

The Boston Globe

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2005

The Junk in School Lunches

WHEN WE drop our two youngest kids at the school bus in the morning, my wife and I assume they are in good hands. But then our 10-year-old son started listing recent lunch menus: Eggo waffles, reheated French toast with maple-flavored corn syrup, hot dogs, ersatz mac and cheese, and canned, sweetened fruit for dessert. I soon sent one of our test kitchen staff to investigate the state of lunches in the Boston public schools. Here is what she found.

More than 30,000 Boston public school kids eat lunches prepared at the Central Kitchen in Dorchester, a site that was originally designed as an auto repair shop. Since most public schools no longer actually cook food on the premises (only 40 schools in Boston have a full-service kitchen), food is prepared and portioned at this central location. (The Central Kitchen is due to close next year; lunches will be shipped in from Pennsylvania.) Central Kitchen lunches often include French toast sticks, egg rolls, and the famous Uncrustable prepackaged sandwiches.

On one information-gathering trip we were happy to find reasonable menu choices: pork in mushroom gravy, mashed potatoes, and corn in one school and a turkey sandwich on whole wheat, an apple, and milk in another. But, right beside these offerings, we found an a la carte lunch line where one can buy Tater Tots, pizza, potato chips, Cheetos, and the like. And don't forget the vending machines right in the lunchroom. How about a Pop Tart, Rice Krispie Treats, fudge brownies, chocolate chip cookies, and granola bars?

Not all the news is bad. Sodas have been banned in Boston public schools since 2004. The National School Lunch Program does indeed have rules: no more than 30 percent of calories from fat and no more than 10 percent from saturated fat. But why are 25 percent of high school students in Massachusetts either obese or overweight? It is estimated that in just a few years, more Americans will die of overeating (and the resultant medical complications) than any other cause, including smoking. That means roughly 500,000 folks are eating themselves to death each year.

The solution to all of this is simple. Billions of marketing dollars have lulled Americans into thinking that processed foods are real food. Is a Smuckers Uncrustable Pre-Browned Grillable Cheese Sandwich, even if it meets federal dietary guidelines, what you want your kids served for lunch? (I counted a whopping 39 ingredients, including high fructose corn syrup, butter flavored oil, dough conditioners, artificial flavors, 19 grams of fat, and 1 gram of salt.) Of course not. Nutritious food does not come "packaged."

An apple, a piece of Vermont cheddar, a hunk of well-made bread, a few carrot sticks, and a glass of milk is a terrific lunch -- and it's healthy and cheap, too. Stop feeding my kids the offal from the bottom of the processed food barrel: turkey loaf, chicken nuggets, processed macaroni and cheese, high fructose corn syrup, palm oil, preservatives, artificial flavors and colors, and whatever surplus foodstuffs the

USDA happens to have on hand that week.

One of America's greatest shortcomings is the triumph of commerce over culture even when it affects the health and well-being of the next generation. For the most part, public schools have abdicated their sacred role as guardians of our children's minds and bodies and have succumbed to the lure of either budgetary pressures (one large school district in Colorado signed a \$10 million pouring rights deal with Coca Cola) or simple convenience.

Boston's Mayor Thomas Menino is the self-proclaimed education mayor. Our nation's first lady is a former teacher and advocate for better schools. We've all heard speeches galore about the quality (or lack thereof) of public school education. Yet our kids are nothing more than a gigantic captive market for our nation's fast-food industry and dumping ground for low-quality USDA surplus.

One day, mothers and fathers across America are going to wake up, throw open the window, and yell, "We're mad, and we're not going to take it anymore!" Like Hercules, we are going to clean the stables of the corporate profiteers, the bureaucrats, and the number-crunching nutritionists and demand that school lunches be put back on the front burner.

How about that day being tomorrow?

Christopher Kimball is founder and editor of Cook's Illustrated Magazine and host of "America's Test Kitchen," a public television cooking show.