

Local Focus

The High-Stakes Battle Over High School Cafeterias



A well-known politician or celebrity can direct attention to an issue, but such support might also lead opponents to personalize their attacks on an initiative. Both those dynamics came into play once Michelle Obama made more-nutritious school lunches a personal priority.

The First Lady helped persuade Congress in 2010 to pass more stringent nutrition requirements. The federal government subsidizes free and reduced-cost meal programs. School districts could lose that funding if they didn't follow the new guidelines, which phased in requirements for lower-sodium foods and more servings of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The idea that schools should serve healthier fare was a no-brainer to some people. Just as kids are taught math and history in the classroom, they should be learning better eating habits in the cafeteria, said Ginny Ehrlich, director of the childhood obesity project at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

After the law passed, the percentage of schools that offered lots of prepackaged foods but nothing by way of produce went down fast. But many people objected. They felt that local schools didn't need the federal government—or Michelle Obama—telling them what to serve. The First Lady became something of a lightning rod, repeatedly described as a “tyrant” by conservative blogs. “By leaving the program, we will not be required to follow these onerous guidelines, pushed by and large by Michelle Obama, who last I checked had been elected by no one,” Rick Petfalski, school board president of the Muskego-Norway district in Wisconsin, told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

The First Lady did not shy away from the controversy. She said that companies that make big money selling processed and packaged foods are unwilling to give up their profits, even at the expense of children's good eating habits. “We are currently spending \$10 billion a year—did you hear that, \$10 billion a year—on our school lunch programs,” she said in 2014 at a White House lunch with schoolchildren who won a healthy recipe contest. “So it's not surprising that there are certain interests that are resisting change and trying to

take us back to the old ways of doing business, because for them there's a lot of money on the line.”

But aside from complaining about heavy-handed mandates, some school leaders felt that the nutrition standards championed by Michelle Obama simply didn't work. That is, students weren't eating the meals. If you dine at your school's cafeteria, are you more drawn to the kale or the ice cream? Lots of districts ended up complaining about the waste and expense involved in students' throwing uneaten produce straight into the trash.

They also said that their budgets were being hurt by students' choosing altogether not to buy their meals in the cafeteria. At C. W. Baker High School in Baldwinsville, New York, the number of students buying lunch dropped from an average of 650 per day to about 400 once the standards were implemented. “With the changes in the kinds of lunches we were able to provide to students, they just wouldn't eat it,” said David Hamilton, superintendent of the Baldwinsville district. “They would turn right around and throw out produce that we had purchased maybe at quite a cost to us. In upstate New York, produce is not cheap.”

Ehrlich argued that while it took some students time to adjust to less-fatty, less-salty meals, most of them did come around. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsored two surveys in 2014 that found a majority of schools were selling as many lunches as they had before the standards were implemented, and the number of kids complaining about their choices had gone way down. “There is some element of growing pains in this, but we're really trying to showcase the success stories and the bright spots,” Ehrlich said.

Hamilton, the educator in upstate New York, says it's fine to offer kids more-nutritious choices, but districts should be able to do so on their own timetable. After he removed Baker High from the federal program, he installed a salad bar in time for the 2014–2015 school year. “It's a mistake to say it's either a federal program and its requirements, or it's going to be corn chips with nacho cheese on them,” he said.