



# **THE LABOR OF LUNCH**

**WHY WE NEED  
REAL FOOD  
AND REAL JOBS  
IN AMERICAN  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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# **THE LABOR OF LUNCH**

## **COMMUNITY READING GUIDE**

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This guide is designed for individuals and groups who are interested in using *The Labor of Lunch* as a way to learn more about school lunch and/or take action at the local level. It is organized in chronological order by chapter, however readers may choose to skip around.

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# PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. As you begin reading *The Labor of Lunch*, spend some time thinking about your own food habits. How were they shaped by your childhood?
2. What are the first things that come to mind when you think about the words “school lunch”?
3. Take a few minutes to reflect on your own experience eating lunch at school.
  - Did you bring lunch from home or eat lunch at school?
  - Did you participate in the US National School Lunch Program (NSLP)? You may not know the answer to this question. If you received free or reduced-price lunches you likely participated in the NSLP. If you paid full-price for your lunch you may or may not have participated. An easy way to tell is to ask yourself whether you stood in the same cafeteria line as students who got a “complete” meal (consisting of protein, grains, fruit, vegetables, and milk), or stood in an à la carte line and purchased whatever you wanted. If you purchased food from the à la carte line, you most likely weren’t participating in the NSLP. Instead, you were buying what people in the industry refer to as “competitive foods.”
  - If you are from another country, did you participate in a different national or government-sponsored school lunch program?
  - What were your favorite/least favorite lunches?
  - How were you treated by the cafeteria staff?
  - What was the atmosphere of the cafeteria like?
4. How would you define “real” food? How would you define a “real” job? Why might it be important for school lunch activists to organize for real food *and* real jobs simultaneously?
5. What is your vision for the future of the NSLP? Dream big! Don’t let yourself be constrained by the pragmatics of money, resources, or political feasibility. Articulate your \*ideal\* school lunch program. Think about dining atmosphere, nutritional quality of the food served, cuisine types, lunch cost, cafeteria staffing, etc. What might it take for us to build the collective power necessary to achieve this ideal?
6. Society cannot function without care, yet there is widespread disagreement about whether individuals or the government should be responsible for meeting the basic caring needs of the American population. There is also widespread disagreement about the quality of care that individuals/the government should provide. In your opinion, what does it mean for us to care well for ourselves? For each other? For future generations?

# INTRODUCTION: WHY WE NEED TO FIX THE FOOD AND THE JOBS

1. Children who attend K-12 schools in the US qualify for paid, reduced-price, or free lunches based on their family's income. Most of the 30 million children who participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Another 20 million children (mostly from more affluent families) do not eat the government-subsidized school lunch. Do you think this is a good model? Why or why not? What would be the pros and cons of serving lunches to all children free of charge?
2. Gaddis presents stories of worker-led change and numerous statistics about frontline K-12 cafeteria workers. How, if at all, did this information change how you think about lunch ladies, the struggles they face, and their potential to lead the movement for real food and real jobs?
3. What does the premise that care work (also called social reproduction) should be cheap, if not free, imply about our societal or political values? What do you think is the driving force behind this mentality?
4. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines intersectionality as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.” How, if at all, do you see school lunch as an intersectional issue?
5. *The Labor of Lunch* discusses how Big Food companies have influenced school lunch and industrial food systems more broadly. In your own words, explain how the drive to keep food “cheap” has pushed companies to exploit both workers and the environment.
6. School lunch activists have recognized the need to organize for racial justice, environmental justice, and economic justice within the NSLP. In your opinion, what are the major issues at stake within the NSLP with regard to racial justice? Environmental justice? Economic justice?
7. Do you agree with the author that labor needs to be at the forefront of the conversation surrounding school lunch reform? Why or why not? If you disagree, what issue(s) do you think should be?

## Organizing Activities

Go eat lunch with the students at one or more K-12 schools in your community. Talk with the cafeteria staff about their jobs. Explore the child nutrition section of the school's website and familiarize yourself with the menus. Take notes on what you learned and report back to your *Labor of Lunch* reading group. Discuss what you learned from this activity and brainstorm a list of changes you'd like to see in the future. Your group may wish to consult Section 1 of the Chef Ann Foundation's [Parent Advocacy Toolkit](#). Consider using the Chef Ann toolkit or the [Food Corps Healthy School Toolkit](#) to guide your work.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE RADICAL ROOTS OF SCHOOL LUNCH

1. Why do you think caring for children has historically been viewed as a private rather than a public responsibility in the United States?
2. What obstacles did activists within the nonprofit school lunch movement encounter when trying to create and expand the nation's first public school lunch programs? How were these obstacles shaped by the gendered power dynamics of American society?
3. Caroline Hunt urged women to use their economic power to support ethical production practices and to organize together in a spirit of mutual aid. How can individuals practice this philosophy of conscious consumption today? What about communities?
4. What would your ideal school lunch program look like? How does this compare with the vision for school lunch that Emma Smedley put forward in the 1920s?
5. What are the benefits of engaging children in food education at school? Consider John Dewey and Emma Smedley's perspectives when answering this question.
6. How did communities come together to create nonprofit school lunch programs and Victory Gardens during World War II? Why were some communities able to access federal resources more easily than others?
7. What parallels do you see between the issues previous generations of school lunch activists faced and the issues that current activists face today?

### Organizing Activities

Over a century ago, a group of concerned women (and their allies) launched a nonprofit school lunch movement that eventually succeeded in creating the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In your *Labor of Lunch* reading group, brainstorm a list of potential allies who could help you make meaningful changes to your local school lunch program. Identify any existing parent-teacher organizations, student clubs, labor unions, enthusiastic individuals, community organizations, public health advocates, local politicians, school board members, etc. How can you use your existing social connections to build momentum? After you've generated a list of potential allies, make a commitment to each other to schedule one-on-one meetings with these stakeholders. Collectively decide on a timeframe, discuss individual responsibilities, and create a mechanism (e.g., Google Docs) for tracking your progress and sharing what you've learned. Your group may also wish to consult Sections 2 and 3 of the Chef Ann Foundation's [Parent Advocacy Toolkit](#) or the Food Corps [Healthy Schools Toolkit](#).

# CHAPTER 2

## THE FIGHT FOR FOOD JUSTICE

1. How did suburbanization and white flight from urban centers affect the development of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) from the 1950s through the 1970s? In what ways did this phenomenon exacerbate the structural racism and classism embedded within local implementation of the National School Lunch Act of 1946?
2. Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale explained the difference between a “reformist” program and a “revolutionary” program when defending the Free Breakfast for Children Program from critics. In your own words, what is the difference? Would you characterize the recent changes to the NSLP contained within the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 as reformist or revolutionary?
3. A national coalition of women’s organizations helped to fuel the expansion of the NSLP during the late 1960s and early 1970s during a time when many Americans worked together to push for social justice. In the years that followed, what caused the shift from outward-looking, collective care to inward-looking concern for one’s own family?
4. Do you believe it is more important for individuals to focus on outward-looking, collective care or inward-looking concern for their own families? Is it ethical to prioritize one over the other? Why or why not?
5. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz (1971-1976) was well-known for his pro-corporate policies and anti-environmental rhetoric. What, if any, parallels do you see between his directive for small family farmers to “get big” or “get out” and the transformations that occurred within the NSLP during this time?
6. Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez, Rachel Carson, Frances Moore Lappé are some of the leaders who changed the conversation about food during the 1960s and 1970s by drawing attention to labor and environmental issues. Based on the summary of their activism in this chapter and/or your own prior knowledge, come up with 2-3 ideas for how today’s food activists can utilize the values and ideas of these revolutionaries to redesign the NSLP.

### Organizing Activities

School lunch activists of the 1960s and 1970s built a powerful coalition that brought people of diverse backgrounds into a shared political project. Take some time to revisit the list of goals and potential allies that your reading group developed. Ask yourselves the following questions: (1) Are the goals designed with social justice and equity in mind? (2) Does our list of potential allies cut across lines of class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.? (3) Have we invited those who are most impacted by the problems we identified to contribute their perspectives to our group and/or to partner with us to develop a strategy for moving forward? If not, what’s holding us back? What resources, community connections, etc. do we need to cultivate?

# CHAPTER 3

## FROM BIG FOOD TO REAL FOOD LITE

1. Do you believe it is ethical for families to focus on protecting their own children's health by opting out of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in search of better, "healthier" alternatives? Why or why not?
2. There are many people, nonprofit organizations, school districts, and corporations that are working to bring "real" food to American public schools. What problems do they aim to address through their efforts? In your opinion, which is the most important?
3. Articulate at least 2-3 ways that Big Food companies benefit from the individualization of risk and responsibility within the food system. In your opinion, should the government play a stronger role in regulating the presence of "ingredients of concern" in processed foods? Why or why not?
4. Discuss what you found most surprising about either: (1) the Food and Drug Administration's approach to regulating food additives or (2) the development of clean label chemistry and real food marketing language by Big Food corporations.
5. What strategies and tactics are consumers using to "lift the veil" on industrial foods and make change? Refer back to the example of "pink slime" as a starting point.
6. What is "real food lite" as Gaddis defines it? Do you agree that real food lite provides some concessions to the real food movement, while simultaneously preserving some of the worst features of the cheap food economy? Why or why not?
7. How does the professed food industry benefit from the narrative that cooking from scratch is stressful, difficult, and potentially unsafe? Why does this narrative persist despite evidence to the contrary? What might it take to disrupt it?
8. In the conclusion of her book *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, sociologist Janet Poppendieck asks "whether school food should be a mirror of the American food system or a leverage point for transforming it in a more just and sustainable direction." What do you think?
9. Why does Gaddis argue for collective solutions over individual fixes like precautionary consumption? Do you agree with her analysis? Why or why not?

### Organizing Activities

Help shape food policy and shift power away from Big Food companies by writing letters and/or calling your elected officials to express your vision for the future of the NSLP. FoodCorps has an excellent [policy action center](#) with an option to sign-up for policy alerts. Here is a [simple guide](#) to help your reading group contact elected officials at the local, state, and national level. Make the letters personal. Why do you care? What would the school lunch reforms you're advocating mean for people in your Congressional district? If you're able, consider donating to politicians and/or advocacy organizations that fight for the food systems reforms you'd like to see.

# CHAPTER 4

## CAFETERIA WORKERS IN THE “PRISON OF LOVE”

1. How does the phenomenon of lunch debt relate to the financial structure of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?
2. Caricatures of lunch ladies abound in American media and pop culture. This chapter highlights the example of comedian Adam Sandler’s *Lunch Lady Land*. What other examples can you think of? What do these examples tell you about the status of lunch ladies in American society?
3. What is meant by the term “emotional labor”? Identify at least 2-3 examples of how you and/or people within your social circle practice emotional labor and for what purpose.
4. How, if at all does gender play into the assumption that “good” school cafeteria workers should be willing to work for love, not money? What other jobs carry this expectation?
5. Why are individual women--mothers and lunch ladies--often blamed for children’s poor dietary habits? What types of structural constraints might they face when attempting to care well for children at home and at school? How, if at all, do these constraints relate to their positionality in terms of class, race, educational attainment, etc.?
6. Gaddis uses feminist economist Nancy Folbre’s concept of the “prisoner of love” to explain the complex dynamics that prevent school cafeteria workers from engaging in organizing tactics that would harm children in the short-term. How might students and communities support cafeteria workers who are trapped in this figurative prison of love?
7. What are the major narratives related to culinary skill and programmatic constraints that keep schools tied to the cheap food economy and “heat-and-serve” food? Did it surprise you to learn about the culinary techniques that were once commonly used in American school kitchens?
8. What parallels do you see between the deskilling of home cooks and the deskilling of school cooks? What are the pros and cons of relying primarily on convenience foods to feed ourselves?

### Organizing Activities

Revisit what your *Labor of Lunch* reading group has learned about the kitchen and cafeteria workers in your local schools. Are they unionized? Are most of their jobs full-time or part-time? What is the average hourly wage? What benefits do they receive? Where else do they work besides the schools? What struggles do they face? What is their vision for school lunch reform? What about breakfast, snack, and dinner programs (if your schools serve these meals as well)? If your group hasn’t already partnered with these workers as allies in the fight for real food and real jobs, how might it do so in the future? Are there any obstacles you’ll need to overcome or trust you’ll need to build? Develop a list of action items and track your progress as a group.

# CHAPTER 5

## BUILDING A REAL FOOD ECONOMY

1. Chapter 5 tells the story of the real food transition in Minneapolis Public Schools. What did you find inspiring about this story? How does this approach differ from what Gaddis calls “real food lite”?
2. This chapter features the voices of several frontline kitchen and cafeteria workers from Minneapolis Public Schools who describe how the district’s switch to scratch cooking and farm-to-school has impacted them. What did you find most interesting about their stories? What questions would you ask if you were able to interview them?
3. According to Gaddis, why is it important for schools to develop “community-based culinary capacity” and comprehensive farm-to-school programs? What benefits does this approach to bringing real food to schools create that real food lite does not? What, if any, drawbacks might there be?
4. How can rural and urban communities work together to build real food economies by redesigning their school lunch programs?
5. What strategies and tactics do schools use to “retune” children’s food preferences away from highly processed industrial foods and toward minimally processed farm-to-school foods? Which strategies and/or tactics do you find to be the most promising? Why?
6. Refer to the example of the Boston-area high school with a high concentration of children of Caribbean heritage and answer the question posed in the book: Should reducing children’s sodium intake and minimizing their consumption of ingredients of concern be prioritized over cultural preferences? Why or why not?

### Organizing Activities

Continue talking with parents, students, and other stakeholders in your community and learn about their priorities. Are current menus culturally appropriate and inclusive of all students? Are there specific ingredients or menu items they would like to see added or removed? How do they want the cafeteria to feel? What educational activities would they like to see? What assets and abilities might they bring to the table?

Consult the National Farm to Cafeteria Network’s [website](#) for resources that can help your district [start or improve its farm-to-school program](#). Review the Tisch Center’s evaluation of the [NYC Scratch Cooking Pilot](#). Work with your local school foodservice director to apply for the Chef Ann Foundation’s [Get Schools Cooking](#) program. Contact your elected officials about the need to [invest in kitchen and cafeteria infrastructure](#) and ask them to support the [School Food Modernization Act](#).

Connect with national initiatives like [Reworking Lunch](#), the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#), and the [Real Meals Campaign](#) (especially if school lunch programs in your district are outsourced).

# CONCLUSION

## ORGANIZING A NEW ECONOMY OF CARE

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. What is the benefit of looking at school lunch through the lens of care? How might this expand or restrict the possibilities for the food movement to advance positive social change?
2. Did *The Labor of Lunch* make you think differently about what kinds of activities count as care? Or how much care work is valued in patriarchal capitalist societies? Why or why not?
3. Outline the distinctions between advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing as explained in the conclusion. Think back through the history of school lunch activism and identify examples of advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. How can you make sure that your own efforts to improve school lunch build sustained power through what Jane McAlevey talks about as [structure-based organizing](#)?
4. Based on what you learned in *The Labor of Lunch* do you believe it is necessary to enact a revolutionary school food politics? What opportunities/barriers exist?
5. Why does Gaddis end the book with envisioning an alternative future for the NSLP? What do you think about the proposal she outlines? Do you have any additional ideas?
6. What recommendations do you have for building labor-community coalitions to advance food justice in schools and/or other public institutions? How might the whole-worker approach be useful? What lessons from the [#RedforEd movement](#) might be relevant?
7. How might we deepen the national conversation and strengthen political organizing in support of real food and real jobs in American public schools?

### Organizing Activities

As part of your broader school food reform efforts, launch a campaign to encourage parents to opt-in to the NSLP. Participation really matters for school lunch programs—increasing revenue allows them to spend more money on higher quality ingredients and improve workers' wages and benefit packages.

Encourage the young people you know to [take direct action for school food justice](#). Provide mentorship and support, but allow space for them to lead.

Continue building power in your community and at the state and national levels. Tell others what your *Labor of Lunch* reading group is up to using #SchoolFoodJustice and #LaborofLunch on social media. What's working/not working? What resources do you need? What opportunities and barriers have you encountered?

# WEB-BASED RESOURCES

## **History and Current Status of School Nutrition Programs**

Child Nutrition Archive Photo Collections

<http://archives.theicn.org/child-nutrition-archives-photo-collections/>

Child Nutrition Archive Oral Histories

<http://archives.theicn.org/oral-history-project/>

Organizing for the HHFKA

[https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/How\\_a\\_Public\\_Health\\_Goal\\_Became\\_a\\_National\\_Law\\_Nutrition\\_Today.pdf](https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/How_a_Public_Health_Goal_Became_a_National_Law_Nutrition_Today.pdf)

USDA National School Lunch Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program>

USDA National School Breakfast Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/school-breakfast-program>

USDA Summer Foodservice Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program>

USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/ffvp/fresh-fruit-and-vegetable-program>

## **For-Profit Companies and Public-Private Partnerships**

Brigaid

<https://www.chefsbrigaid.com/>

Cook for America

<http://cookforamerica.com/lunch-teacher-culinary-boot-camp/>

Good Food Purchasing Program

<https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/>

Revolution Foods

<https://www.revolutionfoods.com/>

reWorking Lunch

<https://reworkinglunch.org/>

Urban School Food Alliance

<https://www.urbanschoolfoodalliance.org/>

# WEB BASED RESOURCES

## **The Real Food Movement**

Chef Ann Foundation Multimedia Resources

<http://www.chefannfoundation.org/news-media/multimedia-content/>

Center for Ecoliteracy

<https://www.ecoliteracy.org/resources>

Food Corps

<https://foodcorps.org/>

Healthy School Meals (Plant-Based Foods)

<https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/healthy-communities/healthy-school-food>

National Farm to School Network

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources>

Real Food Challenge

<https://www.realfoodchallenge.org/>

Slow Food USA School Gardens

<https://www.slowfoodusa.org/school-gardens>

The Edible Schoolyard Project

<https://edibleschoolyard.org>

USDA Farm-to-School

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/community-food-systems>

## **Food Justice and Labor Organizing**

Parent Advocacy Toolkit

<http://www.chefannfoundation.org/for-parents/parent-advocacy-toolkit/>

Healthy Schools Toolkit (also available in Spanish)

<https://foodcorps.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/11/Healthy-School-Toolkit-%E2%80%93-English-Final-11.13.19.pdf>

Food Chain Workers Alliance

<http://foodchainworkers.org/>

Youth Food Justice Network

<https://yfjn.wordpress.com/>

SONG Core Organizing Tools

<http://southernersonnewground.org/resources/organizingtools/>