

Nierenberg, Fenton: Helping poor children avoid poor diets

Danielle Nierenberg and Ioulia Fenton, Special Contributors

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It's almost time for kids to go back to school. But for many children in Austin, this means a return to terribly unhealthy school lunches fried chicken, pizza pockets, corn dogs, and desserts loaded with high-fructose corn syrup that jeopardize the health and well-being of America's next generation. This needs to change.



Unfortunately, Texas gets a bad grade for childhood obesity and malnutrition. A 2011 report notes that the state is one of nine in the United States where more than 20 percent of kids between the ages of 10 and 17 were considered obese — ranking seventh in the nation. It is unlikely that an overweight child will slim down by the time he or she reaches adulthood — 80 percent of children who are obese between the ages of 10 and 15 remain obese at age 25. Children who eat poorly are at greater risk of developing osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and liver problems later in life.

Fortunately, schools can play a key role in reversing this trend and reinforcing healthy eating behaviors. By emphasizing hands-on nutrition education, such as school garden projects and classroom cooking demonstrations, and by providing fresh, local fruits and vegetables in cafeterias, schools can encourage students to improve their diets.

Several school districts in Texas, such as Judson, Lancaster and Northside, have joined the national Farm to School movement, which connects schools to local farms with the purpose of serving healthy, organic meals in cafeterias. Kids benefit from the fresh, nutritious and tasty food, and the state economy benefits from expanding local food networks. The Farm to School initiative has the potential to create billions in food sales that would benefit not only students, but Texas farmers, businesses and consumers.

Unequal access to healthy foods is also a serious issue in Austin — obesity disproportionately affects poor families who can buy only cheap, processed foods. A recent study by the University of Texas showed that many residents of East Austin's poorer communities suffer from an

inability to access fresh, healthy foods because of a lack of nearby greengrocers or supermarkets. The problem is made worse by lack of access to public or private transportation.

Thankfully, a number of organizations are helping low-income children gain access to healthy foods — organizations such as the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — and can serve as models for the development of a just, healthy, and sustainable food system in Austin.

Capital Area Food Bank of Texas, for example, recently launched the Summer Meals That Matter program, which aims to provide 500,000 nutritional meals for low-income families. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which partners with low-income schools in areas such as El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio, helps communities support the development of healthy lifestyles and prevent child obesity. The program establishes community gardens, farmers markets, and other retail initiatives to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for vulnerable children and their families.

And at Kisoga Secondary School in Kampala, Uganda, students are being taught to manage a sustainable school garden that produces fresh fruits and vegetables. Food from the garden, served at lunch, has significantly decreased child malnutrition in the village. This is just one of many innovations highlighted by the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project and the Barilla Center for Food & Nutrition in the new book *Eating Planet 2012: A Challenge for Mankind and for the Planet*, which examines the effects of individual eating habits on health and the environment.

Austin needs more school programs that emphasize nutrition education, hands-on gardening, and organic, scratch-made, nutritious, locally sourced meals. Such programs can support healthy behavioral changes in children that can last a lifetime.

Nierenberg is project director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project (www.NourishingthePlanet.org). Fenton is a research intern with Nourishing the Planet.

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