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Issue Exploration Essay, FINAL

What's for Lunch?

“Living far from the comfort of people who require no explanation for what I do and who I am, I crave the foods we have shared” (Kothari 71). I thought of this quote when my sixteen year old son, Andre, came home from school earlier this year and began grumbling about the way school lunch was changing. I knew something drastic must be happening. Among these changes was the schools refusal to fix the French fry cooker when it broke down for the final time in February. I wasn't upset by this, but to his teenage mind a very serious injustice had occurred. He has been a fan of school lunch since the seventh grade when we finally stopped forcing him to bring lunch from home. Every day it was a delight to hear him describe what he had eaten for lunch that day. He would groan with pleasure as he described the warm concoction the school lunch ladies had come up with in great detail. His descriptions seemed to always included words such as “brilliant”, “delicious”, and “SO good”. When I noticed that his typical enthusiasm for lunch had waned significantly, perhaps due in part by the French fry cooker debacle, I asked for further details regarding what was behind his waning enthusiasm. His response was limited to a few sorrowful groans, and the words “they are making so many changes.” My mind could not stop mulling over his grumblings and I decided that a little further investigation into the allegedly horrible lunchroom reforms was in order. What were these changes being made and why were they so grievous to be borne?

The changes that I discovered had been made to the school lunch program were surprising in many ways. Based on the negative reaction of my son, and the response from several of the neighborhood kids, I was prepared to find some very disturbing information. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the lunch reforms were very reasonable and were aimed at bringing the government subsidized school lunch menu in line with the nutrition guidelines of the USDA (United States, “Nutrition Standards”). This included, among many things, an increased amount of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk provided at lunchtime and limits to the amount of protein, fat and calories in each meal. Flavored milk, if it

is still served, is now required to be fat free. Portion sizes were reduced, and menus were revamped in order to comply with the new requirements (Nixon). As a result of these changes, more vegetables, fruits, whole grains and low fat dairy are now available to our children (Nixon). These changes are positive indeed.

The children who rely on the school lunch program for their main meal sources during the week are now finding that healthy foods they may have never been able to try before are available to them. Should they choose to try these fresh fruits and vegetables they may discover that they enjoy the new flavors and textures. Unfortunately, there are some kids who have chosen to go hungry rather than eat the fresh fruits and veggies they are being provided (Linnekin, "USDA's School Lunch"). This caused me to wonder if these children may not have had the option to eat fresh fruits and vegetables as a companion to their meals. If not, then that could certainly account for their distaste of the healthy choices. If the good food is foreign and new, it will take some time for these children to adapt and appreciate the same. I can almost hear my mother's voice in my mind, scolding a younger version of myself with these words: "Don't knock it until you try it." As I recall that scolding, I feel even more gratitude for the lunchtime variety our children now will be able to enjoy.

As a result of the new lunchroom guidelines, children can experience fresh and healthy food at school now in a way that their financial circumstances at home may have never allowed. As a child I lived on a diet of ramen noodles, macaroni and cheese with hot dogs, beans and rice. I have never gone to bed hungry, but I can remember wishing that my parents could afford to feed us a more varied diet. My grown up mind understands a little more now how restrictive a tight food budget can be. I was fortunate to have parents who grew a garden every year and could supplement our repetitive menu with fresh tomatoes, carrots, corn and peppers. I understand that there are many people who do not have the yard space, nor the ability, knowledge or understanding to offer their families a similar option. Children of these families may not even know what healthy options look and taste like as they are foreign to their present limited circumstances.

The government seemed to understand the need to gradually work the healthier foods into the lunch menu in order to give children the opportunity to try the new and healthier

options. There was a reasonable timeframe given to the schools to bring their lunches in compliance with the revised guidelines and restrictions. Training was provided to inform those involved with making the revisions to the menus of the requirements (United States, “Final Rule”). Exceptions were even made to the menu items offered to student athletes in order to accommodate their higher calorie needs (United States, “Nutrition Standards”). This extended timeline for implementing the changes has made the changes easier to accept by the faculty and students alike.

Although my son was not a fan of the changes, I discovered that many people were very excited about these healthy lunchroom requirements. These people were enthusiastic in their praise of Michelle Obama and the USDA in pushing for the reforms that required healthy foods to be served in the nation’s lunchrooms (Nixon). These changes were, in part, implemented to address the obesity problems found in this country. The obesity level in the children of this country has exploded. It is interesting that, statistically, the obesity level of those children living below the poverty level is disproportionately high (DeAngelis). It is for those children living below the poverty line that the school lunch program was initially put in place in order to provide two meals a day to children who otherwise may go hungry. It was decided that providing healthier options to these children, while also providing these options to those children that purchase their lunches at the cafeteria, was needed (Nixon).

There were also many people who were violently opposed to the government mandating healthy food in our lunchrooms. Their arguments were focused on two things, hunger and freedom. They argued that the reduced portion sizes were causing our children to go hungry and they failed to meet the high caloric needs of student athletes and growing bodies (Crawford). In addition, children were choosing to throw their healthy food choices in the garbage and go hungry, rather than eat the food they were given and continue their day with a full stomach (DeAngelis). Why were they making this choice? The fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains were found to be repulsive to those children who were not used to eating them. Of greater concern to those opposed to the healthy eating mandates were those who felt that it is not the governments place to impose such sanctions. As members of a free society, we should be able to choose. We should not legislate our freedoms away regardless of the positive reasoning behind such legislation. Protests were called for in the form of an ‘opt out of school lunch’ call where

parents are encouraged to stop funding the school lunch program through their daily purchase of lunch for their children. Rather, they are encouraged to pack a lunch for their children to send to school with them, a lunch that meets the parents desired nutritional needs for their own children (Linnekin, “Opt Out”). It was for these two reasons that the core of the opposition to the reforms were focused upon.

The reasons on both sides of the debate have been very heated and passionate, but, in the end, the healthy guidelines won over the freedom factor of “choosing” to eat healthy or not. After all, it is not for those children whose parents can afford to pack them a good lunch that the school lunch program was initially created. It was created for those children who would not even be able to eat were it not for the food provided by this government funded service (Gallego). It wasn’t long after my son declined bringing a lunch from home in place of purchasing lunch at the cafeteria each day that I decided that the positive aspects of these changes would overcome the negative arguments.

Perhaps I came to this opinion because, unlike some lunchrooms, the cafeteria where my son eats everyday has always had the option for healthy eating. There was a salad bar available daily, but the line was always so long that Andre often chose the less popular main dish options he fell in love with and still craves. His favorite menu item was mashed potatoes, with large chunks of savory turkey drowning in a pool of gravy along with a side of steamed broccoli, carrots and cauliflower. Stir fry veggies in a rice bowl with Asian mystery meat came in a close second place. The lunch lady would always let the kids have extra servings of whatever there was a surplus of from the day’s menu. Because this surplus almost always included the steamed veggies, my son was in seventh heaven. He was able to have all the veggies he could eat and enjoyed washing it all down with a thick and gooey carton of chocolate milk. This was just one of the many reasons he would rather have school lunch any day over bringing a cold lunch from home. However, my son, tall and slim as he is, now bemoans the fact that he can no longer have seconds of anything. The children are not even given the option of more fruits or vegetables. A strict adherence to the calorie restriction requirements (no more than 850 per meal) (United States, “Nutrition Standards”) have taken that option away from the lunch ladies.

Yet in spite of the restrictions imposed in the lunchroom, I was surprised to find myself agreeing with the government on this matter. I was determined to find everything wrong with the school lunch reforms and instead found myself nodding my head in agreement on more than one occasion. It seemed like the more I read, the more I agreed with the findings of the reports and inquiries. I found the balanced reports offering the reasons and arguments of both sides to be utterly refreshing after the rhetoric and negative comments of the opposition I had also read on the matter. After weighing many of the lunch options in my own mind against my personal experiences with hunger, eating and school lunch, I found that the ideas and legislation which were passed surprisingly aligned with what I felt was right for the school lunch program.

My son and I still discuss what he eats for lunch every day, but now we chuckle at the creative way that the cafeteria is complying with the new nutrition guidelines. They still get to eat hot dogs occasionally, but they are served on a whole wheat bun instead of on a fluffy white roll. His favorite Asian stir fry now has much less mystery meat and an increased portion of vegetables. Although the changes to the school lunch program have altered his love for school lunch, he still enjoys sinking his teeth into a steaming pile of mashed potatoes, even if they are no longer swimming in his favorite gravy. The turkey chunks are smaller and the light sprinkling of gravy has a significant reduction in its sodium levels. He has even discovered that the soft and chewy texture of the whole wheat rolls is surprisingly satisfying.

These discussions with Andre cause my mind to wander back to a time when it was me walking through that lunch line and not my son. I remember talking with my friends and poking fun at the pile of whipped squash on my lunch tray. That squash was as orange as a sunset with just a kiss of sweetness that reminded me of a warm hug. I secretly loved that goopy squash and it has become one of the favorite food memories of my childhood. Another one of my favorite lunchroom foods was the fully loaded peanut butter bars. I can still almost smell the earthy-nutty sweetness of them. I remember the way my teeth would sink through the chocolate layer on top and clear through the peanut butter body of the bar which had a consistency much like warm butter just before it melted into a puddle. I will never forget how those bars oozed over my tongue and slowly coated my throat. Thirty years later I can still remember how good that felt. Nobody made peanut butter bars the way my lunch lady made them. Those two foods will be forever connected in my mind with that noisy cafeteria, and my little school girl friends

who took me for who I was and didn't ask for anyone more. Who I was then was very much tied to the favorite foods I came to enjoy. They are still a part of who I am today.

Will our children come to crave carrot sticks and whole wheat rolls the way I crave sweetened whipped squash and chocolate topped peanut butter bars? If they do, then I believe this lunch reformation will be a complete success. If who we become as adults, and the lifestyle habits we embrace are directly affected by the type of foods we ate as children then we must begin today to help shape the healthy eating habits of our future generations. Improving the foods offered in the school cafeteria is a good place to begin this transformation. Will they, as I, "crave the foods [they] have shared" (Kothari 71)?

Annotated Bibliography

Crawford, Rick. "New federal rules leave students hungry." Paragould Daily Press. 23, October 2012. Web. 23, October 2012.

<<http://www.paragouldailypress.com/articles/2012/10/23/opinion/doc5085cac7a4b2c185154497.txt>>.

As a member of the Agriculture Committee's Nutrition Subcommittee, Congressman Rick Crawford has firsthand knowledge of the requirements and implications of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 recently passed by Congress. This press release focuses on the high cost of the program to schools. He gives his decided opinion on the inadequacy of the program and its' need to be rewritten. The four paragraph press release is very brief, but this secondary source of its information makes it very credible. It was published the same day I pulled it from the web.

DeAngelis, Jeannie. "Michelle Obama's Share-the-Starvation School Lunch Program."

American Thinker. 26 September 2012. Web. 23 Oct. 2012.

<http://www.americanthinker.com/printpage/?url=http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2012/09/michelle_obamas_share-the-starvation_school_lunch_program.html>.

In this 2 page article written for AmericanThinker.com, Jeannie DeAngelis, a blogger and political commentator, describes the negative impact of the new lunch guidelines on the stomachs of the school children in this country. According to DeAngelis, our kids are going hungry because of the new guidelines. This article is heavily biased against the lunch reforms and uses rather inflated arguments, and very few facts, to support its claims. However, as an opposing viewpoint, it may offer some insight and give a person food for thought.

Gallego, Ruben. "School-lunch bill would hurt kids of low income families." 21 January 2012.

USA Today. Web. 19 October 2012.

<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/USCP/PNI/NEWS/2012-01-21-PNI0121opi-gallegoPNIBrd_ST_U.htm>.

This article addresses the possible negative effect that the school lunch reformations may have on the poor as schools will now have the option to participate in the National School Lunch Program, rather than requiring them to do so. Ruben Gallego, a member of the Arizona House,

discusses his childhood as a member of a low income family and how important it was for him to receive the 2 daily meals the school lunch program provided. He offers a different opposing view, in that schools will choose to cut this program as a result of the higher costs associated with the guidelines and the poor will be negatively impacted as a result of the loss of this program. His viewpoint as someone that has relied on the school lunch program for his main meals of the day makes this article a valuable resource.

Kothari, Geeta. "If you are what you eat, then what am I?" *Reading for Writers: English 1010 Reader Salt Lake Community College 2012-2013*. Ed. Unknown. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's 2012, page 63-72. Print.

In this essay titled "If you are what you eat, then what am I", Geeta Kothari discusses the impact that food has had on her own cultural identity and how these foods directly impact who she identifies herself to be. She walks us through experiences in her childhood as an immigrant where she wanted only to fit in with the rest of the kids around her by mimicking their food choices. She shares challenges she experienced on family vacations taken to visit her native India and some of the challenges that she faced as she tried new foods. She discovered foods she hated and foods that came to be some of her lifetime favorites. She found that some of the foods she loved the most were a mesh of her new American culture and the old Indian culture. This essay explores food in a way I rarely think of it, and shows the reader by experiences shared how we come to identify ourselves directly as a reflection of the foods we eat and the role those foods play in our lives and our personal experiences. "Living far from the comfort of people who require no explanation for what I do and who I am, I crave the foods we have shared," Kothari shares (71). This essay is very relevant to my research issue.

Linnekin, Baylen. "USDA's School Lunch Reforms Earn an 'F' from Students." 22 September 2012. Reason.com. Web. 19 October 2012.

<<http://reason.com/archives/2012/09/22/usdas-school-lunch-reforms-earning-an-f>>.

This article addresses the negative impact of the new USDA school lunch rules. Unlike some of the other articles I have cited, this one is very biased against the rules, and discusses the reaction of students in several different states. Baylen offers some interesting opinions and his writing appeals to both logic (logos) and emotion (pathos). Baylen Linnekin is a lawyer and executive

director of Keep Food Legal, a Washington, D.C. nonprofit that advocates in favor of food freedom – the right to grow, raise, produce, buy, sell, share, cook, eat, and drink the foods of our own choosing. I was impressed by his use of facts in this 3 page article which he used to back up his opinion and believe this article will be a good resource because it is so well researched.

Linnekin, Baylen. “Opt Out of School Lunch.” Reason.com. 19 May 2012. Web. 19, October 2012. <<http://reason.com/archives/2012/5/19/opt-out-of-school-lunch>>.

This article, written for reason.com by Baylen Linnekin, addresses some very negative feelings about the new school lunch reformation passed in January. As an attorney and executive director of Keep Food Legal, Linnekin urges parents to “opt out of school lunch” by packing a good lunch and sending it to school with their children instead of purchasing lunch for them at the school cafeteria. His passionate fight to keep American’s children free from government oppression is clearly felt in the dynamic language used in this article. His bias is clearly evident. His appeal to logos (logic) and pathos (emotion) are quite effective as he pleads with students, educators, business, nonprofits and taxpayers to stand with him in his battle. At a reasonable length of 4 pages, I believe this article will be useful as an opposing viewpoint to the school lunch reforms.

Nixon, Ron. “New Rules for School Meals Aim at Reducing Obesity.” The New York Times. 25 January 2012. Web. 19, October 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1012/01/26/us/politics/new-school-lunch-rules-aimed-at-reducing-obesity.html?_r=2&pagewanted=print>.

In this article written for the NY Times, Ron Nixon announces a few of the changes made to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 which was passed a day after his article was written. This article cites differing viewpoints by lawmakers, farmers, and nutrition experts along with several good quotes from these parties. Included are references to the 32 million children who participate in the school lunch program as well as the added cost (\$3.2 billion) which the new rules will add. With no apparent bias noted in the article along with its two page length, this article may be a good source for quotes and balanced insight into the emotional response of those affected by the same.

United States. U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. "Final Rule to Update School Lunches and Breakfast." February 2012. Web. 23 October 2012.

<<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/legislation/FinalRulePresentation2-2012.pdf>>.

This powerpoint presentation pulled from the USDA's website, and prepared by the USDA, on the final Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (passed by Congress on January 26, 2012) contains current and accurate information regarding many of the requirements of the new Rule as well as information regarding the requirements and timelines required to implement the same. This 56 page source offers credible information regarding what the Rule actually requires in a simple and straightforward presentation format. Unlike many of the articles I have read, this is not written to persuade, but rather to inform the audience of the requirements and allows them to draw their own conclusions. This will be a useful reference as I wade through the many opinionated articles I have found on this subject.

United States. Department of Agriculture. *Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs: Final Rule*. Federal Register, v77 n17. 26, January 2012.

Web. 23 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-01-26/pdf/2012-1010.pdf>>.

These are the final rules provided by the Department of Agriculture for the nutrition standards and information related to the new rule. As a primary source, this 81 page document offers a reliable fact-based resource for my research. I was surprised to find that it was fair and balanced. It provides summaries of public feedback, concerns, and includes the requirements, public comments, costs, timeframes for implementation, benefits and alternatives for the program. I found a pdf copy of this document on the internet and believe it will be an excellent resource for my research.