

## Could school lunch be the reason for childhood obesity?

by Stacy Cacciatore

The latest studies show that 32 percent of U.S. children are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> With over 10 million obese children in the United States, obesity prevalence among children has tripled since 1980.<sup>2</sup>

This tremendous rise in obesity has many looking for what could possibly be to blame. School lunch has come under the spotlight,

Over 31 million children receive meals through their school lunch program and many children receive most, if not all, of their meals at school.<sup>3</sup> Improving the school lunch program is critical to lowering the childhood obesity rate and boosting children's health.

A recent study conducted by the *University of Michigan Cardiovascular Center* found that sixth graders who regularly had school lunch were 29 percent more likely to be obese than those who brought lunch from home.

This is likely due to the finding that children who eat school lunch consume an extra 40-120 at lunch than those who bring lunch from home.<sup>4</sup> This study, conducted by Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach at the University of Chicago, found that even though these students ate more calories at lunch, they did not compensate for the extra calories by consuming less the remainder of the day.

Those extra 40-120 calories may not sound like a lot, but consider that there are 180 days in the school year. This adds up to a 2-6 pound weight gain per year. If a student ate school lunch every day, he would be 26-78 pounds heavier when he graduated high school than his brown bagging peer.

One look an elementary school lunch menu can provide insight how those extra calories come about. Chicken nuggets, French fries, pizza and cheeseburgers are standard fare for most schools. It doesn't get better as children get older either. A study by the federal *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* found that 23.5 percent of high schools offered fast food from places like Pizza Hut and Taco Bell.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Centers for Disease Control and Prevention": Retrieved 2011-07-25

<sup>2</sup> "Childhood Obesity Statistics" Retrieved 2011-07-25

<sup>3</sup> "Child Nutrition Reauthorization Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010"

<sup>4</sup> "Do School Lunches Contribute to Childhood Obesity?" Schanzenbach, Diane Whitmore. University of Chicago. October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "Putting Nutrition at the Head of the School Lunch Line" Alderman, Lesley. The New York Times. 2010-11-05.

Currently school lunches must meet a minimum calorie limit set by the government, but it's up to individual schools to decide how calories are apportioned. This means the cook can throw in an extra serving of tater tots or bread instead of fresh fruit.

This is about to change though. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently proposed new federal nutrition standards for school lunches. The IOM's recommendations include, increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables served to students and specify that dark green and bright orange vegetables as well as legumes be served during the course of the week. (Current standards rate all fruits and veggies equally and are interchangeable.) A new federal law passed in December, will limit the number of calories served at every school meal and require programs to offer a broad variety of fruits and vegetables, not just corn and potatoes.

The first Lady has been a champion for healthy eating, launching the Let's Move campaign to tackle childhood obesity. Recent legislation, such as the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*, which is part of the Let's Move campaign, is working to address offering more nutritious food in schools.

The *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010* is aimed at improving nutrition in school lunches and reducing childhood obesity. It plans to do this by giving the USDA the authority to set nutritional standards for ALL foods sold in schools (including vending machines and fast food), helps communities establish local farm to school networks and provides additional funding to schools that meet updated nutritional standards for federally-subsidized lunches.<sup>6</sup>

Get involved by making sure your local school is a part of *Team Nutrition*. The USDA's *Team Nutrition* is a plan to involve schools, parents and the community to improve school meals and promote the health and education of 50 million school children in more than 96,000 schools nationwide.

*Team Nutrition's* goal is to improve children's eating and physical activity habits using the principles of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid.

Visit [www.teamnutrition.usda.gov](http://www.teamnutrition.usda.gov) to learn more about how you can get your school enrolled in the *Team Nutrition* program.

A school's PTO/PTA can also play a key role in bringing focus and attention to the importance of nutritious school meals. Join your school's local PTA/PTO to get involved.

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<sup>6</sup> "President Obama Signs Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 Into Law' [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov). Retrieved 2011-07-30.

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