
We Need Solidarity to Improve School Lunch Programs

By [Shawnta S. Barnes](#) – December 20, 2018



A little over a week ago I read the article, [“Should I make my kids participate in the school lunch program as a form of class solidarity?”](#) by Chris Stewart and inside I screamed, “Hell no.” We don’t need class solidarity around our current school lunch program; we need solidarity to blow it up and radically change it.

From kindergarten to eighth grade, I carried my lunch to school. Shortly into my first year of high school, my parents thought it would be a good idea for me to stop carrying a lunch box to high school and eat school lunch like the majority of my classmates. I was not happy about this. School lunch looked disgusting. I had few friends when I was in school and my parents were trying to help me fit in, but I was perfectly fine not being in the popular crowd and I was not interested in joining the populous in the cafeteria line.

What I hated the most, besides being forced to eat school lunch, was how bad it was. I went from having fresh food to eating something that resembled food and my body was not happy about the switch. I had an upset stomach that first week of transition and I blame the cafeteria food, if you can call that slop food. The difference is I had the option not to eat at school, but some of my classmates didn't.

If we know some children have no other options, why are we okay with the options being so bad?

A few years back, my husband and I watched Jamie Kennedy's Food Revolution. I knew from experience cafeteria food wasn't great, but that series made me upset. On one particular episode, he showed the ingredients for the hamburgers used in one school cafeteria. The first ingredient was beef and after that there were about 20 more ingredients. Kennedy took over and served healthy food and many kids threw it away. Some cafeteria ladies seemed to be proud about the fact that kids were throwing away the real food. They should have been ashamed that kids were hooked to the artificial food they were providing them. The same pushback showed up during former First Lady Michelle Obama's healthy school lunch movement. Stewart states in his article, "The food waste is outrageous, and adults are the problem. We aren't teaching eating expectations, manners, and skills." I agree. You can't just bring in healthy food and think students are magically going to switch to it. It has to be taught and students have to understand why.

The downside to the subpar nutrients we serve students is that some of our most vulnerable students continue to go hungry because they won't eat anything at all. One of my students, who never eats lunch, (he will drink

some milk) refers to our cafeteria lunch as jail food. He doesn't eat and many times is unfocused in class and I believe this is from hunger. Then, he goes home, many times to an empty fridge.

As a parent, I send my boys to school with a lunch box because I don't want them to eat school lunch even if it shows solidarity with other students who have no other options. Instead, I want other parents and educators to join me in solidarity around changing school lunch so kids can eat healthy whether they bring a lunch from home or eat school lunch especially if the school is in an impoverished area. That's why it was so important to me to get The Kitchen Community learning garden at my last school where we were 100% free and reduced lunch because I wanted students to learn you can come from any background and eat healthily. I want them to understand the long-term damage that will be done to their bodies if their diet is nothing, but takis and hot Cheetos instead of something healthy.

In impoverished areas, we are going to need an army to make this change. Recently, I came across an article about a suburb outside of Indy concerning small portions sizes served during a special holiday lunch and there was immediate action. I know swift action was taken because it was the suburbs. In poor urban areas, a complaint might just fall through the cracks. We will have to come together to get access to equitable and healthy school lunches for all students. Although I understand the sentiment of Stewart's piece, my children won't be tossing their lunch boxes to the side anytime soon and I will continue to advocate for better school lunches.