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**Eat Your Vegetables? Only at a Few Schools**

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OPELIKA, Ala. — When 17-year-old Tianna Summers puts a fork full of fresh lima beans in her mouth in the school lunchroom here, she is eating a vegetable seldom seen in any other American school.

"Junk food is not the center of our universe," Ms. Summers said, polishing off a meal of barbecued pork, the lima beans and a salad.

But in most of the country, it is.

A school lunch often looks like an exercise in fat loading, with a supersize soft drink from a vending machine, followed by a candy bar from another machine. The meal is more in keeping with one from a fast-food outlet than what the Department of Agriculture says is a nutritious meal.

This yawning discrepancy between what students should eat and what most of them actually pile onto their trays has become a central issue in the national debate over why Americans are growing obese. For the first time in five years, Congress will take up the school lunch issue this winter, writing legislation that will affect the diet of 27 million public school children, in elementary through high school.

The problems are immense and any solution is prey to an array of interests vested in the \$10 billion annual federal school nutrition programs, including breakfast, lunch and snacks provided free or at a discount. Among the interests are the soft drink and food service industries, as well as agribusiness and individual farmers.

The starting point for all discussions is money, or lack of it.

Years ago, school officials in Opelika, this middle- and working-class community in rural northeastern Alabama, decided that nutritious school lunches were non-negotiable. The parents backed them up, consistently voting for increased financing.

Feeding children more fruits and vegetables and reducing the fat costs more money. But for a handful of schools, like those in the Opelika district, the answer is to buy fresh produce from local farmers.

In six other schools visited recently, in New York City and Montgomery County, Md., where hundreds of students were eating lunch, only five children took a green vegetable with the main course. Faced with bad-tasting canned green beans provided free by the federal government, children in New York City and Montgomery County opted out.

Most children who took a vegetable chose French fries. Children at Opelika schools are fed fresh vegetables they like — greens and peas.

"We figure you have to serve a new food item 10 times before the kids actually eat them," said Melanie Payne, who oversees meals in the school district, "but we've had no problem with the fresh sweet potatoes, butter cream peas and black-eyed peas." Buying from local farmers — in this case from a nearby Florida cooperative — and cooking the vegetables from scratch is time consuming. It is far easier to open a can and plop the tasteless vegetable in a pot.

Opelika cooks have not fried chicken fingers, or anything else, for seven years. Vending machines have never darkened the school corridors, much less the lunchroom. And students are not permitted to leave school during lunch hour — no quick trips to the local fried chicken or burger outlet.

While the Opelika school system is not alone, it is part of a tiny minority. Many school cooks are so used to dropping prepared foods into frying pans and ovens that it would be impossible for them to serve fresh fruits and vegetables today. Yet over a week's time, as the Agriculture Department calculates the standards, 86 percent of the basic school lunches met the federal nutritional guidelines, on paper.

The problem is that with so much choice, only half the children choose the nutritious meal and then many do not eat all of it, leaving the vegetables.

"I've been in school kitchens where they haven't the simplest tools like knives or equipment to store fresh fruits and vegetables, much less processors for shredding and chopping or containers and utensils for salad bars," said Thomas Forster, of the nonprofit Community Food Security Coalition, a group concerned about nutritious food.

In most schools across the country the cafeteria managers, principals and athletic coaches undermine the relatively healthful, federally subsidized school lunch because they need to raise money. So they load up vending machines, from which they receive part of the profits, with high-fat, high-calorie, high-sugar candy, cookies, chips and ice cream. The school districts also sell vending machine rights to a soft drink company. Fund-raising drives collect money by selling more junk food.

These school districts permit Channel One, the television network for schools, to broadcast two minutes a day of commercials by McDonald's, Hershey, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Frito-Lay and the like.

The diet of the children suffers accordingly. During a recent lunch hour at Albert Einstein High School in Montgomery County, students bought 440 servings of French fries — the most popular item by far. Another 360 students bought the fully prepared lunch. The cafeteria also sold 187 snack cakes, 118 slices of pizza and 56 bags of potato chips. At the bottom of the list were three bowls of soup and three fresh salads.

With an epidemic of obesity among the young — in the last 30 years the proportion of obese children has increased to 15 percent from 5 percent — government officials and nutrition experts say changes in school lunchrooms offer the best chance of weaning children from the sugar and fat that is ruining their health.

"It is ironic that the school food program began because many young recruits in World War II were malnourished and physically incapable of meeting the demands of military life," said Representative Marcy Kaptur, Democrat of Ohio, the ranking minority member of the Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee. Today the problem is overweight schoolchildren who, Ms. Kaptur said, "are given more choices perhaps with less guidance than ever before."

In his report on obesity in 2001, Dr. David Satcher, who was then the surgeon general, pinpointed school meals as one of the eight major areas where Americans should begin to battle fat. The report also discussed the disappearance of daily exercise from school programs — another culprit in the battle.

School principals have been cutting physical education classes and recesses to make time for academic courses. As a result, high school students taking daily physical education classes dropped to 29 percent in 1999 from 46 percent in 1991.

Eric Bost, the under secretary of agriculture for food and nutrition, defended the federal school lunch program in an interview and said that exercise was often the forgotten part of a health program.

"For me," Mr. Bost said, "the solution is threefold: increase the overall consumption of fruits and vegetables, increase physical activity and reduce consumption of other foods."

While Mr. Bost said too many soft drinks and cookies spoiled a balanced diet, he said he doubted that he would ask for a ban on soda vending machines in schools. Instead, he said, he may ask Congress to require that the machines include milk and flavored water.

The federal government could actually improve children's eating habits because the 4.7 billion school lunches served every year are prepared under federal nutritional

guidelines. The guidelines cover more and more meals as millions of children also eat breakfast and after-school snacks at school — most of their daily food intake.

Improvements will require significant changes in what the Agriculture Department permits schools to serve children and in the laws Congress is willing to pass.

The department buys surplus commodities from farmers, many of which are high in fat, especially saturated fat, and turns them over to schools. For school meals in 2002 the Agriculture Department spent \$338 million on surplus beef and cheese but only \$159 million on fruits and vegetables, mostly canned and frozen, like the tasteless green beans.

Advocacy groups for children and the poor have asked Congress to add \$1 billion to the school meals budget, a figure that could help wean schools from vending machines and invest in simple equipment to prepare fresh produce. But the Bush administration will ask for little or no increase in financing, said Mr. Bost, who added that he hoped to find additional money by weeding out students who officials say are ineligible for free or subsidized school meals. He said he did not know the number of those students but intended to look into the concerns.

Barry Sackin, a lobbyist at the American School Food Service Association, a trade group, said federal school meal reimbursement rates had barely kept up with inflation, much less the actual cost of meals.

It will take additional spending to persuade schools to ban vending machines. They provide money for 98 percent of public high schools, 74 percent of middle schools and 43 percent of elementary schools, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than half of those machines operate in direct competition with the school lunch hour. Some schools close the vending machines during lunch hour.

The money from machines outside the cafeteria supports everything, including books and band uniforms.

Money from machines in cafeterias supports school lunch programs, which are usually required to act like businesses and cover their costs or even make a profit. To that end, cafeterias also serve à la carte foods that are higher in fat, sugar and calories, but are what students prefer over the more nutritious federally subsidized meals.

"We suggest boards of education make a statement of principle that school food service is an education support activity and not a profit center and shouldn't be expected to turn a profit or even necessarily be self-supporting," said James Bogden, project director of the National Association of State Boards of Education.

Slowly, a backlash has been growing against junk food in schools.

Some schools now require drinks in vending machines to include some fruit juice. Entire school districts have banned vending machines.

Small local farmers have signed contracts with school districts in 17 states, from California to Vermont. Schools in Rhode Island and Virginia have garden projects where children raise the vegetables they eat for lunch. Some schools offer fruit at half the price of a candy bar and charge less for water than they do for a soft drink, and students buy the less expensive items.

Changes, in fact, usually happen far from Washington. Said Mr. Sackin of the food service association, "When local communities get fed up with what is happening on local campuses and say we don't want that for our children, that's when it gets fixed."