

The Issue of Nutrition in Our School Meals

By Carolyn Schwartz

On a daily basis I walk into Knox Elementary School and see the first meal of the day being served to schoolchildren in Knox, Indiana. Doughnuts, pop-tarts and cookies accompanied with chocolate milk are the typical fare. I could almost tolerate this if the next meal at lunchtime was not comprised of an abundance of saturated fats also accompanied by chocolate milk. These fats hide in such foods as pizza, chicken nuggets, hot dogs and corn dogs. Why we are dumping all of this junk into the bodies of little children is an ongoing dilemma to me. A change needs to be made in the diet of most Americans and the schools would be a logical place to start.

Before the age of twenty-one, I was a victim of the "Hostess generation." We had Hostess Ho-Ho's, Hostess Twinkies, Hostess pies, etc. I would pour sugar on cereal and let it sink to the bottom and then eat it by the spoonful with leftover milk. My teeth hurt now just thinking about it. I know my Mom offered me vegetables and fruits, but they were not as enticing. Interestingly, my brother grew up right along with me, but preferred oranges and yogurt to my stream of sugar. I have come to see that eating sugar is truly addictive. The more you eat, the more you want. Just like other addictions, some people have more of a problem than others. Our society seems more accepting of this addiction.

Thankfully, I began to educate myself by reading about nutrition. Over the last twenty-six years, I have continually upgraded my diet to the point where I prefer organically grown produce that is not genetically modified. I also prefer meat that has been raised organically and not given antibiotics or growth hormones. I realize for many people this is extreme. It is just an outgrowth of my quest to understand my childhood eating habits. As I upgraded my diet over the years I

still found I craved sugar. It was not until my husband died two years ago that I was forced to confront this head on. I knew in order to stay sane I would have to make dramatic changes in my life. I was keenly aware that sugar gave me the “sugar blues.” I could not afford to be held down emotionally and so I took swift action and cut sugar out of my diet. Being human, I had relapses, but for the most part I recognized that I did not feel as well nor did I think as clearly when I gave in and ate sugar.

My own self study is what has made me sensitive to this issue in the lives of schoolchildren. I have experienced dramatic changes in my life by breaking free from traditional thought. In Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, cave dwellers only had a taste of reality. They experienced shadows of what was real. They had to travel through a tunnel and surface to see life as it truly was. Once the cave dwellers had been fully exposed to the light they returned to the cave to educate others. It is my time to do this.

Change is difficult and I see several obstacles keeping change from taking place. The first revolves around the fact that it is easier not to change. We are creatures of habit and the alleged school nutrition program seems to run itself. Then there is the issue of the media in our society. Several generations have now grown up being indoctrinated with commercials that tell us what we must have. These commercials always promote processed foods that are high in sugars and fats as well as dyes. The appeal of these foods is strong and even with a great deal of education and knowledge in our society we seem to be fighting an uphill battle. Other obstacles revolve around issues of money, on the side of profit for the companies making the food and on the side of the schools not wanting to spend it. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is ignorance. We are ignoring the reality of what is happening to the minds and bodies of future generations.

I have heard two illogical arguments that reveal a deep apathy toward the subject. Many feel the children would still be getting junk at home, so why provide anything different at school. Others feel the children who receive proper nourishment at home are unaffected emotionally or physically by the school meals so why change them.

I feel it is a travesty that many of the poorer children are dependent upon the school meals to supply nutrition. The families who are more affluent do not seem to care about the condition of the poorer families. Often these poorer families are riddled with more pronounced problems of addictions and domestic abuse. Clearly, there exists a prejudice against many of these families. For those in the school who claim to believe in the teachings of Jesus, we are propelled onward by the Sermon on the Mount. If we are to truly care about everyone in our community we must heed those words. Jesus told us to love others and to be giving. If we have an understanding of something that would make the lives of others better and we keep it to ourselves then we are not truly disciples. We are in fact hypocrites seeking to glorify ourselves instead of honoring God. I think we can make the lives of schoolchildren better by teaching them to care for the only body they will ever have by eating properly. Then we should supply the proper food.

The issue of battling the power of the media is a tough one. Children are bombarded all of their lives by an industry full of lies. Since so many companies are trying to turn a profit on the backs of our children our voices will not easily quiet this louder one. Hopefully, we can again turn to the sayings of Jesus. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. . . . Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." We have to trust that truth will win out over lies.

The media as an obstacle ties in with the issue of money. These same companies that are coming into our homes with false notions of grandeur about their food products are the ones who are funneling their products into the schools. Much money is at stake. Presently, there are 29 million children eating federally subsidized lunches (Philpott). This market is pretty well saturated. However, there are only nine million eating breakfasts in the school programs (Philpott). This leaves it wide open for more processed food ideas and concoctions to be dumped into this venue. We can deduce that these companies will not attract more recipients of their breakfast foods by making them legitimately nutritious. We must realize these programs were first started to feed the hungry. Kitchens were put into the schools to be able to achieve that goal. Then funds were restricted and most school kitchens simply began to “heat up” the food instead of preparing it. The vast majority of the food is chosen for ease of preparation and shelf life. Thus, the argument can be made that it costs too much to renovate the kitchen infrastructures and serve healthier foods. Sacrifices will have to be made. Money will have to be spent. Change will be slow but is absolutely necessary.

Stated in the simplest form, we have to stop the deluge of sugar and fat into our bodies. . For the attempts at education to be successful, we must explain the reasons why sugars and fats are harmful. My daughter, who is in the sixth grade, explained that she had learned about the food pyramid in elementary school. Obviously, that model allows for little sugar and fat. She added that they were not taught the reasons why. If we are to give our full attention to the children and to this effort, we need to give detailed explanations as to why our bodies succumb to disease. Refined sugars cause disease mostly by forming unstable oxygen molecules known as “free radicals.” These unstable molecules bombard cells thousands of times a day. This causes the cells to break down, leading to weakness. This weakness causes cell mutation or even the

death of the cell. This barrage on a healthy body degrades the immune system. Once the immune system is weakened the body is ripe for disease and abnormality.

Strengthening the immune system is the most powerful way to help the body resist disease. We must educate our children on how to do this. We know obesity also puts a strain on our immune system. It is so profound that a diet full of nutrients can help our minds and bodies function better. We cannot ignore this any longer. It is estimated that thirty to forty percent of first graders in this country will develop diet related diabetes. Nancy Appleton, Ph.D., has written a book called *Lick the Sugar Habit*. In her research, she found many dangers of sugar. She found that sugar feeds cancer cells, reduces learning capacity, causes depression and can lead to alcoholism. There is even evidence that a lifetime of eating sugar can lead to the development of Parkinson's disease (Mercola).

Many teachers have requested that more nutritious food be served. This is met with silence. In addressing the lack of desire on the part of administrators to delve deeper into this issue, it must be pointed out that in many communities and states around the country there is an awakening. As Plato spoke of in Allegory of the Cave people coming up through the tunnel into the light are going back among the cave dwellers to educate. Change is taking place and that is encouraging.

As a decision is made that change is needed, there is plenty of information available on how to get started. In the *Harvard Public Health Review*, the spring 2006 edition, Charlton Street Elementary School in Southbridge, Massachusetts was discussed. A non-profit group called Project Bread- the Walk for Hunger has joined with the Harvard School for Public Health and is lending a hand in this area. They are presently renovating the breakfast programs of eight

schools, steering them away from high fat and high sugar products. Teachers are saying that the students “are more alert and are participating more in class . . .”

Yvonne Sanders-Butler is an elementary school principal in Lithonia, Georgia. She almost died at the age of thirty-eight due to high blood pressure. She promised God she would lead a healthier life and educate others. The meals at her school have been revamped and so have the physical education classes. In fact, her school is now sugar free. Within a year student disciplinary problems dropped, as did visits to the school nurse, while math and reading scores improved by fifteen percent (Thomas).

Hopefully, the sense of wholeness and healthiness will spread and administrators will become eager to embrace new ideas on how to help future generations to excel. At the Four Winds Waldorf School in Warrenville, Illinois, there is a deep commitment to educating the children about their eating habits. The children are given organic produce to eat. Not only are they taught where the produce comes from, but they help prepare the foods. At first, children seem to question eating this new way. They are so used to processed foods. But, the children grow to like the concept of experimenting with new foods and learn to like them. This method teaches them to respect the earth for its ability to sustain life. With this kind of education, I believe there is a light at the end of the tunnel. An upgrade in the nutrition level of school meals seems to be a small thing. There are problems in schools that seem to loom much larger such as illiteracy and sexual abuse. Nonetheless, I believe it is an issue that could be the start of something big and at minimum a very positive step forward.