

Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

No Lunch Left Behind

By ALICE WATERS and KATRINA HERON FEB. 19, 2009

Berkeley, Calif.

THIS new era of government bailouts and widespread concern over wasteful spending offers an opportunity to take a hard look at the National School Lunch Program. Launched in 1946 as a public safety net, it has turned out to be a poor investment. It should be redesigned to make our children healthier.

Under the program, the United States Department of Agriculture gives public schools cash for every meal they serve — \$2.57 for a free lunch, \$2.17 for a reduced-price lunch and 24 cents for a paid lunch. In 2007, the program cost around \$9 billion, a figure widely acknowledged as inadequate to cover food costs. But what most people don't realize is that very little of this money even goes toward food. Schools have to use it to pay for everything from custodial services to heating in the cafeteria.

On top of these reimbursements, schools are entitled to receive commodity foods that are valued at a little over 20 cents per meal. The long list of options includes high-fat, low-grade meats and cheeses and processed foods like chicken nuggets and pizza. Many of the items selected are ready to be thawed, heated or just unwrapped — a necessity for schools without kitchens. Schools also get periodic, additional “bonus” commodities from the U.S.D.A., which pays good money for what are essentially leftovers from big American food producers.

When school districts allow fast-food snacks in the lunchroom they provoke widespread ire, and rightfully so. But food distributed by the National School Lunch Program contains some of the same ingredients found in fast food, and the resulting meals routinely fail to meet basic nutritional standards. Yet this is how the government continues to “help” feed millions of American schoolchildren, a great many of them from low-income households.

Some Americans are demanding better. Parent advocacy groups like Better School Food have rejected the National School Lunch Program and have turned instead to local farmers for fresh alternatives. Amid steep budgetary challenges, these community-supported coalitions are demonstrating that schools can be the masters of their own menus. Schools here in Berkeley, for example, continue to use U.S.D.A. commodities, but cook food from scratch and have added organic fruits and vegetables from area farms. They have cut costs by adopting more efficient accounting software and smart-bulk policies (like choosing milk dispensers over individual cartons), and by working with farmers to identify crops that they can grow in volume and sell for reasonable prices.

Many nutrition experts believe that it is possible to fix the National School Lunch Program by throwing a little more money at it. But without healthy food (and cooks and kitchens to prepare it), increased financing will only create a larger junk-food distribution system. We need to scrap the current system and start from scratch. Washington needs to give schools enough money to cook and serve unprocessed foods that are produced without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. When possible, these foods should be locally grown.

How much would it cost to feed 30 million American schoolchildren a wholesome meal? It could be done for about \$5 per child, or roughly \$27 billion a year, plus a one-time investment in real kitchens. Yes, that sounds expensive. But a healthy school lunch program would bring long-term savings and benefits in the areas of hunger, children’s health and dietary habits, food safety (contaminated peanuts have recently found their way into school lunches), environmental preservation and energy conservation.

The Agriculture Department will have to do its part, by making good on its fledgling commitment to back environmentally sound farming practices and by realizing a separate program to deliver food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, from farms to schools. It will also need to provide adequate support for kitchens and healthy meal planning. Congress has an opportunity to accomplish some of these goals when it takes up the Child Nutrition and Women Infants and Children Reauthorization Act, which is set to expire in September.

But the Department of Education should take some initiative, too. After all, eating well requires education. We can teach students to choose good food and to understand how their choices affect their health and the environment. The new school lunch program should be partly financed by the Department of Education, and Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, should oversee it. Vice President Joseph Biden should also come to the table by making school lunch a priority of his White House Task Force on Middle Class Working Families.

Every public school child in America deserves a healthful and delicious lunch that is prepared with fresh ingredients. Cash-strapped parents should be able to rely on the government to contribute to their children's physical well-being, not to the continued spread of youth obesity, Type 2 diabetes and other diet-related problems. Let's prove that there is such a thing as a good, free lunch.

Alice Waters is the president of The Chez Panisse Foundation. Katrina Heron is a director of the foundation and a co-producer of civileats.com.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on , on Page A31 of the New York edition with the headline: No Lunch Left Behind.