

School Lunches: A Great Legacy from a Great Depression

At times, the current debate over school lunches hardly seems like a debate at all: does anyone really feel school lunches, as they exist now, are the best we can offer hungry schoolchildren? In all this debate, it's easy to forget that there was ever a time when children sometimes came to school hungry and left even hungrier. While the idea of feeding children at school may feel obvious to most modern readers, it would take more than a century and a unique confluence of events for the idea to catch on after its earliest attempts.

The earliest predecessor of what could be considered a school lunch began in 1790, in Munich, Germany, by an American known as Count Rumford. Born Benjamin Thompson in Woburn, Massachusetts in 1753, he was keenly curious boy with an interest in anatomy, chemistry, and physics. As a young adult, he moved to what is now Concord, New Hampshire, and married an older, wealthy widow when he was just 20. As the American Revolution approached, Thompson, a Loyalist, abandoned his wife and child and used his wife's money to emigrate to England in 1776.

Once in England, he began to experiment and publish papers on his scientific findings regarding heat, many of which led to important advances in a number of fields. By 1785, he moved on to Bavaria, and, after cultivating a friendship of the Duke of Bavaria, Thompson would become a Count of the Holy Roman Empire, taking "Rumford" — the old colonial-era name for Concord — as his title.

In 1790, while Count Rumford was working for the Bavarian military, studying the thermal conductivity of cloth (he would later be credited with inventing thermal underwear), he founded the Poor People's Institute. The institute rounded up the beggars of Munich, adults and children alike, and put them to work, producing clothing for the Bavarian army. While the adults worked, the children were only required to work part-time and between their working hours, they were taught, reading, writing, and arithmetic. At lunch, the children were fed a soup of barley, peas, and potatoes (whose cultivation Rumford championed in Bavaria), cooked in vinegar or old beer and water, with little or no other seasoning. "Rumford's Soup," as it would later be called, was the first instance of a school feeding its students as they learned.

The food Rumford's institute served reflected his effort to create a low-cost, nutritionally sound diet for the poor. His notion of a central location serving food to the poor *en masse* quickly become known as a "soup kitchen" — so named for the potato soup it doled out. In a short amount of time, soup kitchens expanded to England, Germany, Scotland, France and Switzerland, feeding tens of thousands. These large-scale cooking operations led Rumford to develop more efficient food preparation facilities to cook more food faster. Over time, aided by his continuing experiments with heat, Rumford developed (among numerous other inventions) the double boiler, pressure cooker, roasting oven, and kitchen range — each forerunners of the commercial ovens and steamers used by virtually every school food service program today.

However, while many of his innovations, like the soup kitchen and the roasting oven, were quickly embraced and spread throughout the world, Rumford's notion of a school-provided hot lunch would take more than a century to gain acceptance.

The first American attempts at school lunch programs were begun by associations already concerned with child welfare and education. The very first was set up by the Children's Aid Society of New York in 1853. It served hot meals to students attending its vocational school, but their program did not gain traction among other schools, and more than 40 years would pass before another program was attempted. In 1894, the Starr Centre Association, a social agency that provided services to Philadelphia's poorest communities, established a program of penny lunches at one school and would later expand to nine schools within Philadelphia.

Not until the publication of *Poverty* in 1904, by progressive author Robert Hunter, would many Americans begin to make a connection between hungry student and their ability to learn:

It is utter folly, from the point of view of learning, to have a compulsory school law which compels children, in that weak physical and mental state which results from poverty, to drag themselves to school and to sit at their desks, day in and day out, for several years, learning little or nothing. If it is a matter of principle in democratic America that every child shall be given a certain amount of instruction, let us

render it possible for them to receive it, as monarchical countries have done, by making full and adequate provision for the physical needs of the children who come from the homes of poverty.¹

Although largely forgotten today, Robert Hunter was a pioneering social reformer who believed poverty could be prevented by government action. Born in Terra Haute, Indiana, Hunter began working in Chicago, where he was mentored by fellow reformer Jane Addams and lived in her Hull House there. He married into a wealthy New York industrialist family, and then shocked society by moving out of a Manhattan mansion to live in a Greenwich Village slum in order to better serve the poor.

His book *Poverty* arose from his work in both Chicago and New York. In *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development*, Gordon W. Gunderson asserts, “[t]here can be no doubt that *Poverty* [. . .] had a strong influence upon the U.S. effort to feed hungry, needy children in school.”²

After *Poverty* was published, school lunch programs began to arrive in urban school areas, many within the first ten years of its publication.

Early American School Lunch Programs ³	
1904	In Milwaukee, the Women's School Alliance of Wisconsin began to prepare meals in the homes of families who lived near schools.
1908	Under the supervision of the Boston School Committee, the Women's Educational and Industrial Union transported hot lunches from a system of centralized kitchens to Boston high schools.
1909	The Cleveland Federation of Women's Clubs began serving meals to children at the Eagle School. Cincinnati schools quickly followed Cleveland's example and both programs swelled to include more schools within two years.
1910	The Chicago Board of Education gave \$1,200 to begin an experimental program of serving hot lunches to children in six elementary schools.
1911	New York's lunch program, which had begun two years earlier as a pilot program, expanded after it was found children in the pilot program gained an average of 10.2 ounces each (compared to average gains of 3.4 ounces for other children). St. Louis selected five schools initially, then expanded to include more poorly nourished children and those who could not go home at noon.
1912	Philadelphia's original program grew to include all the city's high schools, overseen by the newly-created Department of High School Lunches.
1921	Although one of the last major cities to begin a lunch program, Los Angeles opened an ambitious program in 31 elementary schools, eight intermediate and nine high schools.

Schools in rural areas would be slower to adopt school lunches. Not only did they lack the funds and space to begin programs, children usually traveled some distance to attend school and, for them, going home for lunch had never been an option. Rural students had always brought a lunchpail of cold food (usually sandwiches) to school, but in winter, these lunches would often be frozen solid when it came time to eat. Teachers began to encourage students to bring food — cocoa, soups, macaroni — that could be carried in glass pint jars and reheated in a kettle of water on the classroom stove.

1 Robert Hunter. *Poverty*. (Macmillan, 1904) 214.

2 Gordon W. Gunderson. *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development*. (New York: Nova Science, 2003) 7.

3 Gunderson, 10-11.

While teachers, parents, local school boards, and philanthropic organizations were laboring to find ways to feed children in school, concern about child malnutrition was growing in the government as well, but for a decidedly different reason. When the United States opted to enter World War I and the first selective service draft began, nearly a third of all recruits were rejected for being underweight, undernourished, or suffering from other physical defects which could have been corrected in childhood. This upsetting news led to government research into the causes of — and potential cures for — childhood malnutrition. The most common solution: a school-provided lunch.

In the years after World War I, the patchwork of school lunch programs continued to expand and gain momentum, but it soon became evident that local organizations and school boards alone could not possibly furnish all the funds needed to continue — they would need federal aid. And with the Great Depression of the 1930s bearing down on the American public, schoolchildren were about to need food aid more than ever.

The 1930s saw widespread unemployment in major cities, leaving families without any means of support. With less purchasing power in cities, production on farms began to pile up, and with this decrease in demand, farm prices began to plummet. Farm incomes dwindled to the point of barely supporting those living there. Millions of children, both urban and rural, were now in a situation of being simultaneously unable to afford a school-provided lunch, while also being provided with meager food at home. By the mid-1930s, children's health was beginning to pay the toll.

In 1936, Columbia Teachers College nutritionists found American children weighed significantly less than they did five years earlier. In Louisiana, a quarter of all black children and 13 percent of white children were found to be malnourished. An estimated 31 percent of Ohio children were underweight, while in one Chicago study, it was reported that 72 percent of schoolchildren “failed to meet a standard lower than that recommended by the National Research Council.”⁴

In the face of these grim reports on child health, Congress was finally spurred to act. On August 24, 1936, Public Law 320 was passed and approved. This law gave the Secretary of Agriculture a sum of money (30 percent of the customs duties collected each year) “to encourage the domestic consumption of certain agricultural commodities (usually those in surplus supply) by diverting them from the normal channels of trade and commerce.”⁵ In brief, the aim of Public Law 320 was simple: buy up surplus foods on the market, which would help raise farm prices, then use up the purchased surplus through exports or by donating them domestically.

These millions of pounds of federally-purchased food drove an exponential expansion in the number of schools offering lunches. By March 1937, there were 3,839 schools receiving surplus food for lunch programs, serving 342,031 children. Within two years, over 14,000 schools were participating, feeding nearly 900,000 children a day⁶. By 1942, the Department of Agriculture estimated that 78,851 schools and over five million children⁷ were involved in school lunch programs receiving surplus commodities.

The government then went a step further and didn't just provide food for these programs; it also provided much-needed labor. The Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Work Projects Administration) was created in 1935 as a way to get unemployed workers back into the labor force, working on public projects. School lunch work fell under the WPA's Community Service Division. Unemployed women from needy homes were a ready source of labor for doing “women's work” — working as bakers, cooks, clerks, and typists, et cetera — while men did the distribution and sanitation work. Menus, recipes, and manuals were developed and standards set for equipment and safety in the lunch program.

A 1942 handbook provided by the WPA set high, exacting standards for everything, down to the personal appearance of school lunch workers. Women were expected to wear “a foundation garment, or a girdle” under their uniforms, while men were told to wear clean socks and “holes should be neatly mended.” The WPA workbook assured these lunch workers that their efforts would be rewarded with more than just a paycheck; they were helping to build a nation:

4 Susan Levine. *School Lunch Politics: the Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008) 41.

5 Gunderson, 22.

6 Gunderson, 23.

7 Levine, 47.

*All over the country people are learning that children must have good food to grow strong and healthy. The result of regular, well-planned school lunches will be better health, regular attendance at school, and good school work. This will help children become good citizens.*⁸

In February 1942, the school lunch program reached a peak of 92,916 schools, serving 6 million children, but the United States' entry into World War II would have its effect. Defense jobs quickly replaced WPA jobs and the agency closed in 1943. The U.S. Armed Forces quickly siphoned off any surplus commodities for its draftees — men, it can be noted, who were bigger and fitter than WWI draftees, thanks in part to better child nutrition.

After WWII ended, American farmers again found themselves with record surplus crops, and with one eye on ensuring an even fitter population of boys to draft in the future, Congress passed the School Lunch Act of 1946, providing federal funding to make available hot lunches of at least two ounces of meat, a tablespoon of butter, two vegetables, and a half-pint of whole milk. This act would be amended and expanded over the next 25 years, changing its formula of federal payments to states, expanding to include breakfasts, and ensuring the poorest children would not go without a lunch.

Because the seeds of school lunch programs had been sown for centuries — from Count Rumford's 18th-century programs to feed the poor, to the 1904 publication of Robert Hunter's *Poverty*, and the malnutrition seen nearly a quarter of World War I draftees — one could argue that school lunches were inevitable, and would have arrived without the advent of the Depression in the 1930s. But, the large numbers of readily available labor (in the form of workers on the WPA payrolls) and millions of pounds of surplus food (in the form of commodities purchased by the government), coupled with growing evidence of increasing child malnutrition brought on by poverty, these three factors in tandem truly provided a tipping point for the school lunch program to take hold across America.

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⁸ United States Works Progress Administration, *Workbook for School Lunch Worker, Federal Works Agency, Works Projects Administration, Child Nutrition Program Sponsored by Board of Education, New York City* (New York, 1942), Part 1, Section 1.