



October 10, 2012

HUFF
POST PARENTS

Dear Lunch Ladies, Thank You. Sincerely, The Parents.

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When I was a child, we loved to complain about the school lunch. We said it was too greasy, too salty, didn't have any fresh ingredients and didn't offer any healthy options. As it turned out, lots of people were complaining about school lunch and recently, the federal government had the support it needed to make some changes. This year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released significant improvements in the [regulations](#) for the National School Lunch Program. As a mother and obesity researcher, I was thrilled.

Then I started to look into what it would take to implement these changes and the more I learned, the more complicated it seemed. There were so many people to please, and their priorities were sometimes in conflict. The kids care mostly about taste. The parents care mostly about nutrition. The administration cares mostly about cost -- including the cost of more workers to prepare and serve the fresh food. Food service directors in our country have one of the hardest jobs around. They have been working for months now to incorporate these new regulations, while at the same time keeping all of their stakeholders happy. It's a nearly impossible job.

So, along come some students and they have a number of complaints. First, we hear that students are still hungry because there aren't enough calories being provided at lunch, so they want bigger portions. Then we hear that students are throwing away school lunch items because they don't like having to take so much food. Wait a minute -- how can both of these things be true? It's like Goldilocks and the school lunch. If students are really so hungry, why don't they eat the food on their plates?

I have a hypothesis -- these students aren't actually hungry; they miss the salt, sugar and fat.

I'd like to offer a historical perspective. Throughout most of human history the main food-related problem has been famine. During much of the past century, most families had meals made by one person, and you ate what you were served. If you didn't like it, you didn't have to eat it, but no one was jumping up to make you something else. End of story. Never before in history could so many people afford to be so picky about what they ate. The luxury of abundant palatable (read: high in fat, sugar and salt), cheap food has turned our children into a pack of picky eaters.

The new school lunch is one part of turning this around, and our food service directors are leading the charge. Parents, we need to get out there and support them. This is what we've been asking for. Go into your child's school and thank your food service director for his or her service. Ask how you can help. Perhaps you can work with students to do taste tests and get ideas for new options. Perhaps you can help by telling other parents about the positive improvements to school lunch that have occurred. The people making the new school lunches need to know that they have support because all they are hearing are complaints.

Change is hard, but if all of us who care about student nutrition in school work together, we'll get there.