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Cemeen Khodavandi

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Education Connection:
A Need for Improved School Lunches

By: Cemeen Khodavandi

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend to eat healthier and more sustainable meals. Some individuals and families are able to make the switch to more health-conscious meals, but for some, this is not an option. For many students, their school-provided lunch may be the only meal they receive during the day. Because some students may only be eating one meal a day, it is important to make sure that the meals schools are providing contain the necessary nutrients to help student performance in school. While federal programs have been initiated to improve school lunches, some schools do not have enough funding to make the change to completely wholesome and nutritional meals. Although there has been an increase in funding for school meals through the fiscal year budget, this amount still needs to be increased further to be able to supply adequate food options for students. Schools should receive more funding to be able to provide sustainable and healthy meals, which can lead to more positive effects on student performance.

II. CURRENT SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Approximately 30 million students are served lunches through the School Nutrition Association, which is an organization of school lunch providers in the country. Of the millions of students served, around 19 million students are receiving free lunches due to their socioeconomic status.

The National School Lunch Program (“NSLP”) was created in 1945 with the goal of absorbing farm surpluses at the time. However, the act now helps provide nutritionally balanced, low cost or free lunches to children. As of 2018, the fiscal year budget request allocated \$13.1 billion dollars of federal funding for the NSLP. This was an increase of \$659 million from the previous 2017 fiscal year budget.

In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was passed under the Obama Administration and made significant changes to school lunches for the first time in decades. This Act authorizes the funding for school meals and child nutrition programs in schools. One significant change with this child nutrition reauthorization bill is that it provides additional funding to schools that meet updated nutritional standards for federally-subsidized lunches. The main goals of this Act are to provide sustainable, healthier meals

for children, to focus on reducing childhood obesity, and to educate students about making healthy food choices.

To ensure that schools are making the necessary changes to comply with this Act, school districts are required to be audited every three years to verify compliance with nutritional standards. Schools are also required to make nutritional information more available to parents and to provide training and assistance to school food service providers. Most importantly, the child nutrition reauthorization bill grants the USDA the authority to set the nutritional standards for all foods regularly sold in schools during the day.

One 2018 study found that students at California schools that contract with a healthier school meal vendor have higher test scores than students at schools who do not. This study looked at all California public schools over a five-year period. To measure the nutritional quality of the vendor-provided school meals, the researchers used a modified version of the Healthy Eating Index. The study found that schools that contracted with a healthy school meal vendor showed an increase in test scores by 0.03 to 0.04 standard deviations. This result is significant, and it shows that schools that are able to provide healthier meal options can have a positive impact on students' academic performance.

One important result from the 2018 study is that an increase in test scores among students can be highly cost-effective for investment. The results showed that at most, it would take \$27 per year to raise a student's test score by 0.01 standard deviations. Based on actual meal contract bid information, it would cost an additional \$85 per student per year to contract with one of the healthier school lunch providers. If schools can receive more funding to provide students with healthy school meals, it can have lasting effects on a student's academic performance.

In comparison, in 2017 the European Union initiated a program to improve school lunches in European countries. Through this program, the EU pairs the improvement of nutritional meals with the educational measures for students. Not only does this program promote schools using local products and conventionally grown fruits and vegetables, it also helps reconnect children to agriculture by teaching students about farming, sustainable production, and food waste. This program also provides EU countries with greater subsidy incentives, helping with the funding of these nutritional programs. In Finland, the program covers up to as much as three quarters of the cost of fruit and vegetables.

The U.S. federal government should look to the EU model to create subsidy incentives and provide greater funding to states in need of better school meal funding. Further, by advocating for policies that promote healthy school food, and by promoting and implementing these policies, schools may have a greater chance of increased funding. Empowering school stakeholders to advocate for healthier school meals can help create a

public demand for nutritional meals. If there is a great enough want and need for healthier meals, the U.S. government should help provide and support this change, and can incentivize states and schools to also contribute.

III. REASONS FOR CHANGE IN SCHOOL MEALS

School lunches need to be improved for several different reasons. First, when children are hungry or undernourished, they are unable to focus and can have a difficult time learning. Students who are constantly hungry can experience developmental impairments in areas such as language, motor skills, and behavior. Meals with key nutrients can help improve the school performance and behaviors of students.

Second, when students do not receive adequate vitamins and minerals in their meals, mental concentration and cognitive abilities can diminish. Meals filled with high levels of saturated fats can negatively effect memory. A high intake of saturated fats can also increase stress levels for children, especially for teens who are developing coping mechanisms for stress. If meals provide proper nutrients and vitamins, children's mental and physical development can be improved.

Third, students with adequate and healthy nutrition programs can potentially help improve student's health over the long term. Well-balanced meals can also positively impact a student's life as inadequate nutrition and unhealthy meals can lead to diminished health. Student's with poorer health may lead to more sick days which negatively impacts a student's performance. If schools are able to offer healthy snack and meal choices, children can also worry less about their overall well-being.

Lastly, establishing healthy nutrition programs and providing nutritious meals can help teach children to make healthy food choices later on in life. Many students may not be aware of healthy alternatives or may not have access to more nutritious food offerings. Schools that offer salad bars show that about 25-35% of students will choose options from this selection. Children who learn to prefer healthier food choices early on in life tend to repeat these positive choices in adulthood. Involving students in the planning of healthier food options can help children make these decisions later on in life.

IV. CONCLUSION

Healthy and nutritional meals are essential for a student's academic performance, as well as a child's overall well-being. Research has shown that providing well-balanced meals can help positively impact a student's performance and test scores. The switch to contracting with healthy food vendors is also extremely cost effective. While billions of dollars are already allocated for the National School Lunch Program and the goal of

providing adequate school meals, more government funding should be allowed to help schools provide better nutritional meals. Although significant change has been made since the passage of the NSLP, more change needs to come if we wish to support a better future for students.

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