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# How School Lunch Became the Latest Political Battleground

By NICHOLAS CONFESSORE OCT. 7, 2014

The lunch ladies loved Marshall Matz. For more than 30 years, he worked the halls and back rooms of Washington for the 55,000 dues-paying members of the School Nutrition Association, the men and still mostly women who run America's school-lunch programs. They weren't his firm's biggest clients — that would have been companies like General Mills or Kraft — but Matz, wry and impish even in his late 60s, lavished the lunch ladies with the kind of respect they didn't always get in school cafeterias. Many of the association's members considered him a dear colleague. "He would tell everybody: 'You are a much better lobbyist than I am. You are how we get things done,'" said Dorothy Caldwell, who served a term as the association's president in the early 1990s. "And people liked that."

Matz often told the lunch ladies they were front-line warriors in the battle for better eating, and they liked that too. Every school day, they dished out more than 30 million lunches, all of which were subsidized by taxpayers. They also served about 13 million subsidized breakfasts. Many students got more than half their daily calories at school. Few workers,

inside the government or out, did more to shape the health of children.

So when Michelle Obama started Let's Move!, her campaign against child obesity, in 2010, the members of the School Nutrition Association were her natural allies. The average weight of the American child had been climbing at an alarming rate since the 1980s, and now one in three American kids was obese or overweight. One recent study found that by 2030 more than half the adult population would be dangerously overweight, leading to millions of cases of diabetes, stroke and heart disease. Researchers at the Institute of Medicine, meanwhile, were finishing new recommendations to bring school meals into compliance with national dietary guidelines, and Congress was about to reauthorize the school-lunch program. This gave the White House an opening. If there was a war to fight against childhood obesity, then school cafeterias would be a perfect place to wage it.

That year, the Obama administration got behind the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, an ambitious bill that would impose strict new nutrition standards on all food sold in public schools. A generation raised on Lunchables and Pizza Hut, the bill's authors believed, could learn to love whole-wheat pasta and roasted cauliflower. Kids would be more energetic, better able to focus in class and above all less likely to be obese. But to pass the bill, the White House needed to enlist not only Democrats and Republicans in Congress but also a host of overlapping and competing interest groups: the manufacturers who supplied food to schools, the nutrition experts who wanted it to be more healthful and the lunch ladies who would have to get children to eat it.

Few people understood how to accomplish those trade-offs better than Marshall Matz, in part because he embodied them. He spent his early career advising Senator George McGovern, a Democrat who led efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to defend and expand federal nutrition programs. Matz worked for major food interests, but he still considered himself a nutrition advocate. He advised the Obama campaign on agricultural issues and even helped one of the School Nutrition Association's former presidents get a post in the new

administration. He prized his access to the White House but believed deeply, his friends in Washington told me, that bipartisanship in Congress was what allowed the school-lunch program to endure.

To Matz, it seemed clear that a bargain could be struck. He advised the lunch ladies — a term that almost nobody in Washington uses in public and almost everyone uses in private — to support the legislation, even though it did not provide as much money as they wanted. Under pressure to show concern about child obesity, food companies backed it, too: With \$4.5 billion in new funding over the next 10 years, the bill did provide plenty of new business, and their lobbyists could always massage the details later. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act became law in 2010, with overwhelming support in Congress.

But as the government began turning the broad guidelines into specific rules — specific rules with specific consequences for specific players — life became more difficult. What began as a war on obesity turned into war among onetime allies. Republicans now attack the new rules as a nanny-state intrusion by the finger-wagging first lady. Food companies, arguing that the new standards are too severe, have spent millions of dollars lobbying to slow or change them. Some students have voted with their forks, refusing to eat meals they say taste terrible.

Last summer, the School Nutrition Association dumped Matz. In the small world of Washington food lobbyists, the decision provoked unending gossip and speculation. Matz said little about the sudden turn, even to friends. “I was not happy,” Dorothy Caldwell recalled. Several longtime members pressed the association’s professional staff for more information with little luck, and the answer soon became clear to them: The lunch ladies were taking sides, too.

Today the School Nutrition Association is Washington’s loudest and most public critic of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Even as they claim to support the act, the lunch ladies have become the shock troops in a sometimes absurdly complex battle to roll back the Obama’s administration’s anti-obesity agenda. Some Democrats in Congress fear that

if Republicans win control of the Senate this fall, Obama's reform will be gutted within a year — and with it, the government's single-best weapon against childhood obesity. "It's a war of attrition at this point," one congressional aide told me. "Right now we're in that phase where you're fighting a rear-guard action to hold on to as much territory as you can."

**The federal school-lunch** program has always invited martial metaphors, and not without reason: It was the U.S. military that first advanced the national-security implications of a healthful lunch. In the spring of 1945, at the dawn of the Cold War, Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, a former school principal who joined the armed forces before World War I, went in front of the House Agriculture Committee to deliver a stern warning. Hershey headed the Selective Service System — the draft — and he told the lawmakers that as many as 40 percent of rejected draftees had been turned away owing to poor diets. "Whether we are going to have war or not, I do think that we have got to have health if we are going to survive," he testified.

Within a year, a majority of lawmakers from both parties had voted for the National School Lunch Act. The act declared it "the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children." In the way of many programs inspired by the Department of Defense, the School Lunch Program grew in large part because it offered something to everyone. Over the coming decades, the Department of Agriculture would send billions of dollars to states and school districts to help cover the costs of school meals and spend billions more to purchase surplus farm products for the schools. The program was expanded significantly under Richard Nixon, who sought to ensure that poor children got their school lunches free, and by the mid-1970s it fed 25 million kids.

Jimmy Carter made minor cuts to school-lunch subsidies in his last year in office, and Ronald Reagan, arguing that government shouldn't subsidize meals for children who could afford to pay, made even deeper cuts. His administration also modified the dietary requirements: Among

other changes, some condiments could be credited as vegetables. Opponents of the cuts quickly pointed out that, under the regulations, even ketchup could qualify — an observation that led to considerable derision in the press.

The condiment rule did not last, nor did Reagan's cuts. But they did help accelerate a major transformation in how schools provided food. Most districts require food service to earn enough revenue to cover expenses, including labor. The average school-nutrition director is not unlike the chief executive of a medium-size catering business, but with a school for a landlord and a menu regulated by the government. With lower subsidies, the lunch ladies needed cheaper calories, and they turned to the increasingly efficient processed-food industry to find them. School cafeterias also began to rely more on revenue from so-called competitive foods — snacks and lunches that are not regulated by federal guidelines and “compete” with the regular school lunch on cafeteria à la carte lines. Some districts even struck deals with McDonald's, Chick-fil-A and other fast-food chains to sell versions of their commercial products directly to school kitchens.

The kids loved it — and so, more or less, did the lunch ladies. The food industry made their programs hum, made it possible to serve hundreds or thousands of meals, often without working kitchens, in lunch periods as short as 25 minutes. Big food companies became partners in every way: Most held associate memberships in the School Nutrition Association and helped finance it with industry advertising and membership fees.

Nutritionists were less happy with the status quo. Instead of exposing children to a variety of foods, school lunches tended to indulge their cravings. There were plenty of white rolls and French fries but not many leafy dark greens or whole grains. Even after many school-food companies made strides in reducing fat and salt in their products, the average school lunch in 2009 still contained 1,375 milligrams of sodium, almost twice as much as federal dietary guidelines recommend for a single meal. Worst of all, competitive foods — most often desserts, salty snacks and pizza — were adding an extra 277 calories a day to the diets of the children who bought them.

In one sense, the school-lunch program was all too successful. No longer was the military having trouble finding well-fed young American men and women. By 2009, according to the Department of Defense, more recruits were being turned away for obesity than for any other medical reason. The recruits, as a letter signed by dozens of retired generals and admirals put it, were “too fat to fight.”

**The first shot** in the Cafeteria Wars was fired in January 2011. That was when, under the terms of the new law, a team of dietitians, economists and nutritionists at the Department of Agriculture released the revised meal pattern for school breakfasts and lunches. The rules outlined just what schools — and, by extension, their suppliers — would have to do to continue receiving government subsidies. Both groups were struck by just how aggressive the new rules were. Within a few years, schools would need to switch all of their breads and pastas to whole-grain varieties. Within a decade, the average salt content of a high-school lunch would have to be cut by roughly half. When the school year began in fall 2012, lunches would have to offer twice as many fruits and vegetables, and students would be required to take at least half of them. At the same time, plates had to have fewer “starchy vegetables,” obvious code words for French fries.

The starchy-vegetable lobby was quick to take offense. “We didn’t find favor with efforts to paint certain vegetables as, for unspecified reasons, less healthy than other vegetables,” was how Kraig R. Naasz, the head of the American Frozen Food Institute, which represents about 500 makers of frozen foods and vegetables, explained it. The potato and frozen-food lobbies mobilized, orchestrating waves of letters from lawmakers to Tom Vilsack, the agriculture secretary, that extolled the potato’s low cost and high potassium content. When Vilsack went before the Senate to discuss his budget request for the year, Senator Susan Collins of Maine, a state that is one of the country’s largest producers of spuds, marched into the hearing holding a potato in one hand and a head of iceberg lettuce — no one’s idea of a nutrient-dense vegetable — in the other. “My question, Mr. Secretary,” Collins asked, “is: What does the department have against potatoes?”

This, meanwhile, was a minor skirmish compared with the battle over pizza sauce. Pizza is one of the school-food companies' most popular products; schools purchase more than \$450 million worth every year. Under the old rules, companies could market pizza slices as a product combining grains, protein and a full serving of vegetables. This was possible thanks to a longstanding loophole: Rather than count the two tablespoons of tomato paste on a serving of pizza as two tablespoons of tomato paste, they could count it as eight tablespoons of tomatoes, the theory being that at some point before being processed, the two tablespoons had existed in the form of several whole tomatoes.

The new rule counted two tablespoons of tomato paste as two tablespoons of tomato paste, no more — a change that got the full attention of the Schwan Food Company, a privately held frozen-food behemoth based in Minnesota, with 14,000 employees and roughly \$3 billion in annual sales. Schwan manufactures a reported 70 percent of all pizza sold in American schools. Publicly, Schwan emphasized its ahead-of-the-curve efforts to create more healthful slices meeting the new requirements, with whole-grain crusts and low-fat cheese. Less publicly, in comments to the U.S.D.A., the company laid out a series of objections, ranging from the sentimental to the scientific. “Many of the products made with tomato paste appeal to children and help sustain participation in the school-meal program,” the company warned, while also maintaining that the final sodium reductions would be “impossible to achieve without significant technological advances.” (The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, among others, agreed with the salt assessment.) Moreover, if sodium were aggressively reduced in school lunches without corresponding changes in home and restaurant meals, Schwan suggested, students would find their school lunches bland and tasteless.

The White House wanted Vilsack to hold firm. They viewed objections to the tomato rule as classic special-interest pleading. The lunch ladies, meanwhile, had filed 11 pages of comments asking for a delay or reconsideration of many of the new rules, and officially they agreed with

Schwan about the tomato paste. Marshall Matz found himself, not for the last time, in the middle. The administration, particularly the agriculture secretary, was annoyed by the comments — hadn't the lunch ladies endorsed the bill? — and Matz counseled caution. But when the lunch ladies' president sent a letter to the White House pledging to work closely with Vilsack, many in the industry were furious. They viewed it as an apology, perhaps engineered by Matz in an effort to soothe the administration's ruffled feathers. Some felt that Matz was letting his personal beliefs, and desire to stay close to the White House, override the proper interests of the association. Gary Vonck, a senior executive at one of the country's largest brokerages for school-lunch products and longtime industry adviser to the School Nutrition Association, told me that "there were a lot of times when people disagreed with him."

In food circles, OFW Law, the boutique law and lobbying firm where Matz is a partner, is known for its bipartisan roster of lobbyists and its long list of food-industry clients, some with competing interests on legislative or regulatory matters. Matz was not only lobbying for the lunch ladies, who wanted to abolish the mandatory fruit-and-vegetable requirement, but he also was general counsel to the fresh-produce trade association, which loved the requirement. Even allies told me Matz could be vague about which client he was representing in any given meeting. Vonck said, "I think Marshall maybe misunderstood what his role was as it relates to S.N.A."

**That summer, more** than a dozen food companies, including Schwan and one of its bigger rivals, ConAgra, recruited their own lunch ladies. They enlisted dozens of school-nutrition directors to join a new group, which they called the Coalition for Sustainable School Meals Programs. To run the new group, they hired a former S.N.A. official named Barry Sackin.

The government wanted children to eat less pizza, Sackin told me not long ago. "How do you go after the pizza companies without attacking them?" he asked. "You limit the tomato sauce," he said, in the manner of a man describing an aggression that would not stand. In May, Sackin flew to



Washington to testify before the House education committee, which oversees the school-foods program. The rules would drive up lunch prices, he said. And to what end? School meals were already the most healthful meals that many children ate. The long-term sodium reductions would be expensive, and children wouldn't necessarily eat the lower-salt food.

Sackin and the coalition reasoned that if the U.S.D.A. wouldn't bend, Congress could force it to. Republican lawmakers, who now controlled the House, were beginning to view the Obama-led nutrition effort as a new and pernicious form of big government. (Representative Robert Aderholt, a genteel Alabama Republican who is now chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that controls Vilsack's funding, told me, "The overall concept of Washington trying to get into the business of trying to regulate on a local level, on a state level — I fundamentally think that's not the best approach.") And agribusiness had plenty of allies in both parties. At a hearing later that summer, Representative Collin Peterson, a centrist Democrat from Minnesota whose district is home to Schwan's headquarters, demanded that a U.S.D.A. official explain the scientific basis for the tomato rule. If the agency didn't back down, Peterson threatened, he would insert a rider into their budget, blocking implementation. Even Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a popular Democrat on the agriculture committee and a leading supporter of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, became involved. In June, she sent a letter to Vilsack raising questions about the sodium and tomato standards. Parts of it matched Schwan's earlier comments word for word. Klobuchar's intervention helped persuade other Democrats, along with the administration, that the tomato rule was a lost cause. In November, when lawmakers began developing a final budget deal with Obama, the language included a rider to block implementation of the tomato and the potato rules.

One last battle remained. The Reagan administration had become a laughingstock years before when it appeared to propose allowing schools to count ketchup as a vegetable. Now, as the vote approached, Margo Wootan, the director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, began peddling an irresistible talking point: Congress, she said,

was proposing to classify pizza as a vegetable.

The phrase made its way into an Associated Press article and then into newspapers around the country. It came too late to beat the potato-and-tomato lobby, but when lawmakers finally approved the budget with the rider in mid-November, editorial pages and late-night comics were merciless. That evening, after the vote, when Wootan and Naasz appeared on “NBC Nightly News,” the correspondent openly mocked Congress for siding with pizza makers. (Some in Congress may have begun having second thoughts as well. When I spoke to Klobuchar recently, she seemed to regret sending the letter to Vilsack. “I did not want the rule changed legislatively,” Klobuchar said. Her primary concern at the time was the rule’s impact on Minnesota’s farmers, who had been hard hit in the recession. But, she said, “I would not send a letter like this again or take this position again.”)

Kraig Naasz, the frozen-food advocate, was also impressed. “I’m supposed to explain in seven to 10 seconds how many ounces of tomato paste should get credited when it comes as a paste,” Naasz told me. “And Margo gets to say, ‘Congress thinks pizza is a vegetable.’” Shortly after the vote, Naasz ran into Wootan at a nutrition meeting. “Good sound bite,” he told her.

**The rest of** the law took effect in July 2012, as school cafeterias around the country were preparing for the new school year. After two years of debate, the lunch ladies were about to find out what their own customers thought. Some School Nutrition Association members — those who had chosen to get a head start on the new calorie and vegetable requirements — were optimistic. One cheery news release came from Kansas City. “Few, if any, students in the Hickman Mills C-1 will even notice” the new rules, a school district there announced. “And that’s a good thing!”

But when school started, many students did notice. Within weeks, social media filled with photos of skimpy meals and sullen teenagers, some using the hashtag #ThanksMichelleObama and #BrownBagginIt. In Wisconsin and New Jersey, students staged lunchroom strikes. At Wallace County High School in Kansas, students filmed a four-minute parody video

called “We Are Hungry,” set to the tune of the popular song “We Are Young,” that has been viewed more than 1.4 million times. The students made no special efforts to promote the video, says Linda O’Connor, the English teacher at Wallace who wrote the lyrics, but “before we knew it, we saw our story as the top story of Drudge Report.”

One of the biggest factors in the poor reception was a surprise last-minute ruling from the U.S.D.A. To ensure that the students’ calories were spread among different food groups, the administration had imposed a weekly cap on grain and protein, allowing no more than 12 ounces of each per week at lunch. Some school-nutrition directors, struggling to implement the caps, shrank the size of popular items like pizza slices or hamburgers. But many students that year were refusing — as they have since roughly the beginning of time — to take the now larger fruit-and-vegetable servings in compensation, meaning they wound up with significantly less food than before. Students were left hungry, and the lunch ladies were put in a tough spot. Patricia Montague, a longtime School Nutrition Association staff member who became its C.E.O. last year, painted a vivid picture of cashiers being forced into the role of food enforcers. “You have to tell a six-foot football player, ‘You didn’t take your fruit or your vegetable,’ ” she said incredulously. He might just walk away. “And guess what? They can’t get reimbursed for that meal, because he didn’t take the full components.”

Participation in the free-lunch program, reserved for children from low-income families, actually climbed slightly in the first year after Obama’s changes. But in some wealthier districts — where children could afford to turn up their noses at the federally regulated lunch and where schools had been doing a brisk business in snack food — business declined significantly. Cafeteria directors complained that they were being forced to raise prices on their best customers while offering them less of the food they liked most. Some school districts moved to drop out of the program, forgoing the federal subsidies in exchange for more autonomy. That December, the administration moved to relax the cap for the rest of the school year. But by the end of the year, roughly one million fewer kids were participating in the

National School Lunch program, the first decrease in more than two decades.

Nobody could agree on exactly how big a problem this was. To the U.S.D.A., the drop-off, about 3 percent of total participation, amounted to a growing pain. (“There’s ebb and flow every year in the system,” Vilsack told me.) But Matz’s constituents were not so sanguine. Internal surveys by the S.N.A. found that schools of all sizes and income levels were struggling with higher costs, lower participation and what they call plate waste — kids throwing away perfectly good food.

Matz was also under increasing pressure from the S.N.A.’s industry members — the food manufacturers — who were becoming more direct about their concerns. At an association conference in Orlando that year, several executives grilled the S.N.A.’s chief executive, a former grocery lobbyist named Frank DiPasquale. “They were very disappointed,” DiPasquale recalled. “They didn’t like the fact that there was this impression that the association was close to the White House, particularly Marshall and myself.” DiPasquale said the industry members repeatedly pushed him to find a new lobbyist. “I got a lot of pressure about Marshall, more than once. And I resisted. I thought the guy was terrific, and the value we got was terrific.”

DiPasquale left the S.N.A. in the fall of 2012, at the height of the furor over the food rollout. Patricia Montague, then the chief operating officer, took over as C.E.O. The board invited several other lobbying firms to submit proposals for the association’s lobbying contract — a clear warning to Matz, several members told me.

**In March 2013**, close to a thousand S.N.A. members arrived at Washington’s JW Marriott Hotel for their annual legislative lobby week. A major topic of discussion was the latest affront from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

The previous month, the U.S.D.A. announced a new round of rules. Called “Smart Snacks in Schools,” it would reach beyond the subsidized meals in the regular-lunch line to regulate — for the first time — all of the

competitive foods students bought on the à la carte line, as well as snacks bought from vending machines or school stores. Competitive foods were mostly junk or branded fast food, but they were also a moneymaker for many school districts. The lunch ladies, and their industry partners, didn't like what they saw.

The regular-lunch rules let them build meals around average weekly nutritional and caloric requirements — some lunches could be a little fattier or a little saltier than others as long as it all balanced out at the end of the week. But the competitive-foods rule imposed strict limits on individual dishes, forcing the lunch ladies to downsize or discard popular items and forcing food companies to formulate yet more new products. (An entree, for example, had to come in at fewer than 350 calories and with fewer than 480 milligrams of sodium. The breaded-chicken sandwich sold at commercial Chick-fil-A franchises has 440 calories and 1,390 milligrams of sodium.) Worse still, from the lunch ladies' perspective, was another proposal: If they wanted to sell some of their regular-lunch food on the à la carte line, it would in most cases have to meet the stricter standards.

The seemingly arcane provision was there to close a potential loophole. Without it, the U.S.D.A. and nutrition advocates feared, schools would try to evade the rules by wedging a high-calorie food into the reimbursable lunch on one day, then selling it on the à la carte line for the entire rest of the year. The lunch ladies, along with the industry, saw the provision as absurd. ("The biggest common-sense challenge was that if I serve a product that meets the regulations, I can't sell it à la carte," Vonck told me.)

As Matz gave his presentation at the Marriott that March, one member told me, the board members fidgeted, exchanged looks and passed notes.

The Smart Snacks rules made it increasingly difficult for Matz to massage the relationship between the lunch ladies and the White House. He spoke to friends in the administration, seeking advice on how to manage the growing frustration of the S.N.A.'s board. Sackin, who spent seven years at the association's vice president for public policy, suggested that Matz's ties to the administration, once an asset to the S.N.A., had become a liability.

“There was a concern that some of the advice was as much what served the administration’s cause as it was serving the client and what they want,” Sackin said.

Others thought that Matz was doing his best. That May, he helped organize a meeting for industry members at the association’s headquarters in Maryland to discuss their problems with the Obama rules, including Smart Snacks. “The message was: Everyone has to go to the White House, to the Hill, to the U.S.D.A., and get this delayed,” said one person who attended. “They didn’t have a lot of time.”

The lunch ladies and the food companies urged the U.S.D.A. to reconsider Smart Snacks, and some believed that with all the complaints about the earlier rules, regulators might be forced to push back Smart Snacks by another year. But in June 2013, the final rule was published on schedule.

Four days later, Montague informed Matz that he was being replaced. S.N.A.’s new lobbyists would be Barnes & Thornburg, a large national law firm whose clients included the American Kennel Club and the National Rifle Association. Montague described the switch as part of a routine review of the association’s vendors. “We’d been working with him for over 30 years and just wanted to see what else was out there,” Montague told me. The association, she said, needed a lobbyist who could “navigate the process and carry the message — not create it for us.” Matz declined my repeated requests to speak about his time at the S.N.A.

There is little question, though, that the association’s industry members wanted Matz gone. When a group of past S.N.A. presidents campaigned to have Matz reinstated, Vonck sent an email to a group of executives representing some of the biggest school-lunch purveyors, among them Pat McCoy, who was then a vice president for sales at Schwan. “There are a few old-timers stirring the pot on this, many who had worked with Marshall in the distant past,” Vonck wrote. “Some have written letters to publications trying to start an effort to have this decision reversed. As you all know, that can’t and shouldn’t happen.”

**The lunch ladies** continued to battle the new rules, but now they had increasingly vocal support from G.O.P. lawmakers. Aderholt, the Alabama Republican, had begun hearing complaints about the new rule from one of his constituents, a small-town school-lunch director. “It was telling her what she could fix and what she couldn’t fix,” he said. “She was talking about how there couldn’t even be salt on the tables.” Aderholt attached nonbinding language to the 2013 appropriation bill asking the U.S.D.A. to let schools apply for a waiver from the Smart Snacks standards. Vilsack politely ignored the request. Since the budget rider was nonbinding, he wrote, the “U.S.D.A. is respectfully unable to comply with the directive to establish a waiver process.” Aderholt gave his own reply in May 2014, when he marked up the administration’s new appropriation and shared it with the committee. The new bill didn’t request a waiver process; it required one.

The requirement would cover only one school year, Aderholt noted, and Vilsack had already been changing many of the rules on his own. But the administration saw it as a major escalation, both substantively and symbolically. The committee was using the appropriations process to override a national nutrition policy that medical experts had honed for years. (When I asked Vilsack how significant the waiver really was, he paused, started to answer and then paused again. The question visibly frustrated him. “The concern is that it validates something that shouldn’t be validated,” Vilsack finally replied. He added, “You just don’t want to acknowledge that the system doesn’t work when it does.”)

Montague said that the lunch ladies decided to support Aderholt’s waiver language only after the U.S.D.A. refused to budge and that it was the congressman’s staff who approached them with the idea. But an S.N.A. member involved in the decision told me the association had discussed taking the appropriations route well before Aderholt even released his bill, at the association’s 2014 legislative action meeting in March, also at the Marriott. The members charged with drafting the association’s legislative positions were scheduled to present the group’s agenda on the second day of the conference. Montague had asked to meet them in a conference room

beforehand, along with the executive board. She arrived with an unexpected guest: Pat McCoy, the Schwan executive. McCoy proposed that the best way for the lunch ladies to get what they wanted was to use the appropriations committee to force the administration's hand. "You know, it's not just for industry, it's for the members," McCoy said, according to one person who attended. "The members are speaking out and wanting relief."

When the association announced in May that it would endorse the waiver, the civil war bubbling within the S.N.A.'s ranks burst into the open. Caldwell and more than a dozen other past presidents of the association wrote a joint letter to the appropriations committee urging it to ignore their own organization. Conservative media sites, meanwhile, lit up with attacks on Michelle Obama.

The first lady instructed her staff to delay the rest of Let's Move! She believed that a handful of lunch ladies and companies angry with the standards were dominating the debate. To counter the S.N.A., as the House vote approached, Obama's staff organized a White House event featuring school-nutrition directors who supported the new rules — their own band of lunch ladies. There was, some lobbyists told me, a certain sense of disbelief in the White House. Michelle Obama had championed the lunch ladies and lavished them with praise. Now they were sabotaging her biggest accomplishment.

Obama began the event with a speech delivered from a lectern, a format she usually avoids. The round table had been billed as being closed to the press, but after her prepared remarks, Obama invited the reporters and network cameras to stay. She wanted them in the room. A few minutes later, the first lady of the United States attacked the lunch ladies by name.

"Why are we even having this conversation?" Obama asked. "Especially given the fact that it was the School Nutrition Association that worked to pass the original changes in the nutrition standard?"

A few days later, Vilsack's bill passed the appropriations committee with the waiver provision intact. Almost all Democrats voted nay. It was, some food lobbyists told me, the most partisan congressional vote in the



history of the National School Lunch Program. The White House threatened to veto the bill if it came to the president's desk.

The waiver vote marked a seemingly irreparable breach between the School Nutrition Association and the Obama administration. When the association later requested a meeting with the first lady, it did so via news release. The White House offered Vilsack instead. The invitation leaked immediately to Politico. When Sam Kass, the executive director of Obama's Let's Move! program, asked to speak at the association's annual conference in Boston this summer, it refused. Kass calls the breakdown "one of my greatest disappointments since being here."

In Washington, the waiver battle has left the lunch ladies isolated. More than 200 organizations have signed a letter opposing the waiver, including the American Medical Association, the Children's Defense Fund and a variety of environmental groups and food-advocacy organizations — many of them former allies. In public, the school-lunch industry has stayed away from the waiver fight, even as it lobbies for many of the same changes that the S.N.A. has sought. "We haven't taken a position on the waiver because the debate is not relevant to our work to help schools meet the new standards and serve students good food," Chuck Blomberg, a Schwan spokesman, said. The administration is counting on momentum: With each new rule that goes into effect, with every industry dollar spent adapting, there is less incentive to go backward. "This ship has sailed," Kass said.

Wootan and others suggest the industry is reluctant to go into open battle with a popular first lady and is relying on the S.N.A. to carry its water on the Hill. "I've told members of Congress who are supporting this waiver, 'You will never actually see a district waive this,' " says Tom Stenzel, the president of United Fresh, a trade association that represents produce growers and distributors. "Do you really think the soccer moms of America will allow this?"

But next September, when the entire Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will be up for reauthorization, the soccer moms of America may not get a vote. Just a few years ago, President Obama's school-lunch reform seemed

like a kind of armistice in Washington's eternal culture of influence and partisanship. Today Obama's lunch reform, much like Obama's presidency, feels mired in an endless insurgency — against a stealthy, well-financed and infinitely patient foe.

**In July, I** flew to Boston to attend the S.N.A.'s annual national conference. Thousands of members filled the city's massive convention center near the waterfront, where the S.N.A. had organized several days of seminars and presentations, many devoted to helping school-food directors and cafeteria workers figure out the new regulations.

Most striking, however, was the main convention floor, a cavernous space where dozens of food companies had set up booths to demonstrate their products. Much like in a supermarket aisle, the prime locations went to the biggest brands. A huge rotating display advertised ConAgra Foods. Another, promoting AdvancePierre Foods, invited me to "Join the Burger Revolution." At the bottom of the main escalator, Schwan had a small food court, handing out deli sandwiches and plates of glistening Chinese-style food.

Here and there were vendors who saw the new Obama standards as a market opportunity: A small company making frozen Greek yogurt desserts, a vegetable-soup distributor. Midway toward the back of the hall, Stenzel's group had the conference's first Produce Pavilion, offering single-serve fresh-vegetable products and advice on how to store them. Unlike the processed-food giants, few of United Fresh's members have national distribution, and it was hard to persuade individual companies to make the trip to Boston, Stenzel said.

Not long afterward, the lunch ladies would tell Stenzel that his pavilion would not be welcome at next year's conference. The event is a big revenue driver, and the association wants his members to rent their own stalls instead. Stenzel wonders whether this decision had anything to do with his group's fight against the waiver. "You have to question what's behind a decision like that," Stenzel said. He sighed. "The pecking order in the food industry — we're down at the bottom."

As for what sits atop the school-food pyramid, there can be little doubt. At the convention in Boston, a warm, welcoming aroma hung over the convention floor, and after wandering around for a bit, I realized it was the smell of pizza — innumerable brands and styles, on offer around nearly every corner.

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