



On Making School Lunch Part of the Academic Curriculum



Adapted from a speech delivered
by Alice Waters at the
Time ABC News Summit On Obesity.
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FORTY YEARS AGO we had a preview of today's obesity crisis: A presidential commission told us that children weren't fit enough for the New Frontier—and we did something about it. The country responded. We launched a physical fitness program in the public schools: we built new gymnasiums and tracks and play grounds, we bought new equipment, we trained new P.E. teachers. And we made physical education a required part of the curriculum at schools at every level. Students got credit for it.

I know from experience that a lunch-centered curriculum can change lives. I know this from the ten-year experiment we have at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley, California. I believe we need a similar curriculum in every school district in the country, not just serving school lunch, but teaching it, as an academic subject.

King is a public school with about 950 students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Our program, called The Edible Schoolyard, includes a one-acre organic garden, and a kitchen classroom. In the garden, the students are involved in all aspects of planting and cultivation. In the kitchen classroom, they prepare, serve, and eat food, some of it from their own garden. These activities are woven into the entire curriculum and are part of every school day.

A new cafeteria is now under construction at King. When the cafeteria is complete, lunch will also be an everyday, hands on experience for everyone in the school, enlivening the lunch period with the potential for learning and enjoyment. The garden and the kitchen are already woven into the curriculum. Math classes measure the garden beds, science classes study drainage and soil erosion. History classes learn about pre-Columbian civilizations from grinding maize. English classes write recipes. Drama classes do improvisational cooking.

We can try to improve diets all we want by making school lunches more nutritious and getting the Coke machines out of the hallways, but that only gets us part way there. We can't be sure the kids are even eating, let alone understanding what nourishment is all about. Kids tend to be wary of unfamiliar foods—besides, they can always buy packaged junk after school. And the kids who need a good lunch the most are the least likely to take advantage of it, especially if it's only offered in a take-it-or-leave-it way.

But when lunch is offered as a valuable, enriching, hands on experience, a course that children and teachers share and enjoy—and when they follow food from the garden to the kitchen to the table—something amazing happens. They want to taste everything! They get lured in by something beautiful, something that smells good, something that appeals to their senses.

Every year, King School surveys all the students to find out what their favorite classes are. Out of all forty courses, physical education comes in first and The Edible Schoolyard ranks number two. It's clear that this is something positive. This is not like a Spartan diet to which kids have to conform. We're not trying to scare them about the health consequences of this or that kind of food. We're teaching another kind of relationship with food. And since so many kids don't eat at home with their families any more, it's up to the public school system to reach each child in a meaningful way. From kindergarten to college, students can learn fundamental truths about where food comes from, about actions and consequences, about the importance of stewardship of the land, and the civilizing and socializing effect of the table.

What we're doing now is building a demonstration project, called The School Lunch Initiative, to prove that this kind of experiential education is truly a viable option. The Initiative will transform the school lunch program of the entire Berkeley Unified School District, with sixteen schools and nearly 10,000 students, in a collaboration with the Berkeley School Board, the Center for Ecoliteracy, Children's Hospital Oakland Research Institute, and the Chez Panisse Foundation.

This is a revolutionary way of thinking about food and education—it's what I call a Delicious Revolution.

Partners and collaborators in the School Lunch Initiative at Berkeley include:



www.chezpanissefoundation.org



www.berkeley.k12.ca.us



www.ecoliteracy.org



www.edibleschoolyard.org



www.chori.org