



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

Time for a New Deal vis-à-vis the Food System?

By Rose Hayden-Smith

The Victory Garden Alliance blog

September 28, 2008

Available online at: <http://victorygardenalliance.blogspot.com/2008/09/time-for-new-new-deal-vis-vis-food.html>

Yet another example of why we need to seriously reconsider our nation's food policy has emerged. Recently, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation commissioned an analysis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Commodity Program (CNCP), and how that program impacts the nutritional quality of school breakfasts and lunches.

The policy analysis, produced by California Food Policy Advocates and Samuels and Associates, focuses mostly on California, but its authors argue that it has "relevance to other states and the nation." I agree.

A little background: the USDA coordinates the distribution of commodities to more than 94,000 public and private nonprofit schools that provide meals to students. These programs support American agricultural producers by providing cash reimbursements for meals served in schools and other institutions serving children across the nation. The rationale for these programs is a worthy one, and goes back to early in the Great Depression, when surplus agricultural products were destroyed as millions of Americans went hungry, justifiably causing outrage. The development of federal policies to purchase agricultural surplus for distribution to hungry and underserved citizens solved multiple problems in Depression-era America, and beyond. It was progressive public policy for the time and is a key component of today's federal feeding programs.

What this most recent analysis finds is that many of the foods ordered by school districts fail to meet nutritional standards, because of the "processing" that occurs prior to the commodities being delivered to schools. This processing increases fat, sugar and sodium levels in these foods. The result: many commodity foods have about the same nutritional value as junk foods by the time they reach students. In a nation struggling with an epidemic of childhood obesity, this isn't good policy.

Taken directly from the analysis (available free-of-charge, via this link) are some key findings and rec-



ommendations, which I've italicized and included below:

“Key Findings:

Nationally, more than 50 percent of commodity foods are sent to processors (i.e., fat, sugar, and sodium added to foods) before they are sent to schools. Processing is not regulated for nutritional quality and often involves adding fat, sugar and sodium to commodity products.

California school districts used more than 82 percent of their commodity funds to purchase meat and cheese. They spent only 13 percent of their funds on fruits and vegetables.

There is little alignment between what California schools bought in federal commodity foods and what the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that people eat daily.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans should be reflected in School Meal Initiative Standards, and schools should have to meet them. Efforts to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables and decrease the amount of meats and processed foods purchased for school meals would contribute to providing students with much healthier foods.”

I couldn't agree more.

This week, I'll be joining others who are active in the movement to improve the quality of school lunches at the Western United States Assembly on Farm-to-School, being held in Portland. It's sponsored by EcoTrust, and there is enormous excitement among those attending about the opportunity to gather, and to learn about the best models and practices in this field. I am looking forward to sharing what I learn in future postings.

An historical footnote: There is an incredible body of fine art and photography showing deprivation in America during the Great Depression, much of it produced by WPA artists. One of the most haunting pieces is a work entitled Lunch Hour. These pieces of art document a difficult period in American life. To me, they also serve as a reminder that many of the basic public policies and fundamental premises that shape our daily lives in America were crafted during the Great Depression. The Great Depression began for most Americans nearly eighty years ago, in 1929 (although a depression started in the agricultural sector nearly ten years earlier, post-World War I). These policies, which we know as the New Deal, represented a dramatic restructuring of American life that gave subsequent generations - us - very different expectations and experiences than our grandparents and great-grandparents had. This is all leading



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

up to a big question:

Is it time for a New New Deal vis-a-vis the food system?

“A Garden for Everyone. Everyone in a Garden.”