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Book Review: Yuck!

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I won’t eat corn chowder. Never. Ever. I don’t care if it’s prepared by Emeril LaGasse and served by Rachel Ray. I won’t touch the stuff. Why? Every Tuesday’s lunch menu at Plympton Elementary School offered a bowl of watery milk corn chowder with yellow niblets floating in it. Every spoonful stimulated a gag reflex. For six years I had to confront this Tuesday ordeal which, as you can see, still influences my diet choices some sixty years later.

Sarah Wu’s *Fed Up with Lunch* makes much the same point about the role today’s school lunch menus play in her student’s dietary choices. Wu, a speech pathologist at a Chicago elementary school, found herself one day having to rely on the school lunch and was upset at the items placed on her tray, most of them wrapped in plastic which might contain chicken nuggets, pizza, tater tots, or other highly processed foods similar to the fast foods served by the chains. Wu resolved to raise people’s awareness of what she saw as a serious problem with children’s nutrition; she began a blog, calling herself Mrs. Q, to begin a conversation about school lunch programs. “If more people knew,” she writes, “about the pathetic quality of food in public schools, and—at least in my district [Chicago Public School District 299]—

the limited amount of time kids have to eat their lunches, surely more people would want to do something about it.” Turns out she was right; her blog rapidly brought responses from around the country.

Starting in January 2010, Wu decided to eat school lunch every day of the school year “and blog about it.” She would place the day’s menu items on her tray, return to her classroom on the pretext she had work to do, and use her cell phone to take pictures of the day’s menu selections. (My Kindle reproduces the pictures in black and white; for the full color photos, one needs to access the *Fed Up with Lunch* blog site—http://fedupwithlunch.com/. ) Despite her reservations about being considered a “whistleblower” and perhaps jeopardizing her employment—not very likely—Wu kept at her project. “Amazingly,” she explains, “my blog soon became the poster child for school lunch reform.” What bothered Wu and others was an awareness that because many students’ parents worked for fast food franchises and would bring home food from their jobs, students ate at home what they were being served at school. “Chances were good that those of my students whose parents worked for Taco Bell, McDonald’s, Starbucks, and Subway would get similar food when their parents brought home leftovers from their jobs.” One popular and frequently served item was chicken nuggets. “I’d always assumed that chicken nuggets were fried pieces of plain chicken breast meat. I guess those food scientists had me fooled; chicken nuggets are only about 50 percent chicken. Most of the ingredients are modified corn bits (cornstarch corn fillers, dextrose, emulsifiers).” Wu laments the lack of fresh vegetable and fruits available to the students. No opportunity existed for them to learn about good nutrition.

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets school lunch nutrition requirements. The school lunch
program originated in 1946 as a means for distributing surplus food to hungry children. The National School Lunch Act (signed by President Truman) has over the years developed some unintended consequences. Wu notes that French fries count as a vegetable, that a "stiff, prepackaged breadstick made of white flour [satisfies] the USDA’s requirement for grains,” that “a piece of school pizza counts as one serving,” and that, incredibly, a frozen juice bar called a “fruit icee” met the USDA requirement for a serving of fruit. Wu observes that her elementary students often will eat the juice bar first and leave themselves insufficient time to consume the rest of the meal. The frequent reliance on fruit drinks and chocolate milk has the children “assaulting their bodies with large quantities of sugar.”

Wu uses school lunch as a lens for focusing on additional problems within the school day. Most obvious is the insufficient time, twenty minutes, allowed for students to eat their lunch. Lunch periods are too often scheduled to meet the demands of the school day rather than the demands of a child’s appetite. Small children, she points out, have difficulty opening the plastic packages and must wait for an adult to help them. Many children would throw most of their lunch in the trash. Wu begins to notice the enormous quantity of trash generated by the plastic utensils (“sporks”), the cellophane packaging, the styrofoam trays, none of it recycled. “Most American kids know,” Wu says, “it’s not okay to litter or throw garbage in the street, but then why is it okay to throw excessive amounts of paper, plastic, and food waste into our landfills directly from our school cafeterias?”

Further, Wu brings up the accelerating trend to eliminate recess from the elementary school day. "In face of the growing concern over childhood obesity, it seems illogical to eliminate recess. But school districts are under pressure to fill students’ days with testing and academics and … recess looks like open space in the day.” A short recess before lunch allows children to release pent-up energy and return to class better prepared to concentrate. Recess also allows children to develop social interactions. Yet, as some argue, eliminating recess reduces playground bullying. As a skinny, shy, asthmatic kid whose mother made him wear shorts to elementary school, I harbor no nostalgia for recess except that I couldn’t wait for it. When I finally knocked Roger my tormenter on his kiester, urged on by my sixth grade teacher Mr. Furillo, my self-esteem skyrocketed. I hope no one misconstrues me when I assert that Mr. Furillo taught Roger and me a valuable lesson.

The school day exists as a microcosm for the wider American society. Americans have developed a genius for sending mixed messages to one another. On one hand we tell students to recycle and support sustainability; on the other we place them in contexts where they can’t help but produce quantities of trash and garbage. We tell students that success in the global economy requires cooperation and collaboration, then place them in contexts where they must ruthlessly compete with one another on standardized tests and the athletic fields. (Now we’re saying that student performance on standardized tests will determine a teacher’s employment status and express shock when students and teachers both start to cheat.) Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum in That Used to be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World We Invented and How We Can Come Back (a tract whose more accurate title might be If the World is Flat How Come Everything in America is Still Rolling Downhill?) write “education should focus on the whole person—should come to produce better citizens, not just better test takers…. If our schools teach American children what it means to be an American citizen, they—and America—will have a much better chance of passing on the American formula for greatness to future generations.” The arrogance here, the notion that such concepts as ‘whole person,’ better citizen, ‘American formula,’ ‘greatness’ might be viewed as uncontested, simply astounds. Diane Ravich, in a recent New York Review of Books article, makes the point that “the critics of test-based accountability and free-market policies do not have a name, so the reformers call them ‘anti-reform.’ It might be better to describe them as defenders of common sense and sound education.”

Sarah Wu attempts to apply some common sense and sound educational policy to the elementary school day. But, it’s that “American formula” that likely has Sarah Wu wondering. A dedicated teacher, she began her Fed Up with Lunch blog worried that it might jeopardize her employment. Her employer, a school system bureaucracy, might see her efforts to promote better school lunches and more enlightened school policy as somehow subversive and put the ‘institutional press’ on her to desist. Wu’s husband told her that as long as the blog was fun and doing some good, she should keep at it. I’d suggest that the blog became Wu’s recess from the pressures and rigidities—even the absurdities—of the public school day; she could blow off steam in arena that championed social networking. Wu kept at it and has become a celebrity—the American formula.

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