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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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2010

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full image



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Rethinking School Food: The Power of the Public Plate

Kevin Morgan and Roberta Sonnino

For the vast majority of children in industrial countries, school food is something that has to be endured rather than enjoyed—a rite of passage to an adult world where healthy eating is the exception, rather than the norm, as evidenced by the burgeoning problems of diet-related diseases. Millions of children in developing countries have to endure something far worse, of course, because school food is still conspicuous by its absence in many cases.

In parts of Europe, North America, and Africa, things are changing today. People have moved beyond debates on whether public bodies are capable of delivering a healthier school food service. The jury is in: it is indeed possible—because public bodies are already doing it. When properly deployed, public procurement—the power of purchase—can fashion a sustainable school food service that delivers social, economic, and environmental dividends while also promoting a culture of sustainability. Healthy school food is also generally associated with behavioral improvements, especially in terms of children’s concentration levels and learning capacity.¹

Although the power of purchase has been

deployed to great effect to meet strategic priorities—most notably, to create military technologies in the United States or nuclear energy in France—it is rarely used for such prosaic things as fresh food for schools, hospitals, and extended care facilities. Fortunately, more and more people are beginning to realize that healthy eating must in itself be a strategic priority in order to truly value human health, social justice, and environmental integrity—the key principles of sustainable development.

The school food service is a litmus test of a society’s political commitment to sustainable development because it caters to young and vulnerable people whose physical tastes and habits of thought are still being formed. But delivering a sustainable school food service is more challenging than it appears. Indeed, despite the stereotype of being a simple service, school food is part of a quite complex ecology in which many variables have to be synchronized. To be effective, school food reform requires changes throughout the system, given the interdependencies involved in the process that brings food from farm to fork.

Kevin Morgan is professor of governance and development and **Roberta Sonnino** is a lecturer in environmental policy and planning in the School of City and Regional Planning at Cardiff University.

Creating New Generations of Knowledgeable Consumers

Being part and parcel of their communities, schools cannot solve societal problems on their own, especially when it comes to something as complex as people's dietary habits. In virtually every society where it has been broadcast, the "healthy eating" message has faced two formidable obstacles: it has been overwhelmed by the "junk food" message, which dwarfs it in terms of advertising spending, and the public health community has naively assumed that getting the right information to the public would be sufficient to induce cultural change.

A disposition for healthy eating is a socially acquired facility, the result of learning with family and friends at home and at school. A "whole-school" approach—one that embeds the healthy eating message into a wider educational package that stresses the positive links between food, fitness, health, and both physical and mental well-being—can have a positive influence on what children eat in and outside of school, and to that extent it plays a key role in fostering the demand for healthier food in schools.

Crucially, though, the healthy eating ethos has to inform every aspect of the school environment—the classroom, the dining room, the vending machine, even the school grounds—to ensure that the landscape and the mind-set of the school are compatible and mutually reinforcing. Where it is fun, stimulating, and enabling, the whole-school approach can deliver handsome dividends even in the most challenging social environments, creating the single most important ingredient of a sustainable school food service: knowledgeable consumers who care about the origin of their food.

Fashioning Sustainable Food Chains through School Food Reform

Whereas the role of school meals in forging new generations of informed consumers is immediately evident, people do not necessarily think of schools as markets for quality food producers. Yet many countries are using school food reform as a tool to develop new supply chains that set a high premium on the use of "quality" food, which is generally equated with fresh, locally produced food.²

In the United States, securing food from local suppliers is one of the hallmarks of the Farm-to-School movement, which has been helping schools to reconnect with local food producers. So far more than 1,000 schools in 38 states are buying fresh products from local farms. "Home-grown school feeding" has also become a priority in many developing countries, where the World Food Programme of the United Nations has been trying to replace food imports (on which conventional school feeding programs were based) with locally grown foods. The chief aim of this revolutionary initiative, which has been especially successful in Brazil



Dylan Oliphant

Room for improvement: a high school cafeteria lunch in the U.S.

and Ghana, is to create markets for local producers in the process of promoting the health and education of the children involved.³

Sustainable food systems are not wholly synonymous with local food systems. Although there is no reason to assume that locally produced food is inherently better than imports, there is no doubt that the demand for healthier school food creates important opportunities for economic development if local suppliers have the appropriate produce and the infrastructure to distribute it. Thus school food reform has an important role to play in creating new opportunities for small producers who have too often been marginalized, if not displaced, by globalization of the food system.⁴

Tapping the Power of Purchase

Public procurement is the most powerful instrument for creating a sustainable school food service, but its potential has been stymied in some countries by narrow interpretations of what constitutes “value for money.” In cost-based contracting cultures, like those of the United Kingdom and the United States, the biggest barrier to sustainable procurement has been a systemic tendency for low cost to masquerade as best value—a tendency that procurement officers and catering managers often justify by referring to the wider regulatory context of their work. In Italy, in contrast, as described later, best value embodies cultural as well as financial attributes, allowing local authorities to take account of the qualitative features of the service when awarding contracts.

In the United Kingdom, European public procurement regulations have often been seen as a barrier to school food reform. But when the U.K. approach is compared with that traditionally adopted in Italy, which is subject to the same European Union (EU) regulations, it is clear that the problem is one of interpretation. Where the United King-

dom was conservative, Italy was bold; where the United Kingdom stressed value for money in the narrow economic sense, Italy sought values in the broadest sense of the term. The explanation for these divergent interpretations is to be found in the interplay of cultural values and political willpower, which in Italy’s case sets a high premium on the creative procurement of produce that is strongly associated with seasonality and territoriality. In short, EU procurement rules are not barriers if public bodies have the competence and confidence to deploy the power of purchase within these rules.⁵

In the United States, too, procurement rules have been interpreted as a barrier, preventing school districts from purchasing locally produced food in the school lunch program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture interprets the rules very conservatively, claiming that school districts are not allowed to specify local geographic preferences when they issue their tenders—an interpretation that is fiercely contested by other legal experts. Nothing will do more to promote the cause of local school food procurement in the United States than a clarification of the regulations so that local sourcing is positively and explicitly encouraged by federal and state legislation.⁶

Pioneers of the School Food Revolution

Each of the reforms just described—the whole-school approach, the creation of sustainable food chains, and creative public procurement—is a major challenge in itself. But the biggest challenge of all is to synchronize the reforms so that they have a mutually reinforcing, synergistic effect. This is what the pioneers of school food reform have in common: they all recognize the ecological and interdependent character of the school food service.

Even though all over the world people are becoming increasingly aware of the role of

school food in promoting the objectives of sustainable development, two countries can be considered pioneers of the school food revolution: Scotland and Italy. Indeed, in these countries all three fundamental aspects of the school reform process have been taken into account, reflecting a new vision of the service that is beginning to transform cultural values at all stages of the school food chain—among children and their parents, school staff, procurement officers, suppliers, and policymakers.

Scotland pioneered the British school food revolution long before *Jamie's School Dinners*, a popular TV series that in 2006 widely exposed the general public to the problems of the British school meal service. By then Scotland had just ended the first stage of its school food reform, which included an investment of £63.5 million (some \$104 million) to redesign the school meal service. This process started in 2002 with the publication of *Hungry for Success*, a report commissioned by the Scottish government that explicitly promoted the whole-school approach. In addition to emphasizing the need to echo the message of the classroom in the dining room, this seminal report introduced new nutrient-based standards to improve the quality of food served in schools and suggested that the school meal service was closer to a health rather than a commercial service.⁷

The rural county of East Ayrshire, in central Scotland, has gone farthest in implementing the government's recommendations. Making the most of the power of purchase gained through *Hungry for Success*, in 2004 East Ayrshire introduced a pilot scheme in one of its primary schools based on the use of fresh, organic, and local food. The initiative was so successful among children, parents, and the catering staff that one year later the Council decided to extend the reform to another 10 primary schools. Today, all primary schools in the county are involved in the program.⁸

Central to the process was the adoption of

a creative procurement approach that aimed to help organic and small suppliers become involved in the school meal system. For example, some of the “straightness” guidelines for Class I vegetables were made more flexible to attract organic suppliers; the contract was divided into smaller lots to help smaller suppliers cope with the scale of the order; and award criteria were equally based on price and quality. At the same time, the Council actively worked to create a shared commitment to the ideals of the reform all across the food chain. Specifically, training sessions on nutrition and healthy eating were organized for catering managers and cooks. Farmers were invited into the classroom to explain where and how they produce food. Parents were also taken on board through a series of “healthy cooking tips demonstrations.”⁹

In East Ayrshire, school food reform has delivered important outcomes from a sustainable development perspective. As a result of the Council's sourcing approach, food miles have been reduced by 70 percent and packaging waste has decreased. Small local suppliers have been provided with new market opportunities, while users' satisfaction with the service has increased significantly. A recent survey found that 67 percent of children think that school meals taste better, 88 percent of them like fresh food, and 77 percent of the parents believe that the scheme is a good use of the local council's money. Even more important perhaps, the school food revolution in this deprived rural county has created a new shared vision of sustainable development that is cutting across the realms of consumption, production, and procurement, challenging widespread misconceptions about the potential for procuring quality food.¹⁰

In Italy, the whole-school approach is traditionally embedded in the school meal service, which is considered an integral part of citizens' right to education and health. As a result, as noted earlier, best value there is not at all syn-

onymous with low cost; in fact, the qualitative characteristics of the service and its compatibility with the curriculum (specifically, local traditions) are always taken into account in the tendering process. Not surprisingly, then, Italian schools have been sourcing locally for decades, often complementing their emphasis on local products with a wide range of educational initiatives for children and their parents that emphasize the values of seasonality and territoriality. Unlike what happens in most other countries, these strategies are supported by the national government, which enacted a law in 1999 that explicitly promotes “the use of organic, typical and traditional products” in school and hospital canteens.¹¹

When this law was passed, the city of Rome was governed by a Green Party administration that, like many others in Italy, was interested in the potential of organic catering in schools. What made the situation in Rome different from other cities was the size. Some 150,000 children who eat at school in Rome consume approximately 150 tons of food per day. To avoid the shock that such massive demand would have created on the organic food market, the city chose a progressive procurement approach. In the beginning, catering companies were required to supply only organic fruit and vegetables, but an incentive system was created for them to increase the range of organic products for schools. At the same time, award criteria were designed to stimulate bidders to improve the socio-environmental quality of the products and services offered—including, for example, criteria that reward initiatives to improve the eating environment for children or to provide products certified as Fair Trade (which are used as a

tool to teach children the value of solidarity with developing countries).¹²

Like East Ayrshire, Rome understood the importance of creating a new collective culture of sustainability around school food. Contracted suppliers have been ensured a constant dialogue with city authorities through the creation of a permanent round table, which aims to foster “a shared willingness of going in a certain direction,” as the director of one catering company explained. At the same time, they have been asked to introduce food education initiatives among service users, who have been given the opportunity to participate in the reform through Canteen Commissions. These consist of two parents who can inspect the school premises and provide feedback on children’s reaction to the changes being introduced.¹³



Doing a better job? A high school lunch in Grenoble, France.

Peiling Tan

After years of efforts and continuous improvement, Rome is in the vanguard of the school food revolution. Today, 67.5 percent of the food served in the city’s schools is organic, 44 percent comes from “bio-dedicated” food chains that focus exclusively on organic prod-

ucts, 26 percent is local, 14 percent is certified as Fair Trade, and 2 percent comes from social cooperatives that employ former prisoners or that work land confiscated from the Mafia. As the reform process continues to unfold, a new type of quality-based food system is beginning to emerge—and with it new cultural values that are educating civil society to the values and meanings of sustainability.¹⁴

From School Food to Community Food

The examples of Scotland and Italy demonstrate that properly designed and delivered school food reform can play a crucial role in creating new forms of “ecological citizenship” that lead people to think more critically about their interactions with the environment, engage practically with collective problems, and assume responsibility for their conduct. In simple terms, school food reform is creating new generations of knowledgeable consumer-citizens.¹⁵

Much more could be achieved if the power of purchase were to be harnessed across the entire spectrum of the public sector—in hospitals, nursing homes, colleges, universities,

prisons, government offices, and the like. In the context of climate change and food security, extending the benefits of school food reform to larger, more significant social and spatial scales is more and more an imperative, not just an option.

Many cities around the world are beginning to move in this direction through the development of a range of food strategies that are designed to ensure access to healthy food for all citizens. As planners and policymakers begin to redesign the urban foodscape of cities like New York, London, Belo Horizonte, and Dar es Salaam, among others, new challenges continue to arise in the realms of infrastructural development, transport, land use, and citizens’ education, to name just a few.¹⁶

In this context, one fundamental lesson can be learned from school food reform. If sufficient political will could be mustered for a new “ethic of care” that has a global as well as a local reach, as has happened in Rome and East Ayrshire, community food planning could play an invaluable role in promoting human health, social justice, and environmental integration—the hallmarks of sustainable development.

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