



How to Organize and Mobilize to Make Change Happen

By Dana Woldow

My favorite saying, which has guided all of my work as an advocate, is from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Fixing school food is a team sport, and although it is possible for one person acting alone to make a difference, it is hard to bring about change all by yourself. It takes some effort to put together "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens", but once you have done it, your job of changing the school food world will get much easier. Putting together your like-minded group (LMG) is absolutely the first thing you should do when setting out to make change.

How to form a like-minded group (LMG)

The LMG are the people who are going to be your primary support and first line of both offense and defense, so they need to be people you know you can trust to step up when you need them.

1. Figure out a concise way to describe what it is that you are trying to accomplish. For example, "Have you noticed that our school cafeteria never serves fresh fruit? It's always canned fruit swimming in heavy syrup; no wonder there is an epidemic of child obesity. I want to get them to switch to fresh fruit 3 days a week. Are you willing to help me?"
2. Start with the people closest to you – your best school friend, all of your second-best school friends – and make your pitch to them. It is ideal if you can get at least 3 people from your inner circle to join the LMG; that way you will always have a core of fiercely loyal supporters to back you up in any situation.
3. Work outward from there to include all of the other parents you know in your child's class, and in the other classes of the same grade level. Let them know who has already agreed to join the LMG, so that they understand that you are asking them to be a small part of a larger group, not to take on a huge responsibility themselves.
4. As people agree to help, ask for their input on the school food. Keep a list of the other concerns parents have, and add them to your pitch to prospective new members of the LMG. For example, "I want to get them to switch to fresh fruit 3 days a week, and then maybe we can work on getting a salad bar instead of canned vegetables. Is there anything you would like to see changed?"
5. Get to know the parents and guardians who come and go at your school, even if they aren't in your child's grade level. Good prospects include

- ▶ those who show up to go on class field trips (even if it isn't your class)
- ▶ those who come to PTA or other parent group meetings, especially any officers of the group
- ▶ those who organize the fund raising activities or volunteer to help on picture day
- ▶ those who act as "room parent", or who help out in the school office, or in the library

These are the most involved people at your school, the ones who are demonstrating by their presence that they are aware of what is going on in their child's class and that they care about their child's education and are willing to make time in their undoubtedly busy life to stay in contact with the school. These are also the people most likely to take an interest in what you are trying to do, *and the ones who are most likely to oppose you if you don't reach out to include them.*

Improving the school food may not be an issue for everyone; some may just send lunch from home, or not yet be too concerned with what their child is eating at school, but once you explain to them what the food situation is that you are trying to correct, and what changes you would like to see happen, many of them are likely to agree that what you propose makes sense. However, even if they agree with you, people are so busy that they may not all be willing to help. It will become apparent as you talk to people who would be willing to help you do the heavy lifting, who might be willing to help in a limited way with one project, who has no time at all to help but will be happy to send an e-mail if you write the text, and who is not the least bit interested in seeing your project succeed.

Don't scare people off by asking them to take on too much too soon. Your first request is just to see if they are interested enough to join the group. Don't ask them to sign up for a leadership role, or be responsible for one aspect of the organization (like doing public relations, or approaching a school board member); that comes later, after your LMG members have had a chance to get connected, energized and enthusiastic about helping. Don't even ask them if they will attend a meeting on a specific day. Just see if they are willing to be part of an e-mail group, to discuss via e-mail possible strategies for improving the food, at their convenience.

You don't need a big group to get started. If you can find 6 people who support your goal and are willing to help, ask each of them to identify just 2 other people who would also be willing to help in a small way if they are ever needed. This secondary group doesn't have to be as committed as the core 6, but they have to be willing to send out an e-mail in support of your cause when you need them to. That will give you almost 20 people who can be mustered in the event you need to make some noise around your issue.

Mobilizing the LMG

An e-mail campaign

Make sure you get an e-mail address for every member of your LMG. Create a group in your e-mail program so that it is convenient and easy to send out messages to the group. You can have discussions via e-mail, which will make things much more convenient for busy parents who don't have time for any more meetings in their hectic lives.

You will continue to act as leader of the group, so you will always try first to accomplish your goal without mobilizing. If, for example, you want your student nutrition director and Principal to allow a month-long pilot replacing the canned fruit with fresh fruit 3 days a week, approach these two individuals on your own first, and see if they will agree to your request. If they do, then you don't need to mobilize, but if they don't, explain to your LMG what you asked for and what the response was. Ask them each to e-mail both the nutrition director and the Principal, echoing your request to pilot fresh fruit instead of canned 3 times a week for a month. You should also suggest several additional sentences for the e-mail and explain to your LMG that they can either write their own reasons for supporting the proposed pilot, or just cut and paste from among the various choices you have suggested to create their own message. For example, after making the request for the pilot, choices for additional text could include:

"The syrup packed with the canned fruit has too many calories"

"In this country, one out of every three children are now considered overweight or obese; our kids don't need extra calories from syrup"

"Canned fruit such as peaches and pears and applesauce doesn't include the edible skin of the fruit, which is where much of the fiber is found."

"Our children are already eating too much processed food, when they should be learning to eat fresh whole food as much as possible."

"Every time our school serves canned fruit, hundreds of individual plastic serving cups go into the landfill."

The e-mails don't need to be long; they just need to clearly state what is wanted, and give a reason why. Ask people to bcc you on their e-mails, so you will know when they have been sent, and also ask if you can share them within the group, to inspire others. As people write their e-mails and bcc you, forward each one to everyone else in the group. This serves multiple purposes:

- ▶ It reminds people that you asked them to write (in case they forgot)
- ▶ It shows them that others have done so (in case they were worried they would be the only one and thus stand out in a bad way)
- ▶ Reading what others have written can provide inspiration for their own message

Don't bother with a petition; individual e-mails draw much more attention. It is vastly better to have 15 individual messages than 15 names on a petition.

Response to an e-mail campaign

Ask your group members to also share any response they get to their e-mails; again, share all responses with the group. Discuss the responses – did you get what you wanted? If not, did either the nutrition director or the Principal offer legitimate reasons why your request cannot be

accommodated? For example, were you told that you have requested something which would violate USDA regulations for the meal program? Don't take their word for it; check with an authoritative source, such as Janet Poppendieck's excellent ["Free for All: Fixing School Food in America"](#), or read through the current [USDA meal regulations](#) for yourself.

Brainstorm with your group ways to address the reasons why your request is being denied. For example, maybe you were told that the district cannot switch to fresh fruit because students won't eat it; your response to that might be that it is impossible to know what students will or won't do without a pilot. If the response was that students won't eat fresh fruit AND it is too expensive, you might respond that you are not requesting that the entire school district participate, just one school; that the pilot is only 3 days a week for a month (about 12 operational days); that 12 days of fresh fruit at one school will not bankrupt anyone, but that the data the pilot will yield on what students really will and will not eat is well worth any extra expense.

Have everyone who sent an original e-mail request write again to the nutrition director and Principal, and make your case again. Be sure everyone remains cordial and polite; these e-mails may get a wider audience later on in the process, and it is important that your group always be seen as calm, rational and respectful, not shrill, rude or just plain crazy. Offer specific remedies for any problems they suggest might occur. Can parents help in the cafeteria during the pilot to make sure students are urged to try the fresh fruit? Can parents make posters to put up in the caf and around school promoting fresh fruit and encouraging kids to eat it? Be respectful and polite, but insistent. Try to get a few more parents to send e-mails too; make sure you send them something they can just cut and paste into their own e-mail, so that they don't have the excuse of "I don't have time" or "I don't understand the issue well enough to write anything." Get as many people as possible to participate in this second e-mail blitz, even people who don't go to your school. The original LMG members can ask their spouses to send a message too; that can double the number of e-mails you have. You want the nutrition director and Principal to understand that your group is not going to dry up and blow away just because you hit a bump in the road.

Did they agree to try your pilot after the second e-mail blitz? If so, congratulations! Be sure you make good on whatever help you promised to provide to make the pilot successful, and be profuse in your thanks. If not, discuss with your LMG. If your group decides that the response you got is not legitimate, or that it is legitimate (like that the nutrition department cannot afford to do what you are asking) but that you are not willing to take "no" for an answer, then you need to take it to the next level.

Taking it to the next level

[Elsewhere](#) I have talked about the importance of cultivating a relationship with at least one member of your Board of Education. *This is something you need to do early on in your organizing efforts; don't put it off until the day you need to go to the school board for help!* You need to have that card in your deck right from the start, before you begin your campaign.

Ideally, you met with whichever member(s) of your school board you believed would be most receptive to a pitch for improving the school food; you should now have a sense of whether this person is someone who is likely to support you, and who else on the school board this member thinks might also be open to the idea of better school food. It is time to bring these folks into the

loop. Compose a short polite e-mail describing what you have asked for, why you feel it is important, and what response you got from nutrition services and the Principal. Ask for help – can the board member suggest someone else within the district administration that you might approach who would have the power to approve the pilot (this is called "going over the nutrition director's head")?

You are not yet at the point of asking the board member to intervene on your behalf; right now you are just asking for guidance on how to go through proper channels (school district administrations are VERY BIG on going through proper channels) *Don't try to escalate this to a school board level without first having gone through the proper channels.* If you do, you will likely lose, because lifelong administrators will be so shocked at someone not going through channels that they will completely discount anything else about your request, being so upset that you violated protocol. You will lose all credibility; the discussion will become entirely about your breach of protocol and the thing you were requesting – the pilot – will be completely lost in the discussion. You MUST make a good faith effort to take this issue up the chain of command before you approach either the superintendent or a board member to intervene on your behalf. So make it perfectly clear in your communication with the board member that you are NOT asking him or her to step in; you are just asking for the names of those higher ups that might be able to assist you. This e-mail only has to come from you, as group leader. You can mention the fact that there is a group of others who are also in support of this, but they don't need to e-mail the board member at this point.

Once you have the name(s) of those higher on the ladder, forward your e-mail stream to them; that saves you having to summarize the situation. Explain very briefly what it is you want, and why, and ask if they can help you. Ask your LMG and all of the people who sent e-mails to the nutrition director and Principal to do the same. This shows the higher ups that you are not a lone parent, but rather the leader of an organized group, and that you are going through proper channels. Note that it is not likely that any of these higher ups are going to grant your request; far more likely is that they will support the Principal and the nutrition director. That is to be expected – those people are on "their team" and you are not. Team members support each other. But that's okay; you aren't really contacting these higher ups because you expect them to help you. You are contacting them because you can't go to the Superintendent or the school board without having (all together now) "gone through proper channels." By the time you go to the top level, you need to have your e-mail trail which clearly shows that you took it up the ladder step by step; you didn't just jump directly from the bottom rung to the top.

Taking it to the top

If you have pursued your request all the way up the chain of command, and no one has been willing to say yes, or to provide what you consider to be an acceptable explanation for why your request cannot be accommodated, then it is time to take your request to the top. There are two ways to the top; you can either take the request to your school district's Superintendent, or you can take it to the Board of Education.

The difference between the Superintendent and the school board is that the school board sets policy (generally broad policy) and the Superintendent is charged with carrying out the policy. The school board would not generally take up a specific issue like, shall there be a pilot

promoting fresh fruit at Your Elementary School. They could, however, pass a resolution mandating that healthier food be provided to students in the cafeterias, vending machines, classroom events, and fundraising sales, mentioning more fresh fruit and vegetables as examples of such food; then it would be up to the Superintendent and staff to make that happen. School board members also work closely with the Superintendent and frequently have close relationships with top school district staff people as well. Technically, the Superintendent works for the Board of Education and not the other way around, but in a high functioning school district, all parties work together amicably, and more or less as equals.

Which direction you choose to go will depend to some extent on the relationships you have built. Do you already have a relationship with either the Superintendent, or with one or more school board members? It is always easier to work with people who already know you, and are familiar with and support your cause. If you can't decide, then approach both the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

Use the same e-mail strategy that you used when you were first asking the Principal and the nutrition director to approve your pilot, but this time, you need to get a broader base of support. You want parents from all over the school district, and people from all around the community, to support you. The easiest way to get the word out to such a large group is to set up a website, or a page on an existing website, to provide all of the information anyone would need to support your cause and send an e-mail on your behalf. [This](#) is an example of such a website. [Note that this campaign was not related to school food; this is just an example of what kind of information to provide.]

- ▶ In the first section, cogently explain what your issue is, why people should care about it, plus a very brief history of what the situation is now and what you would like the situation to be.
- ▶ Next section explains clearly what people can do to help, and includes a link to another page which has a sample letter, and the e-mail addresses of the people you want contacted (the members of your school board and the Superintendent – these should be available on your school district's website.)
- ▶ Then come links to other material, including one to a page where you will post (with the authors' permission) e-mails that your supporters have sent and shared with you. This helps inspire people to compose their own e-mails, and to see that they are not part of a small group, but rather are part of a growing movement.
- ▶ Add links to any other relevant material that might help support your case; if it is a pilot for fresh fruit, then link to studies that show better nourished kids are better learners, and studies showing the value of eating fresh produce rather than junk food. If you are aware of other school districts, especially in your area, which do serve more fresh fruit, try to find descriptions of what they are doing and link to those.
- ▶ You will also want to post links to any media coverage you are able to generate about your issue.

Once your website is up, write a concise pitch to enlist people to get involved and send e-mails to the Superintendent and the school board. Again, explain to them what the thing is you are trying to accomplish, why they should care, and how easy it is to do what you are asking them to do. Direct them to the page with all the information and be sure to mention that there is a sample e-mail there which they can feel free to cut and paste (so they understand that they don't have to write their own message from scratch); tell them you have provided all the e-mail addresses too. Ask them to bcc you on their e-mail if they are willing to let you post it to inspire others. Urge them to send an e-mail right away, or before a certain date not more than a few days in the future; the longer they wait, the less likely they are to do it at all. Finally, ask them to share your e-mail with all of their friends, post it on their school's chat board or listserv, and generally just share it with the whole known world. This should take no more than about 5 sentences; people are busy and if reading your request for help takes too long, people will assume that "helping" will also take too long and they will just hit "delete."

Meeting with a school board member

Ideally, your e-mail campaign will generate some kind of response from at least some of your school board members. Now is the time to try to meet directly with whichever member(s) seem most receptive to your issue. Ask for a face to face meeting, at their convenience. At the meeting, ask for help moving your project forward. Would the board member be willing to sponsor a resolution supporting healthier food in schools and recommending more pilot studies be done to see how students react to various improvements? Offer to bring a group of people to the necessary school board meetings to speak in support of such a resolution during the public comment portion of the meeting. School board members are always thinking about their budget, so try to find ways to show that what you want to do will help, not hurt, the bottom line. Does poor nutrition lead to students missing school? Are malnourished kids more likely to act out in class, wasting instructional time for everyone and putting the whole class behind? These students can easily fall behind academically and need costly remediation to catch up.

Attending a school board meeting

Even if you can't get a school board member to agree to sponsor a resolution for you, organize your LMG to attend a school board meeting anyway, and use the public comment portion of the meeting to have each member speak in support of improving the quality of the school food and using pilot programs as a sensible and fiscally sound way to test ideas before committing a large amount of district resources to any specific change. Check with the clerk, secretary, or executive assistant to the school board to find out if you need to have your LMG members sign up in advance to speak.

Allow plenty of time to pull this together! It may take you a few weeks to get your speakers organized, so check the schedule of school board meetings to find a date that works. You will also want to reach out to the community to find speakers, and that may also take some time. Keep in mind that it is valuable to have speakers who are authorized to speak on behalf of their organization – for example, someone who is authorized to speak on behalf of your community's PTA (not just your school PTA, but the one for the whole area.) It is possible for an individual to get authorization to speak on behalf of a group such as PTA, but it usually takes a vote of that organization's board to authorize the speaker; the PTA board may only meet monthly, and while they may be willing to authorize the speaker to come to a school board meeting and support your

cause, you will have to go through their existing procedure, on their time line, to get that authorization. It is worth the wait to do this, if it is a large and well-respected organization. It gives your issue huge credibility to have the support of a group like the PTA.

Where can you find community members to speak on your behalf? Try any organization devoted to the needs of children, including Parents for Public Schools, the YMCA, a local hospital, especially a children's hospital or clinic, a Boys and Girls Club, a food bank or anti hunger organization, a pediatric dentists' group. Nurses and pediatricians always support children's health issues; ask each of your LMG to invite their own pediatrician and their nurses and staff to attend the meeting and speak. Nursing or medical students at a local university, or college students studying to be teachers may support you. Does your community have a civic group focused on helping children – a Lions or Kiwanis Club? How about some kind of local government group, such as a city or county task force on child obesity? If you or any of your LMG still have contacts at your children's preschools, those parents may share your concern about better food in the schools because their own kids will soon be enrolling. Other supporters may be found within environmental organizations, or those which support small local farmers, or farmers markets, or food justice. Don't forget to make contact with the people involved with any school gardens in your community and, of course, teachers. It can be really effective to have students speak too, especially those from 8-12 years old; not every child is brave enough to do this, but if you can find a couple who are, put them near the front of the line so they don't have to wait nervously for their turn to speak.

Develop a list of talking points, to make it easy for your speakers to compose their speeches. If you have a lot of points to make, assign the most important ones to the speakers you know for sure will show up; then let everyone else just choose whichever point resonates most with them. Find out from the clerk of the school board how much time is allotted to speakers; it may be just 2 or 3 minutes, and when there are a lot of speakers on the same topic, board members really don't want to listen to all of them saying the same thing, or spend 30 minutes of public comment on just one topic. If your group is large, you may all be asked to limit your comments to 30 or 60 seconds each. Have your speakers prepare a shorter version of their longer speech, so that if your speaking time is cut, the important points still get made. Each speech should include, at a minimum:

- ▶ Speaker name and affiliation (if not representing a group, then name of child's school, or at least number of children speaker has, or what their connection to children is, such as "nursing student".)
- ▶ What action the speaker wants to board to take (pass a resolution in support of better school food and more pilots.)
- ▶ Why the board should take this action (parent efforts to get pilots authorized have been rebuffed, better nourished children learn better, obesity is taking a dreadful toll on kids, etc); it is only necessary for each speaker to choose one reason, the one which each finds most compelling.
- ▶ Be sure to end by thanking the board for prioritizing student health.

If there is time, speakers can also relate a short anecdote from their own experience about why better food or pilot programs are so necessary. Just keep in mind that even if your speaking time is not curtailed, briefer is better! Don't let people ramble on, or talk off the top of their head. It is okay to just read from a prepared speech, especially for those who are nervous speaking publicly, or those who are new to the movement and not yet able to speak authoritatively without notes. Have your speakers practice reading their speech at home, and use a stopwatch to make sure that both their shorter and longer versions fit within the required time limits.

If you have time to have tee shirts printed up with the name of your group on them, this is a valuable tool when your group appears in public. It is hard to ignore a group of a dozen people in the audience, all in bright red or green tee shirts, and it makes it easier for your group members to find each other quickly, so that you can all sit together at the meeting. The media loves this kind of thing too, as the tee shirts look great on TV or in photos, so wearing them may help you snare a post-meeting interview with a reporter. Get them in size XL or even XXL, so people can just pull them on over whatever they are wearing.

If you can't manage custom tee shirts, then either ask everyone to wear the same color shirt or sweater, or buy plain tee shirts in one color and make some large colorful ID badges, using bright adhesive labels available at any stationery or office supply store. Use black marker to emblazon the name of your group and have each speaker wear a badge on their matching color tops. Ask your speakers to each try to bring a friend, or even their kids, to make the group appear larger; these supporters don't need to speak, they can just form part of the crowd sitting in the audience. School board members are definitely swayed by seeing a large organized group turn out to a meeting to support a cause. You want them to be looking out into a sea of red or green-clad people so that they understand that this is not a request coming from a few lone parents, but rather a movement with wide support in the community.

Going to the media

The media can be some of your strongest allies. Reach out to every reporter within at least 25 miles of your community, everything from the nearest major newspaper to the smallest neighborhood four-pager, and all of the radio and TV stations. Don't forget the student newspapers at the local high schools, community colleges, and any nearby colleges and universities; the bigger schools may also have their own radio or TV stations. These student journalists are usually interested in anything related to local education, and they know school food is a hot topic right now. Write up a press release letting the world know that your group will be attending the school board meeting on whatever date you have chosen; explain what your issue is and why your members feel they have no choice but to bring their concerns to the attention of the school board. Indicate that your group will be available to speak with reporters before or after the meeting, and be sure to include a contact person with phone number and e-mail address.

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