



What's for Lunch?

A review of school food and garden-based education in the United States using Portland Public Schools as a model for change

On April 13, 2008 Ecotrust and the Portland Culinary Alliance hosted a community conversation about school food and garden-based learning opportunities in Oregon. On April 17, 2008 the Grantmakers of Oregon and Southwest Washington hosted a conversation on sustainable agriculture in general, which included the topic of school food. This document summarizes the presentation made by Deborah Kane at both events. Please contact the author with any questions.

AUTHOR:
Deborah Kane
Food & Society Policy Fellow
Vice President, Food & Farms, Ecotrust
503.467.0763
dkane@ecotrust.org

CONTRIBUTOR:
Rose Hayden-Smith
Food and Society Policy Fellow
University of California,
Agriculture & Natural Resources
rmhaydensmith@ucdavis.edu

“Farm-to-School”

The phrase “farm-to-school” has been in use for more than a decade. It is defined by the National Farm-to-School Network as connecting “schools with local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing health and nutrition education opportunities that will last a lifetime, and supporting local small farmers.”¹ As the term grows in use and popularity, its meaning is increasingly debated among advocates. We’re trying to pack a lot of concepts into one catch phrase.

At first blush, you’d think the phrase meant bringing fresh products from farms to schools. Early efforts do routinely involve trying to bring more fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms into schools. Often, locally sourced fresh fruits and vegetables are incorporated into salad bar programs or are offered as a la carte items alongside the hot lunch entrée or main meal. But farm-to-school efforts are not limited to fresh fruits and vegetables. Increasingly advocates are focused on “center of the plate” items so as to incorporate more regionally sourced items into the main meal. Thus, farm-to-school efforts also include an emphasis on bringing healthy products from regional food processors and manufacturers into school cafeterias, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables.

Many believe the phrase carries inherent geographic exclusions. Certainly farm-to-school programs aim to procure more locally grown, processed, and manufactured products into the lunchroom. Yet “local” is defined many ways.

In Oregon, we recently asked the Oregon Legislature to allocate additional money to school food. Because we were requesting state resources, we placed a geographic restriction on our request and committed to only buying Oregon grown, processed, or manufactured products with the Oregon general fund dollars we requested. Others may draw a 100-mile radius around certain school districts, or define geographic ranges by region, not state boundaries.

Still other farm-to-school efforts are focused on the issue of “source identification,” or the ability to trace back to the point of origin all the foods we offer for consumption in our schools. Advocates also make a strong case for “clean labels” or processed products that don’t include excessive additives but rather wholly recognizable ingredients. The concept of “minimally processed” or “lightly processed” foods is akin to the notion of clean labels.

Beyond the products themselves, some farm-to-school programs include consideration for production practices, favoring products that are organically or sustainably produced.

¹ As of April 2008, it is estimated that there are nearly 2,000 such programs in the United States, operating in at least 38 states and serving more than 8,300 schools. For more information, visit www.farmtoschool.org

...and School Gardens

School gardens represent another very important aspect of farm-to-school programs. We posit that the child who has planted, tended, harvested, and then eaten kale in the school garden is much more likely to consume kale in the school cafeteria. Research supports this notion, and also proves additional benefits of school garden programs.² Thus it is neither possible nor desirable to isolate efforts in the cafeteria from garden- and food-based educational activities.

In gardens across America teachers are conducting history, culture, math, science, business, and language lessons. There is almost no subject that can't be taught in the garden. Gardens provide the experiential component that reinforces the value of the healthy food provided in the cafeteria through farm-to-school programs. In fact, school gardens enjoy a rich history in the United States, and have been used to improve academic performance and nutrition; as a tool to integrate instruction across the curriculum; as a means to beautify built-space and

increase cooperation; and to assist in a variety of reform efforts.³ In California, Assembly Bill 1535, the California Instructional School Garden Act of 2006, allocated \$15 million dollars in non-competitive grant funds for gardens in public schools; this has proven complementary to some farm-to-school programs.⁴

Field trips to farms and other food-oriented businesses are also often included in the phrase farm-to-school. Thus, curriculum integration of food, nutrition, garden, and agriculture-based learning opportunities is central to farm-to-school programs.⁵

2 For a summary of research studies discussing various aspects relating to the efficacy of school gardens, please visit www.csgn.org

3 For an excellent summary of the history of school gardens, please see Subramaniam, A. 2002. *Garden-Based Learning in Basic Education: A Historical Review* in the University of California Davis, 4-H Center for Youth Development Monograph Series, available at cyd.ucdavis.edu/publications/monograph.html

4 For information on California's Assembly Bill 1535, see Hayden-Smith, R. *From the Garden E-Brief: California Assembly Bill 1535 Funds Instructional Gardens for Public School*, March 2008. Internet. Available at www.foodandsocietyfellows.org/fellows.cfm?id=101910. Accessed 4 May 2008.

5 School garden experiences provide even greater efficacy and sustainability when situated within the larger context of home and community gardening opportunities.

Life-Long Healthy Eaters

At the most basic level, we're trying to create life-long healthy eating habits and children who will go on to make healthy choices long into adulthood. But behavioral change is complicated—it doesn't happen in isolation.

First we consider how our society is structured. We assume that if we want to influence individuals' behaviors, we have to simultaneously address the broader societal contexts in which the individual lives, works, and plays. With regard to children, that same concept might be framed as lives, learns, and plays.

To influence individual behaviors we must also influence social norms. We can't afford to just focus on changes in the lunchroom; we have to influence changes in the home, school, and community. Our work takes us to individual schools and school districts, yet we work at a state, regional, and national level simultaneously.

By necessity then, our conversation today will take us into the realm of school gardens, or trips to farms, or the food in the cafeteria, or the policy changes needed at the local, state, and federal level. You might hear stories about home canning, or teaching kids to cook at the farmers' market, or enabling low-income families to access and prepare more fresh fruits and vegetables. We may veer off

into topics related to the price of land, agricultural stability, and exports. We may talk about the Farm Bill and the commodity subsidies program. We might talk about health care, the obesity crisis, nutrition education, and how the rising cost of food is impacting what people eat today. Our conversation may take us well outside the walls of the school. All of these conversations and points are relevant to the topic of school food, because it is all interconnected.

In preparing my remarks, I was reminded of an expression: "If you don't know your history, you are destined to repeat it." I'd like to spend some time reviewing our shared history, as it relates to garden-based learning and school food. Certain aspects of our history might be worthy of repetition.

School Gardens of WWI & WWII



Today we have the Department of Homeland Security, but back in 1917 our federal government sponsored a national program called the U.S. School Garden Army (USSGA).⁶ The School Garden Army busied itself with encouraging urban and suburban youth to plant gardens for Uncle Sam. The program was housed within the federal Bureau of Education, with funding from the War Department. It represented one of the first attempts to nationalize a curriculum in the United States.⁷ In some respects, one could say it set a precedent for national programs like 'No Child Left Behind.' But in this case, it was 'Leave No Child Out of the Garden.'

The School Garden Army is significant and relevant to our current work because this was a school-based effort with strong linkages to home and family.⁸ The program provided a curriculum that emphasized gardening and

agricultural literacy in ways that integrated these topics across the school curriculum. (The very stuff we dream about today.)

Two statements frequently used by the School Garden Army were "He who produces is a patriot—a good citizen" and "A Garden for Every Child. Every Child in a Garden."⁹

6 For information about the United States School Garden Army, see Hayden-Smith, R. 2007. *Soldiers of the Soil: The Work of the United States School Garden Army During World War I* in *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, v. 6(1): 19-29; June 2007. Hayden-Smith, R., 2006. *Soldiers of the Soil: a historical review of the United States School Garden Army* in the *University of California Davis, 4-H Center for Youth Development Monograph Series*, available at cyd.ucdavis.edu/publications/monograph.html

7 Hayden-Smith, *Soldiers of the Soil: a historical review of the United States School Garden Army* in the *University of California Davis, 4-H Center for Youth Development Monograph Series*, available at cyd.ucdavis.edu/publications/monograph.html, pg. 2.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 5.

School Gardens of WWI & WWII continued

By the end of WWI, the USSGA estimated that several million American youth had enlisted as “soldiers of the soil.”¹⁰ American children had answered their nation’s call to service. From Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine, children gardened.¹¹ In Los Angeles alone it is estimated that children tended 13,000 different school gardens.¹² Students in Ventura, California raised and consequently sold so many potatoes that they literally depressed the local potato market!¹³

The U.S. School Garden Army came at a time when our country was experiencing the first real rural-to-urban migration patterns, with families moving into the cities from more rural environs. The School Garden Army was viewed as an opportunity to instill rural values in an increasingly urbanizing America.¹⁴ I find it amazing the parallels we can draw. In our recent legislative initiatives at the Oregon State House, we rallied around the farm-to-school bills as a viable strategy for bridging the rural urban divide.

And while much of the activity was of course focused at school, the U.S. School Garden Army had a parallel goal: It wanted to encourage home gardening as well.¹⁵ The USSGA suggested teachers conduct home visits in order to evaluate gardening efforts.¹⁶ School gardening and canning equipment was made available to families for home use and educational literature about gardening was provided to parents as part of the program.¹⁷

The School Garden Army was dismantled shortly after Armistice was signed. But gardening enjoyed a resurgence during WWII. While in WWI the great drive was to increase the production of food, by WWII the aim was to improve the quality of home food supplies and increase the health and vigor of our people and our allies.¹⁸ Improving family nutrition was the goal. The WWII-era “Food for Freedom” gardening campaign was a phenomenal success.¹⁹ Everyone gardened, or knew someone who did. Why did people so enthusiastically embrace Victory Gardens during WWII? Many believe it might have been because so many had gardened as children in the School Garden Army.²⁰

The government’s goal to improve the health of the nation was realized: At no time before or since have Americans consumed as many fruits and vegetables. A full 40 percent of all the fruits and vegetables consumed in the U.S. during WWII were raised in Victory Gardens.²¹

10 Ibid., 9.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 9.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 12.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid

21 Ibid. See also Bentley, Amy, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*. Urbana: University of Illinois, Press, 1998, pages 114-141. These statistics are culled from a variety of government agencies and Gallup polls conducted during WWII.

Early School Meal Programs



The federal government permanently authorized the National School Lunch Act in 1946.²² It required schools to serve lunches free or at a reduced price to children in need.

In many respects the National School Lunch Act of 1946 was a response to the need to fatten up our fighting boys. Our nation was coming off the Great Depression of the '30s, we had a war to fight in Europe, and our soldier stock wasn't as healthy as we might have liked. An investigation into the health of young men who had been rejected from the WWII draft revealed a connection between physical deficiencies and childhood malnutrition.²³ But the National School Lunch Act didn't happen overnight and wasn't solely a response to wartime needs for healthier recruits.

We were feeding children in school as early as the 1850s, with sporadic food services undertaken by private societies and associations interested in child welfare.²⁴ While a variety of reform efforts had focused

22 For an excellent history of school lunch programs, see excerpts from Gunderson, Gordon W. *The National School Lunch Program Background and Development*, FNS-63 Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, available at www.cde.state.co.us/cdenutritran/download/pdf/SEC26.pdf

23 In general, wartime drafts become a census of male health, and by extrapolation, the health of the general population. Food Resource and Action Center. National School Lunch Program. www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/nslp.html

24 Gunderson, Gordon W. *The National School Lunch Program Background and Development*, FNS-63 Food and Nutrition Service, USDA

Early School Meal Programs continued

on improving the lives of American youth, a single book published during the Progressive Era influenced and informed our societal sense of responsibility for feeding school children.²⁵

In 1904, Robert Hunter published a muckraking book entitled *Poverty*, in which he addressed this prevalent and seemingly intractable problem in American life; he estimated that at least 13% of the American population was poor. Hunter argued for providing meals to needy children in school. He wrote:

“the poverty of any family is likely to be most serious at the very time when the children most need nurture, when they are most dependent, and when they are obtaining the only education they will ever receive...Learning is difficult because hungry stomachs, languid bodies and thin blood are not able to feed the brain. It is utter folly, from the point of view of learning, to have a compulsory school law which compels children, in that weak physical and mental state which results from poverty, to drag themselves to school and to sit at their desks, day in and day out learning little or nothing. If it is a matter of principle in democratic America that every child shall be given a certain amount of instruction, let us render it possible for them to receive it, by making full and adequate provisions for the physical needs of the children who come from the homes of poverty.”²⁶

According to Hunter (and other Progressive reformers), society placed emphasis on and took responsibility for educating children, yet children arrived at school unfit to learn. Thus, society had a corollary obligation to ensure that children were capable of learning. Therefore, society had an obligation to account for the physical needs of its children, most notably the need to be adequately nourished so that they could learn.

In Boston, Milwaukee, New York, Cleveland, and cities throughout America, there are examples from the 1900s of school boards, philanthropists, and civic and social organizations rallying to the cause.²⁷ In Cincinnati, Ohio, penny lunches were served; each item was sold for a penny. A typical lunch in Cincinnati included a hot meat sandwich, baked sweet potato, oranges, candy balls, and graham crackers.²⁸

The challenge in rural environments, where facilities were limited and students traveled great distances to attend school, was great. One ingenious official in Wisconsin devised the ‘pint-jar method’ where students were encouraged to bring items such as soup in pint jars. The pint jars were placed in a bucket of water on top of the room heater or stove, and by lunch time the contents of the jars were piping hot.²⁹

Under varied means of support and with great ingenuity, school lunch programs across the country expanded during the 1920s and into the 1930s; by 1931, there were 64,500 cafeterias in operation throughout the country.³⁰

The depression years of the 1930s deepened the concern over hunger and malnourishment among schoolchildren, and many states and municipalities adopted legislation, some of them including appropriation, to enable schools to serve noonday meals to students.³¹ While state and local legislation authorized local school districts to provide meals for children, it soon became apparent that local governments and school boards alone could not provide the funds necessary to carry the increasing load.³² The need for aid from federal sources to remedy the situation became inevitable at a time when the federal government, under the new leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (elected 1933), was beginning to rethink its role of non-intervention, which had been the policy under President Herbert Hoover.

25 The Progressive Era in America is generally regarded as the period between the 1890s and 1920s. The period was characterized by the emergence of a variety of reform efforts that altered the social and political structure of America. Progressive reform efforts included, but were not limited to, pure food and drug movements, compulsory education, prohibition, female suffrage, attempts to improve working conditions and reduce childhood labor, civic beautification, etc.

26 Ibid., 26.3. (Citing Hunter, Robert. *Poverty*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1904).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 26.6.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 26.7.

31 Howard L. Briggs and Constance C. Hart, *From Basket Lunches to Cafeterias – A Story of Progress*, *Nation's Schools*, No. 8, 1931: 51–5.

32 Gunderson, “National School Lunch Program Background and Development,” 26.7.

Early School Meal Programs continued

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were millions of unemployed and underemployed Americans.³³ Simultaneously there were agricultural surpluses because farmers could not find markets for their goods. During this time, school lunch programs were used to solve both problems. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), charged with finding people gainful employment, dispatched American women to school kitchens to provide labor for the cooking and serving of lunch. With much of the labor provided without cost to a school district, lunch prices were held to a minimum. Many more children participated in the school lunch program and the natural outcome was a very rapid expansion of the program throughout the nation. By 1941, the WPA was operating school lunches in every state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.³⁴

At the same time, legislation in 1935 authorized the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to purchase surplus farm commodities and distribute them to the school lunch program. Crops that were in surplus supply were purchased by the government and diverted from normal channels of trade so as to remove price-depressing surplus foods from the market. Goods such as surplus pork, dairy, and wheat were then disposed of through exports and domestic donations to, for example, school meals programs.

But at the time, the federal government's involvement was largely framed on a year-to-year basis, with one piece of impermanent legislation after another. The sense that federal support for school meals programs might be discontinued at any time limited the program's growth. Thus, in 1946, President Truman signed into law the first permanent legislative authority that created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)—the one we have today.

Section 2 of the Act defines its purpose: the Act was considered a "measure of national security, ... (and intended to) safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children."³⁵ By 1949, the Commodity Assistance Program for the NSLP was authorized to supplement price support and surplus removal programs. In 1966, the school breakfast program was established under the Child Nutrition Act (CNA).

In 1968, President Nixon established the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) as part of the United States Department of Agriculture to operate federal food programs. Today, the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program is housed within the Child Nutrition Program of the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service division. The legislation that authorizes the school meals program is reauthorized every five years, and naturally changes over time. Sometimes the changes are subtle, other times profound.

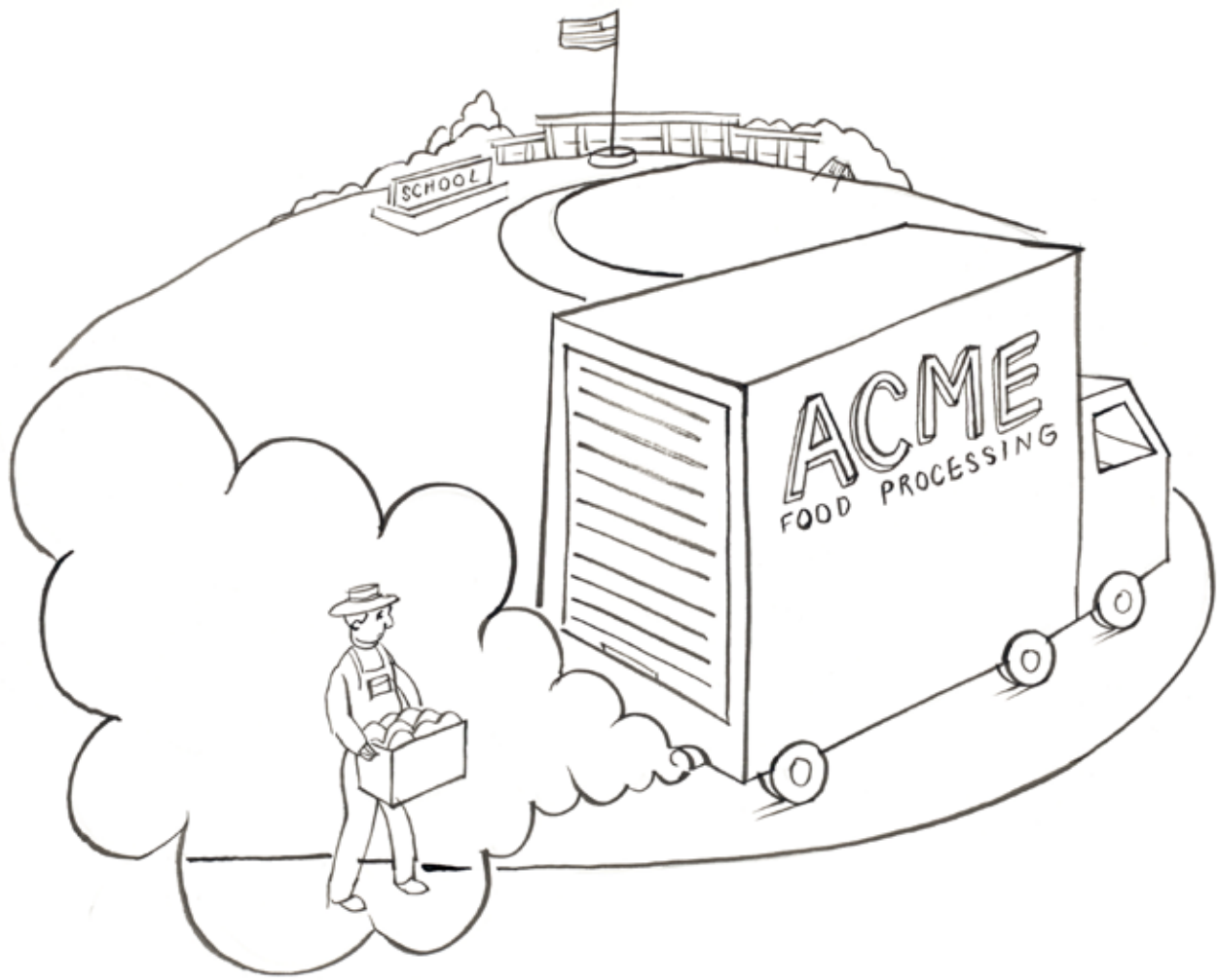
All of this history seems so critical to understanding today's reality. Today in Oregon, 53% of the students who participate in the school lunch and breakfast program do so via the free or reduced meal program. They might be considered the very same children that Robert Hunter referenced in 1904, 104 years ago.

33 When Roosevelt took office in 1933, unemployment had risen from 8 to 15 million (approximately 1/3 of the non-farmer workforce). Leuchtenburg, William E. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963, passim.

34 Roberts, Susan Lynn, *School Food: Does the Future Call for New Food Policy or Can the Old Still Hold True?*, *Drake Journal of Agricultural Law*, Fall 2002, Volume 7., No. 3.

35 It is interesting that in America, food production and distribution (including gardening) — and the feeding of children — were viewed as an issue of national security, at least during the first half of the twentieth century. The reference to "national security" framed the school, home and community garden programs that were sponsored by the government during WWI and WWII.

1980s and 1990s



Fast forward our history lesson to the 1980s and 1990s, a period of time during which the school meals program changed considerably from its original form.

While in the early 1930s the Public Works Administration had cafeterias full of people cooking and canning surplus commodities, over the years the administrative support to school meals shrank. When there wasn't enough money to adequately fund core academic programs, cafeterias were often the first place cuts were made.

School gardens and healthy lunches, rather than being viewed as integral to the creation of responsible and patriotic citizenry, have, over time, been deemed largely an afterthought. As Alice Waters of Berkeley, California has said, "cafeterias became the most neglected classroom in the school."

During the Reagan administration, the school lunch program budget was cut for the first time in history.³⁶ In fact, even though there was an increase in the number of children qualifying for free and reduced lunches due to high unemployment and a poor economy, participation in the program decreased because prices for lunches had to be increased.

By the 1980s and 1990s, schools across the country were increasingly outsourcing the production of meals. Rather than employing high-wage, high-skilled workers, in the face of budget cuts, increasing regulation, and food safety and food handling liabilities, food production was increasingly handled by vendors outside the school. As school cafeterias became heat-and-serve operations, new schools were built that literally did not have functional kitchens.

1980s and 1990s continued

Consolidating operations outside the schools, along with many other factors, made it harder and harder for individual farmers to work with schools. Add to the issue of consolidation the fact that school food-service operations had so little money to work with, and many independent family farmers with wholesale quantities of products routinely consumed by schools simply stopped trying to sell to schools. School food was not viewed as a viable market—prices were just too low.³⁷

Yet, even while it became increasingly difficult to make ends meet in the cafeteria with the funds received from the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program, some cafeterias across America were actually turning a profit through increased sales of a la carte items, also known as “competitive foods.”³⁸ It became increasingly common to see unregulated branded products from major national companies sold alongside regulated offerings of the National School Lunch and Breakfast program. In some cases, unregulated items were sold via vending machines; in others, whole sections of the cafeteria were dedicated to “parallel offerings”—items offered alongside the regulated school meal program. Those students who could afford to do so often chose items from the a la carte line while foregoing the subsidized federal foods.³⁹

The federal school meal program thus had to compete with food items that were often perceived by children as the more attractive option. The school cafeteria began to mimic the increasingly “grab and go” lifestyle of the typical American family.

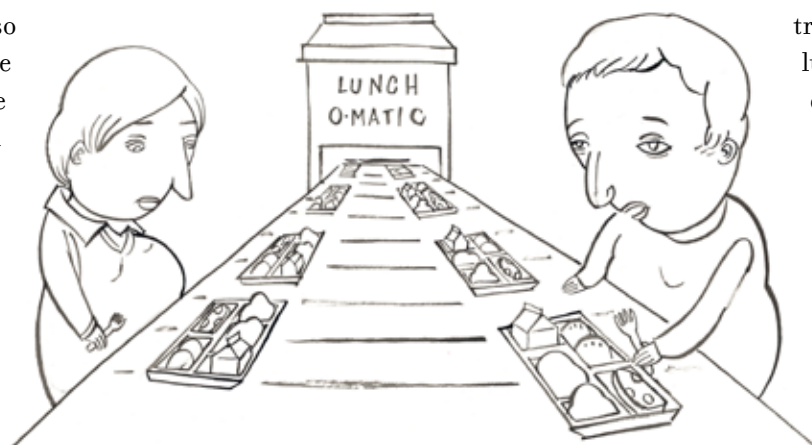
During the 1980s and 1990s, federal nutrition policies began to reflect the increasing awareness of the complex relationships between diet choices and health. In 1980, the USDA, along with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHS), published the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the federal government’s most compre-

hensive recommendations for healthy eating. Yet it took some time for those same federal guidelines to find their way into the schools. In fact, a 1992 study showed that school lunches and breakfasts far exceeded the recommendations for fat, saturated fat, and sodium made by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.⁴⁰

Thus, in 1994, the Healthy Meals for Americans Act required that by 1996 school food programs provide meals that were consistent with the federal government’s own guidelines for healthy eating. Note that school meals are required to meet two sets of nutrition requirements. The first, established during WWII, reflected wartime concerns about getting enough food;

the War Food Administration required school lunches that received donated commodities to provide one third of the recommended daily allowances (RDAs) for protein, calories, and a short list of vitamins and minerals.

As health concerns shifted to the perils of over-consumption and unhealthy consumption, schools were required to reduce fat to no more than 30% of total calories and saturated fat to 10% or less. Reducing fat to 30% or less of calories, while maintaining 1/3 RDAs is no easy feat. In short, if you reduce the fat, it is hard to maintain the calorie minimums. The quickest, least expensive fix is actually to add sugar!⁴¹



37 Most of the support provided to schools through the NSLP comes in the form of a cash reimbursement for each meal served. Reimbursement rates for the time period July 1, 2007 – June 30, 2008 were as follows: free lunches - \$2.47, reduced-price lunches \$2.07, paid lunches - \$.23.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 603-604.

40 Ibid., 597-598.

41 Poppendieck, Jan. 2007. Speech presented at the Urban School Meals Institute Meeting, May 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia.

1980s and 1990s continued



By 2004, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act provided regulations to strengthen nutrition programs and promote healthy choices among children. Specifically, it requires that local wellness policies be designed and implemented at the local level.

What do we want from our school meals program today? The school lunch program is now 62 years old. Certainly it has changed and evolved over the years and there is now renewed interest in the program. Certainly many are asking questions about its efficacy.

Some who work on food systems issues often refer to a food system that is out of control, one that is characterized as a 'runaway train.' The same can be said for the school food landscape. As budgets shrank, food costs rose, yet the dollars assigned to school meals remained relatively static or were cut. Increased regulation to ensure that kids were getting what they needed all contributed to some unintended negative consequences. It became easier for school food operations to outsource meal preparation. Over the years, we've been cooking in schools less and less. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, we saw unprecedented

involvement from branded products companies in our schools. Uncle Sam had been replaced by Ronald McDonald.

Increasingly, communities across America have decided it is time to stop the runaway train. The pendulum has swung. We've gone from Uncle Sam to Ronald McDonald and his pals and now we're realizing that there is a role for community activists, parents, teachers, the health care community, the business community, state legislators...everyone. Many individuals and organizations have contributed to the sense that we're going to be able to stop the runaway train.

Today, the National Farm-to-School Network reports that there are active farm-to-school programs in 38 states, representing almost 2,000 programs.⁴² It is estimated that 8,354 schools are involved, in 1,910 school districts.⁴³ These figures vastly underestimate the degree to which farm-to-school programs have spread throughout the United States in the last decade.

Here in Portland, Oregon, and throughout the region in general, our efforts are impressive. Our own timeline is rich with accomplishments and milestones that have set the stage for creating life-long healthy eaters in our community. Using Portland Public Schools (PPS) as a case study, our experience likely mimics that of other school districts throughout the country.

⁴² National Farm-to-School Network online. Available from www.farmtoschool.org. Internet: accessed 3 May 2008.

⁴³ Ibid.

Portland Public Schools

Portland's history mirrors what was taking place across the country. While at one time schools boasted fully functional kitchens and plenty of staff to bake bread from scratch, over time the district consolidated its operations within a centralized kitchen. There, meals were made and distributed out to individual schools. Today, the central kitchen is more distribution warehouse and storage facility than kitchen, as the great majority of meals dispersed out to individual schools are classic 'heat and serve' entrées prepared and frozen somewhere else.

Also, tracking national trends, in the late 1980s, Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services (PPSNS) was focused on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and implemented these dietary recommendations into all school meals. PPSNS also instituted a department wellness program which encouraged staff to act as good role models. "Training Tables" were set up in all high schools that highlighted how high school athletes could eat low-fat, well-balanced meals at school. Sheggy Good Grub and Sickly Spot educational programming was incorporated into elementary school classrooms to help children make healthy choices. In recognition of these and many other programs, PPSNS was awarded the USDA's Western Regional Award of Excellence for Outstanding Programming.

By the mid 1990s, self-serve fruit and vegetable bars were in place at all schools throughout the district. By 2005, the district began to craft a wellness policy and partnered with chef/garden educator Linda Colwell to begin a pilot farm-to-school program at Abernethy Elementary in Southeast Portland. The farm-to-school program at Abernethy, which continues today, includes a cafeteria component, where meals are cooked on site; the outdoor Garden of Wonders; and curriculum integration that weaves garden and nutrition-based themes into history, culture, math, and many other subjects at the school.⁴⁴

Also in 2005, the district discontinued the sale of all snack foods and a la carte items in all school cafeterias. By 2006, with a rigorous district-wide wellness policy in place, PPSNS applied new nutrition guidelines to vending machines, student stores, and fundraising efforts that disallowed all soda, sports drinks, and other sugary beverages, and greatly restricted the types of snacks offered. And at the end of the 2005-2006 school year,

after many years of purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables primarily through wholesale produce distributors, third-generation farmer Sam Pollock partnered with PPSNS and donated 44,000 Oregon-grown watermelons to Portland Public Schools.

PPSNS continues to prioritize purchases from local farmers in general and also specifically through its Harvest-of-the-Month program, an effort designed to feature seasonal products from regional producers on a bi-weekly basis. In 2007, PPSNS developed a protocol for tracking the volume of local products offered in its cafeterias, and now monitors its progress against the baseline developed in 2007.

By December of 2007, Portland Public Schools' Wellness Policy was highlighted in the latest edition of the American Association of School Administrators newsletter, putting PPSNS "well ahead of the curve" nationally in school meal quality, healthfulness, and accessibility. In January 2008, PPSNS Nutrition Services Director Kristy Obbink earned top honors from the National School Nutrition Association, recognizing the district's progressive policies and changes to improve food served to Portland students. Obbink's elimination of snack foods in schools, her influential support for state-legislated school nutrition standards and farm-to-school funding, and her careful budget management made her an outstanding candidate for the Foodservice Achievement Management Excellence Award.

What's on the horizon for Portland Public Schools? With the Harvest-of-the-Month program entering its third school year, attention is now focused on creating "local lunch" entrée items, heightened scrutiny regarding "clean labels," and a deep commitment to continuing to set a new standard for how urban school food-service operations can meet the evolving needs of their communities.

Portland's Community of Supporters



Portland Public Schools' many successes related to changing the school food environment and providing experiential learning opportunities for children are directly tied to the efforts of numerous community partners.

On the school gardening side, organizations such as Growing Gardens and many others have provided invaluable garden-based learning opportunities for youth throughout the Portland metropolitan area since the late 1990s and early 2000s. In addition to institutionally supported programs, individual parents at schools throughout the region have started and maintained school gardens. These gardens are supported by organizations such as Slow Food Portland, community businesses, PTA fundraisers, and volunteer efforts; each represents a tremendous labor of love. It is estimated that there are at least 46 active school gardens in the Portland Public School system. Whether

at Kelly Elementary, Whitaker Middle School (where Growing Gardens has been active), Atkinson Elementary or Trillium Charter School, children in Portland tend garden plots on school grounds.

All over the city there are examples of students gardening and farming at remote locations as well. For example, Learning Gardens Lab, an 11-acre parcel of public land managed by Portland State University, serves as a learning laboratory for students at Lane Middle School and others. And middle school students from Sunnyside and Lewis, two southeast Portland schools, get to visit and work on Jean's Farm. Jean's Farm is situated on an idyllic acre adjacent to the banks of Johnson Creek, on property that was once owned by Jean Johnson's grandfather, the man for whom Johnson Creek is named.

Portland's Community of Supporters continued

Field trips to farms and/or hands-on educational experiences are provided by organizations such as Janus Youth Programs, Friends of Zenger Farm, Tryon Life Community Farm, the Organic Education Center at Luscher Farms, and the Sauvie Island Center. Interest in learning on farms is on the rise, with local programs growing to meet demand every year. At Friends of Zenger Farm, for example, the number of youth visits has doubled in the last three years, with the nonprofit currently hosting more than 3,000 youth visits each year and working with more than sixty schools and youth organizations.

By 2006, it was apparent that there were so many great projects and programs underway in Portland that increased coordination and sharing of resources and information among the groups was a logical next step. To this end, community partners began meeting and networking with one another more formally in the conference room of the Portland Schools Foundation, which now serves as the fiscal agent for the Portland Farm-to-School and School Garden coalition. At one such meeting in early 2007, coalition members determined that statewide policy changes might present an opportunity to catalyze more widespread change.

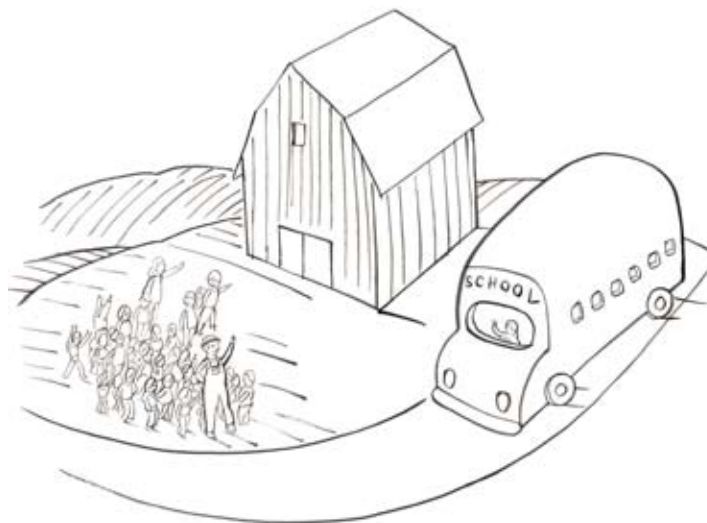
Indeed, during the 2007 legislative session, the Oregon State Legislature grappled with issues related to school food and passed House Bill (HB) 2650, known as the "Junk Food Bill," thereby tightening nutrient standards for food served in schools. The Oregon State Legislature also heard a trio of farm-to-school bills designed to (a) create a single focus position within the Department of Agriculture to ready the Oregon agricultural community to work with Oregon schools (HB 3307); (b) allocate up to seven cents per meal served to incorporate Oregon

agricultural products into the lunchroom (HB 3476); and (c) provide resources to schools throughout the state to start or maintain school gardens (HB 3185). The farm-to-school bills unanimously passed both the sub and full House Education Committees and were subsequently referred to the Joint Ways and Means, where they died.

Yet the statewide support and momentum for the approach represented by the trio of bills inspired the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) to create a new Farm-to-School position and engendered the Oregon State Farm-to-School and School Garden Network, a broad-based coalition of more than forty governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

In August of 2007, Ecotrust was selected as the National Farm-to-School Network's Regional Lead Agency, with

responsibilities for coordinating farm-to-school and school garden efforts in an eight-state western region. And finally, with regard to one last notable milestone, in December 2007, the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund at the Northwest Health Foundation authorized a grant to Ecotrust that will test the theories inherent in HB 3476. Specifically, resources provided by the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund will be used to spend an additional seven cents per meal to incorporate Oregon agricultural products into food served in two school districts (Portland and Gervais) during a specific period of time throughout the 2008-2009 school year.



Portland's Community of Supporters **continued**

During the 2008 mid-term session, the Oregon State Legislature passed HB3601A, creating a full time Farm-to-School position within the Oregon Department of Education, making Oregon the first state in the nation to have a farm-to-school focus within its Department of Education and Department of Agriculture.

In closing, I offer my whole hearted congratulations to all of us. That we have accomplished so much together in such a short period of time is a testament to this community's collective spirit and individual passions.

The train is off its tracks. The conductor decided to take a detour as he blazed through the lush Willamette Valley and blossoming Columbia River Gorge; the bounty proved too much to resist. Last time we checked, school children were tending verdant garden plots in the field where the train was derailed.



The author would like to thank the following individuals.

Eben Dickenson for his amazing illustrations (www.ebendickinson.com).

Rose Hayden-Smith for arriving just when she did with her huge, generous heart and spirit.

An anonymous angel whose early support of this work made all the difference in the world.

Ecotrust's farm-to-school work is generously supported by:

Kaiser Permanente Community Fund at the Northwest Health Foundation

Lamb Foundation

Northwest Health Foundation

Annie's, Inc.

Kettle Foods

Organically Grown Company

**Additionally, the following companies support
Ecotrust's Food & Farms program overall:**

Burgerville

Cooking Up a Story

New Seasons Market

Olsen Family Vineyards

Organic Valley

Truitt Brothers Inc.
