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Everybody's Guide to Fixing School Food

By Dana Woldow

I've been working on fixing school food in San Francisco since 2002, and have served as co-chair of my school district's student nutrition committee for over 7 years. I don't work for the school district and never have; I am a parent volunteer. I'm happy to share what I've learned with others who are hoping to drive change in their own school districts. Here are a few key points to understand before jumping into the battle:

- 1) Fixing school food is a team sport. You will get nowhere on your own, so be sure you have a core group of supporters who share your goals.
- 2) You have to make the decision going in that, no matter what, you will never, ever, ever give up until you attain your goal.
- 3) Change is hard for a bureaucracy, and good bureaucrats always want to do what is easiest; that's usually just doing what they have always done. You must make these folks realize that you are not going to give up and go away (see #2), that you are going to keep coming at them, and that each time you do, you have more people behind you. Eventually they will realize that it is easier to just give you what you want, rather than continue to do what they have always done while trying to fight you off, and at that point, you will prevail.
- 4) Fixing school food is not for the faint of heart, nor for those who want everyone in the world to like them. There will be those who won't like you, those who will call you "the food police" or worse, and you may even make a few enemies; you have to be able to shrug that off. I always tell people who are put off by my blunt attitude that fortunately I am not running for Miss Congeniality.
- 5) Nothing happens overnight. It's okay to dream big, but break your dream down into smaller pieces which can realistically be achieved. Celebrate every success, even if it is just baby steps. Getting to your ultimate goal will take years; you need to be in this for the long haul.
- 6) You may not know as much as you think you do about fixing school food. Much (really most) of the media coverage of this issue has been faulty, sometimes misrepresenting the situation, sometimes outright untruths. Some of the loudest voices in the debate have their own agendas to push, which skew the public debate. Try to be aware of who might have partnerships with businesses that may be focused on profit as much as on kids' health, or a book, TV show, movie, consulting business or service to promote, and be a little skeptical when deciding what to believe. Keep an open mind and be ready to learn from every experience.
- 7) Every school district is different, and something which works in one place may not work somewhere else. Among the differences are cost of labor, availability of outside funding, quality of facilities, and socioeconomics of the community.

8) School food is highly regulated by the government and you have to be aware of all of the regulations; it takes a lot of reading and asking the right questions before you can really understand what is involved in getting to your ultimate goal. Be prepared to spend a lot of time on this!

So, with those key points in mind, here is my Everybody's Guide to Fixing School Food.

Your very first step towards fixing school food should be **Getting Educated**. School food is tightly regulated by the USDA; your state and even your own school district may also impose further regulations. If you don't understand the regs, you will get nowhere with your student nutrition director, and without the cooperation of your student nutrition director, you will get nowhere with fixing school food. A great place to start is with Janet Poppendieck's excellent book "Free for All: Fixing School Food in America." However, at a certain point, you are going to have to confront The Beast – the sections of the Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) that deal with school food. Here is the link:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/regulations.htm>

Start with SubChapter A – Child Nutrition Programs, Part 210; this part deals only with the National School Lunch Program; the School Breakfast Program has its own enormous set of regs, but if you understand the lunch regs, it will be easier to understand breakfast. Don't try to read this all in one sitting; rather, think of it as a resource, the first place you go to try to find out what the regulations are. Skim through and get a sense of what is there.

It is important that you be at least familiar with all of the regs Janet P. discusses in her excellent book. There may come a time when someone who does not want to give you what you are requesting tells you that "the regs won't allow it" and you must be informed enough to know if this person is telling you the truth or just bluffing to make you go away. You will also find that you have to be a teacher of the regs as well as a student; it will be up to you to make sure that others you come into contact with, including your supporters, key district officials, and the media, all understand the regs too. Right now it is a safe assumption that 99% of them don't; you will have to understand well enough to be able to teach others. This is a process; you don't need to understand everything before you begin. Just keep at it and try to learn a little more each week.

Next step is to find a posse of other like minded individuals - parents, students, teachers, school nurses, health care professionals - who are willing to work with you. I call this **Getting Organized**. This isn't as hard as it sounds; lots of people recognize that school food is a problem, but most of them don't know what to do about it, and for sure they don't want to be the ringleader. You have to be the ringleader, but once you assure people that they don't have to lead, just follow, you would be surprised at how many people will sign on. Start at your own kids' school, but branch out from there. If your school or school district has a parent listserv, that can be useful for finding people who share your concern. If you can get just 8-10 people to start, that's plenty.

Have a meeting and let everyone share their concerns about school food. Brainstorm about what you would like to change. What would your ideal meal program look like? Prioritize the changes - what is most important to your group? Try to break big changes down so that they are

manageable, because for your first challenge, it needs to be something you can actually win. A big win early on really galvanizes a group. So, for example, don't pick something like "switch to scratch cooking" or "use all organic ingredients" for your first challenge - no one gets that on the first try. Instead, something like "Offer fresh fruit instead of canned 3 days a week at lunch" is much more doable.

Pick a good name for your group and get everyone's e-mail address so you can easily stay in contact even if you can only meet in person once a month. If you have a group member who is willing to set up a website for your group, that can be hugely helpful moving forward. When you wage your various campaigns, it is so much easier if all of the information people need to have about the issue can be found in one place. That way, you don't need to explain the issue to each person, you can just refer them to your website where they can find everything they need including background, who to contact, what to say, etc. You can also use the site to promote your group's successes, archive your press releases, and solicit new members. Visit www.sfusdfood.org to see an example of such a site.

Once you have organized your core group, you need to start **Getting Connected**; this is where you research your school board members to find out which one(s) are most likely to be sympathetic to your cause. Look for people with a medical background, or those with youngish kids in the public schools, or those who have fought similar battles in the past, especially battles based on the idea of social justice, that low income students deserve the same respect and services as higher income students. I think it will be obvious once you know about your school board members, which ones are the likely candidates to support you.

When you have identified one or two, make contact. Don't be intimidated by these people - generally people on school boards are just like you - concerned citizens who think that they can make the schools a better place for the kids. Call or e-mail your target and ask for a meeting; explain that you represent a group of concerned stakeholders who have some practical ideas for improving kids' health and academic performance through better school food. Make your pitch for better school food, but make sure your target understands that you are not asking (at this point) for a complete overhaul of school food, but rather for the one thing that your group decided upon - our hypothetical is "Fresh fruit instead of canned 3 days a week at lunch." Try to get your target to agree in principle that better food would mean better nourished kids; have the documentation with you showing the connection between better nutrition and better academic outcomes (not hard to find on the internet.) Remind your target that when the food gets better, more kids eat the school meals and that brings in more income for the meal program, which in turn funds the purchase of better food. Make sure they get it that you are not asking for something which would bankrupt the school nutrition program. If you sense resistance, at least ask for a pilot at your own kids' school; be sure you have your school Principal on board with this. The most likely response you will get from your target school board member is some form of "Let me think about it." That's fine, but even if you get an outright "I don't think that's a good idea", move on to the next step.

Now it is time for **Getting Active**. After the meeting, have everyone in your group write to the school board target and thank him/her for meeting with you, and express support for whatever it was you requested. Ask each member of your core group to get just two of their best friends to send a similar e-mail; group members can even write up key talking points and send to their

friends to cut and paste into their own message (the easier you make it for people not directly involved in your crusade to support you, the more likely they will do so.) If you have already gotten your website set up, put up all the information there, and then just refer people to the site, where they can get all the info they need (including e-mail address) to write to the school board member. If you can get 25-30 people to e-mail your target about this, all saying more or less the same thing, it is really likely that your target will support it. Individual e-mails are much more impressive than petitions; you want to fill up your target's inbox, and petitions don't do that.

At a certain point, your target is likely to refer you to someone within the district administration - either the student nutrition director or that person's boss. You may need to start the process all over again here, but with luck, now you have the support of your school board target; make sure the district person knows that, as it is invaluable. Make your request; have your supporters e-mail to show their support, and let the district person know that you are not just one parent asking for this, but a group. Be sure to cc your school board supporter on your correspondence with district administrators.

Let's say you asked for a switch from canned fruit to fresh fruit 3 days a week at lunch, and you got this relatively small change approved; make sure everyone knows what you have achieved. **Getting Coverage** is essential to moving forward. I highly recommend trying to get one of your core supporters to agree to take the role of PR person for the group; this is a big job and really needs its own dedicated person. If anyone in your group has a media or PR background, that's the person to court, but really anyone who is comfortable writing can learn to do this.

Use whatever parent listservs are available to get news out directly to parents. Then make a list of all of the reporters from every news outlet in your town who ever cover school or children's or health issues, everything from TV down to the smallest weekly shopper newspaper. Write up a press release lavishing praise on the student nutrition director or his/her boss, whoever it was that agreed to the change you asked for, as well as the school board member(s) who supported you. This is KEY - do NOT claim the credit and praise for yourself or your group! Thank the district official for supporting student health, and also thank your school board friend(s). It is vital to tell the public that these people value student health and good nutrition for kids above all else (especially if you feel that they only gave you what you wanted grudgingly and maybe they don't really value student health....) because once you have announced it to the world, what the hell are they going to do - say they DON'T value student health? Make it all about them, and what a hero they are, and how they are following in the footsteps of Ann Cooper and Jamie Oliver and Michael Pollan. This makes it so much easier when you go back to them in another month and ask for the next thing on your list. They need to understand that the decisions they make about your requests are going to be made very public, and that they can be the hero and support better food for kids, or it can go the other way and the public will hear about and react to that, too.

If you can't get any of the media to cover this as a story, try writing it as an opinion piece for the largest newspaper in town (if they won't run it, go to the next largest paper, and keep going until someone runs it.) As a last resort, try writing it up as a letter to the editor. Be sure to check the guidelines for letters which your local paper probably has online. If they say letter should be limited to 150 words, don't go over the limit; keep it short and to the point.

Letters to the editor are a good way to promote your work any time there is an article in the paper which is relevant, maybe something about child obesity, or about the poor quality of school

lunches nationwide, or about growing interest generally in higher quality food, or the White House getting involved in student nutrition. This is a perfect opportunity to let people know that the local angle on this national story is that your schools now offer fresh fruit three times a week instead of canned fruit, thanks to the visionary leadership of Ms. Nutrition Director and Mr. School Board Member, who both prioritize student health above all else, because they know that malnourished students can't learn. Thank you, thank you Ms ND and Mr SBM! Signed, You, Chair of the Yourtown Student Nutrition Group. This short letter accomplishes so much – it promotes the school meal program and lets people know that there is fresh fruit being served; it highlights the "vision" of two key players whose support you need to move forward; it connects student health with academic achievement; and it lets people know that your group exists and has a voice.

That's it – lather, rinse, repeat. You are on your way to fixing school food! Good luck!

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