

**Back to School:  
A Qualitative Assessment of Public School Food Policies and their Value to  
Cultivate Healthful Eating Habits**

**Abstract**

This study investigates how policy-makers and policies foster eating habits and define nutrition for children from kindergarten to eighth grade through close reading of academic texts and ethnographic research. I will ask how policies are in effect at local levels and how participants implement policies to answer whether Chittenden County public schools serve nutritious meals by meeting state and federal laws, or if they meet nutritive standards by superseding these policies.

**Purpose**

The intersection of public education and the food industry in the United States originates in the late nineteenth century, although school lunch programs flourished during the Great Depression and the advent of the New Deal. Under President Roosevelt's administration, agriculture surplus, like grains and corn, was allocated to the new National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to feed severely malnourished children. The NSLP was signed into law in 1946 to "safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children" and during this era, most children received their one daily meal through the program (Gleason 2003: 1047). By assuming this role, the federal government assumed the power to dictate food policies in public schools. As influencers of what school children consume, policy-makers became the architects of children's eating habits as they defined

nutrition and molded social norms about food and diet. The private companies who lobbied policy-makers used their influence to maintain and create laws and regulations in their favor. Companies like Coca-Cola have gone to extensive lengths to advertise their products and appeal to a young demographic starting as young as age seven (Nestle 2007).

Since 1917, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued several dietary recommendations to combat nutrition problems. These recommendations came in the form of pamphlets, posters, and booklets, but it was not until 1946 that governmental food recommendations entered the sphere of public education, and it was then that food propaganda for motives unrelated to children's health entered the school system (Nestle). The opportunities for food companies to lobby the government are unceasing and "and the personal connections made with legislators or agency officials who might be in a position to promote favorable regulations" (Nestle 93).

By questioning current policies, I will analyze the intersection of these two persuasive forces of the state. This research centers on how policy-makers and policies foster eating habits and define nutrition for children from kindergarten to eighth grade. I will ask how policies are enacted at local levels and how stakeholders implement policies. This study will consist of close reading of historical texts and critical policy assessments and ethnographic research of the Chittenden County public school food services, including interviews with non-profit organizations like the Burlington School Food Project and Hunger Free Vermont. Through participant observation, I will understand the systematic

coordination to make programs efficient and the variety of opinions staff and legislators hold about the public-school food system. Through semi-structured interviews, I will have in-depth conversations about how to make nutritious food accessible to students and how policies can best be put into practice.

A person's early relationship with food leaves an impression for life; one's relationship with experiencing food is critical to their world (Harris 2008). What's more, the importance of such nourishment is necessary to a child's wellbeing. Public schools have a tremendous responsibility and pressure to provide healthy meals to their students. Their role is a means to equitable access to food, which should mean a more equitable academic playing field. 50.6 million students depend on school-provided meals, so it seems only logical to ensure such programs meet the needs of students, so they, in turn, may be happy, healthy, and successful students (NCES 2018).

### **Significance**

The rise of obesity among younger populations, namely children, in the U.S. has been of the utmost concern for doctors and politicians alike. In recent decades, Western biomedicine nationalized an obesity epidemic identifying millions of Americans as overweight and unhealthy. While the biomedical construction of the obesity epidemic addresses a valid correlation between body weight and physical health, we should look at meals students are served in school and ask how these meals contribute to their health.

The nutritive value of meals served in public schools is a direct result of stringent standards and tight budgets highlighting what is, perhaps, the root of a

larger problem in the U.S. While the food children are exposed to in the home is important to their taste and food preferences, the ritualization of eating habits is solidified throughout adolescence as children eat one or two meals per day in their school (Harris 2008). These policies dictate a minimum nutritive standard, and since legislation remains relatively untouched by policy makers, there is little room for adjustment on local levels. The latest renovation of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization was in 2010, and before then in 1995. The growing landscape of child psychology tells us habit formation begins as early as nine years old. Thus, small incentives are an effective way to encourage children to eat well can be enforced through legislation (Loewenstein et al 2016). Moreover, the food students are served matters to their academic success. One study provides strong evidence that low-income African American students who participated in their school breakfast program for four months showed a significant increase in their math grades and a decrease in absence and tardy rates (Murray 2007).

My goal is to add to the current body of scholarly work about federal and Vermont state public school food policies and to ask if policies are realistic. I will examine the role these policies play in the development of children's relationships with food. It will be important to know how *nutrition* is defined and who is setting the nutritive standard. I will question whether Chittenden County public schools serve nutritious meals by meeting state and federal laws, or if they meet nutritive standards by superseding these policies.

## **Literature Review**

The current literature on public school food policy in the U.S. encompasses a breadth of information ranging from child nutrition, to foodservice labor, to community-level food sovereignty. These topics vary in their central focus, yet they share an analysis of the quality of food served to K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Despite reformative efforts, the NSLP remains a large federal operation that sees little policy change that is beneficial on local levels for schools and communities.

In her field work in a high school lunch room, Janet Poppendieck found that nutrition content did not drive the NSLP; in fact, a slice of pizza and a serving of French fries satisfies the required components of a reimbursable lunch. A classification such as this was met with a demand to ameliorate issues like these. Academic achievement is explicitly affected by nutrition and to deny students a foundational pillar of their academic potential speaks to a larger national responsibility (Murray 2007). In recent years, child nutrition came to the forefront of political conversations when First Lady Michelle Obama addressed childhood obesity and its relation to diet. The “Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Health Hungry-Free Kids Act of 2010” increased aid for federally funded school meals and nutrition programs and improved access to healthy food for low-income children.

The research that critiques heat-and-serve meal models and the nutritional content of federally funded meals is relevant to this study. Research that assesses the NSLP aids in decision-making about food policy on a variety of levels. Gleason and Suitor (2003) utilize a fixed-effects model to estimate the result of

NSLP participation, using data from the Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals (CSFII) from 1994 to 1996. They found that NSLP participants are more likely than nonparticipants to consume milk and meat (foods provided by the NSLP), while nonparticipants are more likely to consume soft drinks and fruit drinks. Overall, the results of the study indicate that from its inception, the program is succeeding in the effort to limit total fat, saturated fat, and added sugar consumption. While Gleason and Sutor (2003) focus on the NSLP's efficiency to accomplish its objectives, there is a wide subset of research that examines the increasing rates of childhood obesity concurrent with school food environments.

In some studies, school lunches are examined for their nutrient diversity. While lunch programs are “contested political terrains shaped by government agencies, civil society activists, and agri-food companies,” the social organization of school lunch programs are ever-evolving (Gaddis 2018: 89). Cullen et al (2008) assess the effect of the Texas Public School Nutrition Policy during a middle school lunchtime for three years. The data collected during these three years confirms the success of the program. The authors conclude that state nutrition policies can improve the nutritional value of the foods consumed by students. Evidently, state policies are helpful to implement nutritionally-conscious policies on a large-scale platform. However, statewide policy affects *all* school food environments, and thus there may be less room to adapt to the needs of smaller communities.

The environment in which students are exposed to food is vital to their relationship with food. Contemporary food policy research also considers the

sustainability of school food systems. The research that tackles the intricate network of labor and policy demonstrates that the commercialization of school meals and pre-packaged food diminishes the nutritional value of food, students' interest in their meal, and the social interactions between students and school food service workers. Morgan and Sonnino's (2013) framework for a school food-based moral economy requires socially just policies and better school food programs. Alternative food movements seek to de-commercialize this highly streamlined delivery of food and engage students with their food.

### **Methods and Timeline\***

\*timeline follows at end of proposal

A variety of methods will be employed to conduct this study and offer a breadth of perspectives about Chittenden County public school food policies. My research will be informed through close reading, participant observation, and one-on-one interviews. Close reading of historical texts and critical policy assessments will inform how I approach my ethnographic research and provide a well-formed basis of knowledge and critiques. By understanding the most fundamental elements of school lunch programs, its intricate history, and policy changes, I can better address the gaps in the research field and where the most effective change should be applied.

A critical element to anthropological research is participant observation which Marshall and Rossman describe as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (1989: 79). My participant observation will include observing elementary and middle school lunch hours. First, these observations will be most useful to understand how

legislation is enacted and secondly, to examine the satisfaction of those who eat and serve the meals. I will see how children are served lunch, what they eat, and their general reactions to the food they are served. The IRB process will require me to gain consent from each Burlington-area school I work with including Edmunds Elementary, Hunt Middle School, and Sustainability Academy. After both the IRB and schools agree to the ways in which I would like to do ethnographic research, I will visit each school during lunch hours. The goal of this observation is to know the environment in which students are eating. This will not involve speaking with students. While conducting this ethnography, I will have a notebook and a voice recorder in which I will write and verbally record notes which I will later transcribe.

Additionally, I will engage in participant observation with non-profit organizations, like Hunger Free Vermont and the Burlington School Food Project. In these cases, I will partake in their state and federal advocacy, nutrition education curriculums, and school meal implementation. Again, I will take handwritten notes and all audio-recorded notes will be transcribed. Participant observation will open the door to speak with school food service workers. My interviewees will be from an array of school food backgrounds and, thus, offer personal testimonies to the reality of how school meal policies are enacted on the ground. I hope to address the successes and failures of state and federal school lunch programs. I will record all 1:1 semi-structured interviews so that the flow of the conversation is not limited by my writing speed. I will transcribe the interviews in Microsoft Word documents. With NVivo, a qualitative analytical

software, I will consolidate, reflect, and analyze my in-person experiences. From these conversations, I will evaluate how policies are implemented, to what degree they are successful, and how they can be improved.

### Proposed Timeline

Method	When	Estimated Duration	Description
Close Reading	Summer 2019	Continuous	Federal and State food policies implemented in public schools
Close Reading	Summer 2019	Continuous	Federal and VT state current and proposed legislature on school food policy
Close Reading	Summer 2019	Continuous	History of National School Lunch Program and current-day social implications
Participant observation fieldwork	Fall 2019 (Oct-Dec)	(1) Elementary school: 2 hours, 2-3 visits // (2) middle school: 2 hours, 2-3 visits	Chittenden County public school lunch hours
Participant Observation	Fall 2019 (Oct/Nov)	3 visits	Hunger Free Vermont, Burlington School Food Project
Interview	Fall 2019 (Oct)	3-4 employees, 30-60 minutes	school food service worker(s)
Interview	Fall 2019 (Nov)	2-3 employees, 30-60 minutes	School meal/food coordinator(s)
Interview	Fall 2019 (Dec)	3-4 employees, 30-60 minutes	Hunger Free Vermont employee(s)
Interview	Fall 2019 (Dec)	3-4 employees, 30-60 minutes	Burlington School Food Project employee(s)

Interview	Fall 2019 (Nov)	1 employee [potentially 2], 60 minutes	Employee of Vermont Agency of Education: Child and Adult Care Food Division
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