

Growing up, kids loved to make fun of school cafeteria food. There was the grilled cheese sandwich that stuck to the plate when you turned it upside down, and the egg soufflé that jiggled when you poked it. But at least we had homemade food, prepared in the elementary school kitchen with fresh vegetables and homemade soup in the winter. It's a far cry from what's served now.

In the midst of a growing childhood obesity crisis, school food now means federally subsidized chicken nuggets, low grade hamburgers, French fries, hot dogs and pizza. "Cooking" usually involves a centralized kitchen not unlike a fast food assembly line.

How did it get this way? According to Ron Haskins, senior fellow of Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution, "behind the overcooked vegetables and steam-table pizza that American children confront each school day is an industry that rivals defense contractors and media giants in its ability to bring home the federal bacon." That industry is agribusiness - and, via the National School Lunch Program, it has a chokehold on our kids.

The commodities-driven National School Lunch Program, meant to feed 60 million children healthy food, has instead turned into a major public health threat. The most vulnerable in our society are suffering the most severe consequences, including epidemic levels of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses. While we need to be able to add more children to the School Lunch program, we also need to be able to feed them higher-quality, more nutritious food or else we are defeating the purpose of the program.

Over the past three decades, rates of obesity in the U.S. have more than doubled among children ages 2 to 5 and more than tripled among those ages 6 to 11. Today, approximately 9 million U.S. children over the age of 6 are considered obese. America's overweight teens consume an average of 700 to 1,000 calories more than required each day.

The National School Lunch Program and its affiliated programs have unmatched size and scope, serving more than 35 million lunches every day in almost every school in the U.S., costing taxpayers more than \$8.5 billion. Close to 20 million K-12 students receive up to two meals a day five days a week. The program was recently expanded to include all children enrolled in Head Start and child nutrition programs. The summer food service program feeds 18 million low-income children.

Where does agribusiness come in? Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program receive cash subsidies and commodity foods for each meal served plus bonus commodities from agricultural surplus. The pact between the government and the commodities industry trumps the federal nutrition guidelines. In fact, the school lunch program authorizing language requires that participating schools serve the most abundant commodities -- in short, leftover or surplus food.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture purchases hundreds of millions of pounds of pork, beef, and other animal products as well as surplus corn and wheat primarily as an economic benefit to agricultural interests. These commodities are donated to the school lunch program and other food assistance programs; unfortunately these entitlement foods are almost all unhealthy.

Next year, The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, which includes school lunches, will expire and the renewal battle will begin. We must dramatically improve the federal nutrition requirements that guide this program, break or weaken the ties between the school lunch program and the commodities markets, revolutionize the quality of food in our schools, and educate school officials, regulators and the American public about the school lunch program and its disastrous implications for our children's health.

There needs to be a Congressional mandate for higher nutritional values for the school lunch program - to improve the quality and types of food that are served in K-12 schools with an emphasis on local foods and organics. However, that's useless unless we complement it with revamped nutrition curriculums for children and parents - so they can learn the value of good nutrition in preventing disease.

Significant progress can and must be made in overhauling the entire concept of school lunches. It will take the voices of millions to bring about this change. The cost to the next generation though is too high for this battle to be lost.