Local School Lunch Plan Can Tackle Obesity, Environment

A trio of researchers theorizes that schools can fight childhood obesity and help the environment at the same time in an article published in the Spring 2010 issue of the journal *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, which is published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. “School Meals: a Nutritional and Environmental Perspective” concludes that by focusing more on locally grown products, schools can produce healthier meals for students while reducing energy costs associated with transporting foods to schools.

The article was written by Antonia Demas, Dana Kindermann, and David Pimentel. Demas is the founder and director of the Food Studies Institute, based in Trumansburg, New York, and is a Visiting Scholar at Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health. Kindermann is a physician at Georgetown University Hospital, and Pimentel is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Entomology at Cornell University.

The authors used the school meal system in Baltimore as a case study for how to achieve these two goals. Baltimore serves a large number of school lunches and has previously contracted with a Brooklyn, N.Y., company to provide their meals.

“As fuel costs and childhood obesity rates continue to rise, the quality and production of student meals may become more of a priority,” they write, pointing out that Baltimore had started working toward healthier and more economical options in the 2009-10 school year.

More than 60 percent of school-age children across the country eat at least one meal a week at school. Children who participate in reduced or free lunch programs often rely on school meals to meet their nutritional needs. Current offerings often fall short of the mark, but that can change with some easy decisions, the authors write.

“Menus would feature less meat and would contain more locally procured and minimally processed foods that could be prepared on-site. … By simultaneously focusing on childhood nutrition and environmental resource use, school meals could have the potential to address two of the major public health problems of our time,” they write.

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