deficiencies afflicted about a third of the excluded men, an estimate which, publicized as it was in the midst of world war, indicated to many a national emergency in the making. Virginia Congressman John Flannagan responded to the news by expounding upon the fragility of democracy, which, he said, arose “from the loins of men of strong minds and bodies” and “will be preserved by the same kind of men.” Nutritionally inferior men, women, and children, the thinking went, would be unable to adequately defend and build the country.

Thus, the Recommended Dietary Allowances were developed, and the federal government soon turned to these RDAs to determine what types of meals served in local schools would be eligible for subsidies from Washington. When Congress passed the National School Lunch Act in 1946 — to “safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children” (“as a measure of national security”) and also “encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food” — it specified the sort of lunch students would receive: a lunch that, among other things, would provide one-third to one-half of a child’s RDAs. The “Type A Lunch,” as it was known, dictated school lunch patterns until the early 1970s. And today — despite myriad advances in food science and food culture, and despite the fact that America’s children of 2010 have very different dietetic needs than America’s children of 1946 — the Type A lunch continues to influence the government’s standards for and

requirements of school food.

REVOLUTIONARIES AND INCREMENTALISTS

IF IN MARCH you happened to catch the pilot episode of the English chef Jamie Oliver’s reality television show *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution*, you would have witnessed quite the scene: Preteen pupils in Huntington, West Virginia, one of America’s unhealthiest communities, chowing down in their school’s cafeteria on a breakfast of processed pizza.

That school food needs fixing is widely agreed upon. What those fixes should be and how they should occur is not. There are those like Oliver, the revolutionaries (“organic” and “local” are among their shibboleths), who believe that school meals need an immediate and wholesale renovation and that the U.S. government must make this happen; and then there are those who work for more incremental changes, who focus their efforts on improving one or two facets of the school food system — the USDA nutritional standards, say — at a time. (There are also those few who not unjustifiably think the government has made such a hash of feeding children that it ought to get out of the business altogether.) Occasionally these two groups overlap, but often, they seem to simply talk past one another.

The revolutionaries are more prominent than their incrementalist peers, in part because revolutions are more exciting than methodical progress, and in part because the school-lunch revolutionaries are often very prominent people, usually former chefs or restaurateurs. Oliver is a good example. A celebrity chef, he began in 2005 advocating for improved school food in the UK by initiating a “Feed Me Better” campaign, which attracted 271,000 signatures of support (Oliver delivered the signatures to then-Prime Minister Tony Blair) and brought pressure on the government to invest more money in pupils’ meals, which it eventually did. Another well-known, revolutionary chef who has made the transition from cuisine to cafeteria is Ann Cooper, who calls herself the “Renegade Lunch Lady.” Cooper is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and, in her fine-dining days, cooked, most notably, at the Putney Inn in Vermont. In 1999, she was asked to run the kitchen at the Ross School, a ritzy private institution in East Hampton, New York, and after several years there, years during which her work received serious publicity (Martha Stewart filmed a segment at the Ross School, for example), she took a position to direct food services for the Berkeley (California) Unified School District. She now runs food services in Boulder, Colorado.

Cooper is everywhere, speaking to rapt crowds, dashing off op-eds, penning and promoting books. She is nothing if not ardent about elevating the quality of school food, a project which she sees as a “social justice issue.” She has defined ideas and a rapid, aggressive way of presenting them. “What I came to understand,” she told an audience in 2007, “is we needed to teach children the symbiotic relationship between a healthy planet, healthy food, and healthy kids, and if we don’t do that, the antithesis, although we’ve heard otherwise, is we’re really going to become extinct because we’re feeding our children to death. That’s my premise.” For Cooper, improving school lunches is part of a larger struggle against the commoditization of food in general:

We have to start thinking about whether or not we should be or could be moving food 1,500 miles before we eat it. So we talk to kids about that and we really start to feed kids regional food. And then we talk about organic food. Now most school districts can’t really afford organic food, but we as a nation

have to start thinking about consuming, growing, and feeding our children food that's not chock full of chemicals. We can't keep feeding our kids pesticides and herbicides and antibiotics and hormones. We can't keep doing that. You know, it doesn't work.

Cooper believes that ensuring freshness should be priority number one. “You have to start with fresh foods,” she says. “The most important thing is to replace those highly processed foods.” But with school lunches currently so wanting for vegetables of *any* kind, why, I asked her, wouldn't it be sensible for cafeterias to stock a variety of frozen vegetables which, unlike their straight-from-the-farm counterparts, wouldn't spoil and might cost significantly less? “How about taste?,” she replied. “Frozen carrots do not taste like fresh carrots. What are we teaching kids? We should be teaching them about real food, what it tastes like. Not frozen, not processed.”

Alice Waters agrees. Waters is the renowned chef who in 1971 opened Chez Panisse restaurant and, with her commitment to local and seasonal cooking, began a sea change in the way restaurants approach food. She hopes to bring about a similar change in the way Americans approach the provision of school lunches. “We have to look for a real food transformation,” Waters told me. “It's a social justice issue. All children should be fed delicious meals that are good for them, at school, for free.” Food, Waters believes, has become disconnected from culture, more about “fueling up” than anything else. And young people have no connection to what they eat. “I'm terribly worried — one in ten children is going to have diabetes. We need to mobilize as if it were a war. We need everybody's help in the country.”

In its own work to improve school food, the White House has lately sought the involvement of chefs and restaurateurs. Last year, a cadre of Washington, D.C.-area chefs was asked by Michelle Obama's office to dine on lunches at local public schools and then report back on what they had seen and tasted. Cathal Armstrong of Restaurant Eve in Alexandria, Virginia, went to Tyler Elementary School in Southeast D.C. “They had barbeque ribs that day. A piece of mystery meat slathered with syrupy brown sauce, served with a brown whole wheat roll and a salad that no kids touched, and chocolate milk. It was terrible. I wouldn't feed that to my dogs, to be honest with you.” But unappealing as it may seem, isn't that mystery meat providing pupils with needed nutrition and calories? “It may meet a USDA standard,” Armstrong said, “but it's not food anymore — it's processed garbage.”

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The revolutionaries have done much good. Cooper, for instance, worked tirelessly to completely revamp school food in Berkeley, and the reviews of her labors there have been almost wholly positive. Through their individual reputations, the revolutionaries have brought significant attention to an issue — the sorry state of school lunches — that otherwise wouldn't get it, and they've shown that there are viable alternatives to the status quo pizzapalooza. Yet, occasionally, their advocacy drifts too far into idealistic waters. Sometimes they seem unmindful of the scale at which the school-food program operates. Other times their enthusiasm simply gets ahead of the reality. No one could justifiably claim that Alice Waters believes that nine-year-olds growing organic produce in playground gardens is the answer to the country's school-food

problems, but she does spend a *lot* of time talking about such gardens and extolling their virtues. Meanwhile, thousands of schools currently serve their pupils no leafy, green vegetables whatsoever. It would seem that the main concern should be getting some moderately tasty broccoli onto plates and getting kids to eat it; at this stage, whether that broccoli is local or organic or tended to by children seems sort-of beside the point.

Chefs and restaurateurs are understandably concerned about how food tastes, about the culture of eating, about teaching kids to differentiate a ramp from a leek and to enjoy both. Those I talked to are devoted to the Michael Pollan school of thought, so skillfully communicated in his books *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*: It is best to eat fresh, whole foods, to eat them in sensible quantities, and to avoid “nutritionism,” the unexamined idea that the way to understand a food is to understand its nutrients. Armstrong, for example, was in an anti-nutritionism spirit when he told me, referring to the USDA standards, “We’ve allowed nutritionists — pseudo-nutritionists — to define whole milk as an enemy, while all these chemicals in processed foods are no longer the enemy.”

Margo Wootan, the director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, has been mixed up in school lunch politics for decades, and she fervently opposes Armstrong’s assessment. “The people who place the emphasis just on food and ignore nutrition? No, I don’t agree with them,” she said. “Those people are wrong.” Unlike the revolutionaries, Wootan believes that school food programs are actually pretty good overall. “The school lunch and breakfast program provide the right balance of nutrients to children. But the food is not optimally nutritious. It needs to be better.” To that end, Wootan and her organization pushed Congress to increase reimbursement rates for school food, to improve school kitchen facilities, to encourage the purchase of local produce when possible, and to update national nutrition standards for snacks sold in school vending machines and a la carte lines. “One of our top legislative priorities,” Wootan said, “is to get the junk food out of schools.” In August, the Senate passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which takes big steps in that direction.

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Wootan pointed out that many people who have garnered so much spotlight for their school-food advocacy are not actually doing a lot of *effective* advocacy. “They are not doing the day-to-day work,” she said. “They are not up on the Hill everyday, lobbying Congress. They’re complaining about things, sure, but their solutions are not even in the realm of political possibility.” Take, for instance, the battle over reimbursement rates. The USDA currently reimburses schools \$2.72 for each free lunch they provide (for pupils who pay for their lunches, the reimbursement rates are lower), and that money is meant to help cover not only food but also facilities and labor costs. Almost everyone agrees that \$2.72 is not enough, and that the amount should be raised. Cooper thinks it needs to be raised by a dollar, and Waters, in a 2009 op-ed (written when the rate was \$2.57), called for the rate to be doubled: “How much would it cost to feed 30 million American schoolchildren a wholesome meal? It could be done for about \$5 per child, roughly \$27 billion a year, plus a one-time investment in real kitchens,” she wrote. Sounds good, but the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 that passed in the Senate would raise the reimbursement rate by just six cents. And that would be the

first noninflationary increase by Congress since 1973.

Wootan also defends the USDA from those who vilify it, noting that the agency “has been working over the last decade to improve the nutrition of commodities. If you look at the 180 commodities there’s a lot of healthy stuff. And how can you say you’re for ‘farm-to-school’ but then be against USDA managing the school lunch program?”

It is true that schools use even healthful USDA commodities in particularly unhealthy ways, by, say, ordering their commodity chicken in already-processed nugget form (which saves time and money on preparation and protects districts from potential lawsuits over food contamination) instead of as whole birds. But the USDA is a tough client to defend, and on this point, the revolutionaries are the realistic ones. In June, Sallie James, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute, called attention to a federal nutrition panel working to reform the USDA food pyramid; the panel had just released new dietary guidelines recommending that Americans eat fewer fatty meats. And yet just one day earlier, James pointed out, the USDA had announced plans to buy \$14 million worth of fatty dark-meat chicken in order to address a glut in chicken stocks. The purchase, Reuters reported, would “be used by food banks, school lunch programs, and other food assistance programs.” Incidents such as this give much credence to the contention that the USDA’s responsibilities — to balance agricultural markets and also provide healthful food to American children — are irreconcilably contradictory and that the school food program should be coordinated by another federal agency.

LOCAL CONTROL

THE SCHOOL FOOD program is a big government program, and major reforms to such behemoths do not typically come all at once. And powerful parties (agribusiness companies such as Tyson and Monsanto) have a real and clear reason to lobby lawmakers on Capitol Hill to keep the school food program from changing in any meaningful way.

Where visible and positive change on cafeteria plates has occurred it has occurred locally, with district food service directors who hope to meld the best ideas of the revolutionaries with the unglamorous work of the incrementalists. Jeff Mills may be a former restaurateur with a passion for local leaves, but he is also the food service director of a big public school district who must get things done, who must work within a bureaucracy to get kids fed everyday. Thus, he retains revolutionary ideas but looks to implement them where he can, when he can, and in savvy ways.

Mills told me that Tony Geraci, who runs school food in Baltimore, is a person whose strategy he particularly admires. Geraci has been on the job since 2008. In that time, he has discovered ways to pay less for certain local fruits and vegetables than for the same type of USDA commodities, has smartly played politics in order to change the contents of school vending machines and shift the profits away from principals and coaches and toward food programs, and continues to find methods of funding Great Kids Farm. He cares about food, and he thinks students should know where it comes from and how to cook it. He also cares about the bottom line and is committed to making Baltimore’s school lunch program not just more tasty and healthful but more efficient. He is a revolutionary working smartly within a far-from-revolutionary system. Baltimore schools chief executive, Andrés Alonso, told the *Washington Post* about Geraci, “Tony doesn’t have an ounce of cynicism about what’s possible. He’s new

enough that he hasn't been beaten down by compromise or failure.”

Alonso's description could easily be a description of Mills, who also appears so far unaffected by cynicism or despair. In August, DC Public Schools announced the two vendors selected to run the box lunch and central kitchen pilot programs: Revolution Foods was tapped to provide prepackaged meals to seven schools currently undergoing renovations and DC Central Kitchen to provide made-from-scratch meals to seven others. “The pilots are designed to create a more competitive environment for school food and to help us to assess what works best in terms of food quality and different methods of cooking,” Mills told the *Washington Post*. “We will then take the best practices of all our programs and apply them the following year.”

Three days after the start of the 2010–2011 school year, Mills invited me to lunch at Kelly Miller Middle School, one of the pilot-program schools for which DC Central Kitchen is now in charge of meals and where the organization does its cooking. In the back, peppy chefs chopped locally grown peaches and fresh vegetables. A man sautéed together buckets of diced summer squash, zucchini, and onions, and was about to add tomato chunks to the mixture, for one of the next day's lunch offerings, couscous salad. On today's menu was baked catfish, brown rice with peas and carrots, pico de gallo, and milk (skim or 1 percent). A vegetarian burrito was also on offer. The burrito was fine, as was the rice medley, and the pico de gallo was actually quite zesty. But the catfish — it tasted, literally, like dirt. Not earthy. Dirty. And the patrons were clearly displeased with the fare. I watched a young lady voluntarily assume the tedious task of removing each and every pea and carrot cube from her rice concoction, and when I asked the tables of students how they liked the food, the most-popular response was, “It's naaaaaasty!”

I informed Mills of the popular dissent. What if the students just won't eat this new, non-pizza food? He winced at first, then quickly regained optimistic form. “Oh, you know, they're in middle school, when it's cool to be negative about everything,” he replied with a smile. “They'll come around.” And then he returned contentedly to his catfish.

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