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Clean your plate

Everyday kids in America come home from school ravished and start rummaging through the pantry and fridge trying to find something to eat. My kids are no exception. So I wonder why they are still so hungry when they ate lunch at school a few hours ago. The real question might be, is the school feeding my kids food that is healthy, filling and tastes good? The lunch being served to my kids is in compliance with the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). While it is true that recent changes have been made in the NSLP, it is also true that the food is still far from being healthy and is over processed, full of empty calories, and lacking in flavor. In addition American children lack the knowledge and desire they need to make healthy food choices. Furthermore our kids are still coming home hungry.

When I first realized that my kids were not eating their lunches I would asked them, “Why, didn’t you eat lunch?” They would reply, “no, because it was gross!” or “I did but it wasn’t enough food.” If my kids will not eat the food and they are not picky eaters, then I believe that there must be other kids at their school wasting food or not getting enough to eat. There has to be a hole in the system. The NSLP along with the First Lady Michelle Obama has made many changes to the program in recent years. Are the changes they have made effective in reaching their goal of a healthier child?

Michelle Obama in correlation with her “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” has worked with the NSLP to change the way our kids eat at school. The changes made went into effect at the beginning of the 2012 school year. The idea was to offer healthier choices to students and reduce obesity in children. Michelle Obama made this her platform because she was concerned as a parent about the health of her children and ours. Mrs. Obama said in a statement “As parents, we try to prepare decent meals, limit how much junk food our kids eat and ensure that they have a reasonable balanced diet ... and when we are putting in all that effort the last thing we want is for our hard work to be undone each day in the school cafeteria” (Nixon). Michelle was right, in the fact that school lunch needed to change, although what Michelle and the NSLP considered to be healthier is still far from perfect and is now offering food that American kids will not consume.

Some of the changes made to the NSLP are: making sure that students get more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and that the milk offered is low-fat, or fat-free. In addition to those changes they reduced the sodium and calorie intake. Well that doesn’t seem so bad. So why do my kids hate school lunch? Some might suggest that if kids dislike school lunch, they should pack a home lunch instead. But for the 38% of Utah kids and some states reaching as high as 91% participating in the free/ reduced lunch program like my kids, parents might argue with that idea as they simply cannot afford to send a sack lunch every day—when they receive one for free or near to free (Kids Count Data Center). So if bringing a home lunch is not an option, we must make other changes so that our kids will want to eat what’s for lunch and clean their plates.

The first question in the lunch room should be “what’s for lunch?” What is being served to our kids that some deem inedible? After researching elementary school lunch and breakfast menus from around the nation, I found it full of prepackaged food. I was no longer confused as

to why my kids did not enjoy lunch. Items kids dislike might include: Mozzarella Breadstick and Sauce, Potato Crunch Fish Sticks, Cheese or Pepperoni Pizza and Corndogs, all served with a variety of fresh or canned fruit and a variety of fresh or steamed vegetables and low fat milk.

Well, to most kids that menu might seem like a little slice of heaven, all those fast-food type foods, but when you ask kids what they taste like the responses are shocking. They say, “the Breadsticks taste like rubber...the Fish Sticks smell like Utah Lake...the Pizza is like eating grease on cardboard... and the Corndogs, we are not sure are even meat, they are pink inside.”

When asked about the fruit and vegetables the responses are similar, mushy or bruised fruit, soggy or over cooked vegetables or wilting or watery lettuce. It is no wonder why kids are not eating the food being served. According to Alpine School District, my kid’s school lunch is in compliance with the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” and the NSLP (Alpine School District). So, I question their judgment on food choices. Are these fast food look a likes and nasty produce making the cut? Are they encouraging kids to eat healthy at home and in life too? I say no.

I believe that if we make simple changes in the program and include education on healthy eating by making the lunch room a classroom of culinary and agriculture learning experience we will give kids the tools they need to make the right choices. It is not enough to just change a menu; we must educate our child on healthy eating, both in school and at home. We need to introduce new healthy foods and teach children where their food comes from. “If the kids don’t know what stuff is, then they will never eat it,” emphasizes, Jamie Oliver, a chef and activist in his 2010 “Teach every child about food” TED talk (Oliver). One great way to educate children and cut back on cost and waste is raising a school garden. I have found that knowing what and where your food comes from and how it gets from the ground/farm to your plate can help children and adults have a greater appreciation for the food they eat.

Sopris Elementary School, in Glenwood Springs, Colorado knows where their food comes from. They grow it themselves. Students at Sopris not only grow their own vegetables used in the lunch room but they have also learned many things along the way, like how to keep the greenhouse year round warmed by solar panels they made themselves. “We have so much fun...Everyone is going to like the food we’re growing,” exclaimed Hannah Jull, a student at Sopris, age eleven. The garden project helps reduce land fill waste too, because of the schools great compost system run by the science classes and powered by worms (Kraus). This is a great way to get kids thinking different about their food.

As a mom of four I know that kids want to get dirty, they want to see how things grow and they want to taste what they grew. Some schools might argue that they simply don’t have enough room for such a garden, but I think that when space is limited there is access to roof top gardening, which can offer an ideal setting for planting. I believe in an old saying my mom would tell me all the time when we worked in the garden, “you can give a man a fish you feed them for a day, but if you teach a man to fish you feed them for a life time.” Teaching our children how to grow healthy food now will in change the way they eat and think about food forever.

Gardening is not the only way to encourage kids to eat more healthy meals. Studies show that kids that receive a longer lunch period are more likely to eat more and waste less. Students at Oakland High, California get an average of forty minutes for lunch. “But Jennifer LeBarre, Oakland Unified School District's nutrition services director, admits that the actual table time is far shorter. At times it's just 10 minutes... But eating more healthful foods can take more time, LeBarre says, ‘It's going to take longer to eat a salad than it will to eat French fries’ ” (Westervelt). Lunch lines can be long and the tables at my kids school are always full, so by the

time they sit down to eat, all their friends that brought sack lunches are already finished eating and heading out to play. What kid wants to sit alone and eat while their friends run out to play for the ten remaining minutes of lunch? So, like most kids they hurry through the edible food and toss the rest, even though they are still hungry. Solutions for such behavior might be, regulating lunch tables like I have heard they do at some schools in Alpine School District. Students may not leave the table until they have been approved by the lunch room coordinator. Students simply raise their hand when finished and the coordinator comes over to see if they did indeed eat most of their lunch and if so will then dismiss the child to play. This is very effective and gives the child the encouragement finish more of their food.

For some kids school lunch is the only time they will have to eat during the day. One out of five kids in America go to bed hungry, that is over sixteen million kids every day that do not get enough to eat at home (No kid hungry.org). This is why it is even more important that kids are interested in eating school lunch. Therefore even though there has been many great changes made to the NSLP there is still much work to be done like working on taste and quality of the food being served. I believe that if we make changes in the program and include education, longer lunch periods and implement ideas like the school garden program, that the health of our children will greatly increase, the kids will be full and want to clean their plate.

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