

## Lunch debate moves from cafeterias to Congress

By Sam Oldenburg/Farm to Fork

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Cheetos and ginger ale were not what Colorado schoolteacher Mendy Heaps thought her students should be eating for lunch, so she started selling fresh fruit out of an overhead projector cart. Kids, parents and teachers loved it, but the principal put a stop to it.

Principal Robert McMullen told Heaps that her fruit cart had become disruptive to the operations of the school's food services and asked her to stop the fruit cart and focus her energy on teaching language arts. While Heaps ended the fruit cart operation, she hasn't dropped the cause.

"We have to teach these kids to value their health and take care of it," said Heaps.

Heaps isn't alone in her fight to revamp school lunches. Across the country, activists are speaking out about school lunches as Congress considers updating the National School Lunch Program. TV viewers watched [Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution on ABC](#) take on school lunches in Huntington, W.Va. [Retired military officers](#) argue that school lunches are making young Americans too obese to fight. First lady [Michelle Obama](#) has pointed to changes in school lunches as a part of combating childhood obesity.

From Kentucky to Colorado to California and elsewhere, schools are making changes in the nutrition of school lunches. Now, it's up to Congress to decide how change will be implemented on the national level.

In the Boulder Valley School District in Boulder, Colo., change is already under way. Where other schools might serve chicken nuggets, french fries and chocolate milk, a meal here could consist of roast chicken, roast potatoes, a salad bar, organic milk and a whole wheat roll, said Ann Cooper, the district's director of nutrition services.

Chicken nuggets, Popsicles and trans fats don't belong in school lunches, Cooper said. "What of any of that is part of a healthy diet for a child?" she said.

Cost is the other difference. The food in a typical meal elsewhere costs less than \$1, while the food in a meal in the Boulder Valley school district costs about \$1.20, Cooper said.

Increasing participation in school meals is the key to covering that price gap, she said. Cooking in larger quantities enables the district to produce more food without increasing the labor hours of food service workers. While she was working in schools in Berkeley, Calif., participation tripled in four years. She does this through things such as the Iron Chef competition held in the school district April 14.

Cooper and her staff have started [thelunchbox.org](http://thelunchbox.org), a tool to help other school districts initiate change. The site offers healthy recipes along with case studies to help other districts implement programs similar to Cooper's.

Parents agree that change must come to school lunches; 63 percent of parents of school-age children described the nutritional quality of local school food as "poor" or "only fair" in a national [survey conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#).

[Dayle Hayes](#), a registered dietitian and consultant based in Billings, Mont., is also speaking out about school lunches, but she emphasizes the positive. Hayes, who has consulted with education departments in several states, has started a "[school meals that rock](#)" initiative. The project's Facebook page describes it as "a counter-revolution to the media bashing of school meals and a tribute to every lunch lady (and gentleman) working to do amazing things for kids' nutrition."

A desire for culinary perfection has overtaken the reality that many of these children are hungry, Hayes said. "People have all sorts of expectations for school meals. They want them to be fresh, local, organic – yet schools don't have the funding to be able to do that." she said, "I think one of the really key issues here is that school lunches matter most to those who have the least."

Such is the case at [Dishman-McGinnis Elementary School](#) in Bowling Green, Ky., where 95 percent of the school's approximately 290 students [qualify](#) for free or reduced-price lunches, Bowling Green city schools food service coordinator Kim Simpson said. Students whose families have an annual income at 130 percent of the poverty level or less, for example \$27,560 for a family of four, qualify for free meals, while children in families with an annual income between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level, between \$27,560 and \$39,220 for a family of four, qualify for reduced-price meals.

A full-price lunch in Bowling Green schools costs \$2. Students pay 40 cents for a reduced-price lunch. The school is reimbursed \$2.65 for each free lunch served; \$2.28 for each reduced-price lunch served; and 25 cents for each full-price lunch served through the United States Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program.

The cost of food makes up about 46 percent of the total cost of producing a school lunch while labor costs account for slightly less than 45 percent of the expenses, according to a [2008 cost study conducted by the USDA](#).

At Dishman-McGinnis, not much goes uneaten. "The kids truly are hungry," Simpson said.

A buzz of conversation fills the gym during lunch as kids sit side by side on benches attached to the lunch tables.

"Here we go, sweeties," cafeteria manager Karen Huffman says to kindergarteners as she ushers them through the lunch line.

"At home I really don't eat a lot," fifth-grader Rashad Durden said. "At lunchtime, I eat a lot."

One thing that did go to waste was second-grader Conner Trowbridge's slice of pizza. "I'm tired of eating pizzas," he said with a sigh. "I have to eat pizza every day at home, and now – pizza." He said his parents buy a lot of pizzas.

"My favorite food at home is cereal and Pop-Tarts," he said. "My favorite food here is carrots."

Fresh fruits and vegetables have become a major focus for the school district. A "garden patch" area has been created in each school's cafeteria line to provide these items. "We let the kids get as much as they want from the garden patch," Simpson said. "They can make a salad if they want... or they could just pick and choose vegetables and fruits."

When the garden patch was started in 2006, students began to experience foods they had never seen before, Simpson said. "We've had kids say they love the little orange things; they've never had a carrot before – a little carrot."

One of the favorite fruits among students is the [ugli fruit](#), a type of tangelo from Jamaica. "They're just like oranges, but they're more better," fourth-grader Sebastian Salkic said.

Not every student was ready to give a thumbs-up to the school's lunches, however. "Sometimes they're nasty; sometimes it ain't," fifth-grader Whitney Miller said. When asked if there was anything she liked about the school lunches, she shook her head no.

Not having dessert every day is the one thing fifth-grader Olivia Humbles said she doesn't like about school lunches.

"When we do have it, it is good," her classmate Tysheona Shannon said.

The variety of fruits also appeals to Shannon. "I like pineapples, bananas and strawberries," she said. "We don't really get pineapples at home."

That emphasis on quality foods has become a trend statewide, said Denise Hagan, Kentucky's division director for nutrition and health services. "There are just so many low-income students, and we realize that because we are such a rural state many kids aren't going to have access to quality foods," she said.

As a part of pursuing quality lunches, Hagan has encouraged schools to take part in the [HealthierUS School Challenge](#) started in 2004 by the USDA. The program recognizes schools that promote nutrition and physical activity. Of the 667 schools recognized nationwide by the program, 195 are in Kentucky, Hagan said.

Hagan's office gives schools specific suggestions that can reduce the amount of unsaturated fat and sodium in lunches, such as serving only low-fat milk, more produce and fewer pre-processed items.

Being recognized as a HealthierUS school takes collaboration. "There has to be a buy-in at the district level," Hagan said.

Obtaining that buy-in became easier this year, when it was announced that school districts will receive a monetary incentive from the USDA to meet the challenge. The

money can range from \$500 to \$2,000, depending on how well the school district matches the goals of the challenge.

Money is a major factor in national reform. The reimbursement rate for school lunches hasn't increased beyond the rate of inflation in recent history.

Proposed legislation would change that. [The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#), which passed through the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry unanimously March 24, reauthorizes childhood nutrition programs, which must be done every five years, with \$4.5 billion in new funding over 10 years, according to a [press release](#) from committee chair Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark.

Some of the money would increase the federal reimbursement rate for school lunches six cents per meal, according to a [summary of the bill](#).

Back in Colorado, Cooper says that isn't enough. "What is six cents going to do?" she asked. "If that's all our country thinks it can do to help our children, I don't know what to say."

Cooper said reimbursement rates should increase by a dollar.

The bill also places restrictions on vending machines, provides \$40 million to help schools buy locally produced foods, gives the Secretary of Agriculture the ability to establish national nutrition standards and allows schools in high-poverty areas to qualify students for free lunch without collecting paperwork.

Some states already monitor food sold outside the main lunch line. Kentucky, for example, was one of the first states to impose strict standards for competitive foods. Vending machines must be turned off until half an hour after the last lunch is served, Hagan said.

Ironically, competitive food laws are what upset Heaps' apple cart. After about three years of sales, one day the cart ended up in the school's cafeteria. That's when McMullen told Heaps to cease the fruit cart sales. Regulations in Colorado prohibit food sales at schools that compete with school lunch programs.

The school cafeteria offers a main meal line but also has a grab and go line, which is where students could buy things like Cheetos and ginger ale. "Why don't we only have healthy choices for them? Instead of choosing between a chocolate chip muffin and an orange, why not choose between a banana and an orange?" said Heaps, who now worries about the security of her job.

Since then, those items have been removed from the grab and go line and only healthy choices are offered, McMullen said.

Salads and fruit are now available in every cafeteria, according to a press release from the district's food service program.

McMullen declined comment on the fruit cart issue, saying that it is a private personnel matter.

À la carte lines like that in [Elizabeth Middle School](#) have become a part of the economics of school lunch programs across the country. The cost of producing a reimbursable meal- the main meal choice in cafeterias- is 15 percent above the reimbursement rate. Adding in non-reimbursable items like those in the à la carte lines brings school nutrition programs to the break even point, according to a [2008 cost study conducted by the USDA](#).

A lunch can't be prepared at the current reimbursement rate, Hagan said. She suggested that if the reimbursement rate goes up to \$3, then districts would be losing only pennies.

With more than 5 billion school lunches served every year, those pennies add up. President Barack Obama's budget proposal included more than twice as much in additional funding for school lunches than what is included in Lincoln's bill. Obama proposed an additional \$10 billion for school lunches over the next 10 years - \$1 billion per year. Quick calculations show that even that would have come out to less than 20 cents more per meal - less than most advocates desire.

Hayes believes that at least as much as Obama proposed is needed to improve school lunches. "They are essentially fueling education," Hayes said.

Cooper agrees that more must be done than Lincoln's bill proposes. "This is the social equity issue of our time," she said, citing predictions that most kids will have diabetes before entering high school and will die younger than their parents. "What is it we don't get about having to fix this?"