Food Policy and Social Justice: Evaluating the Food Purchasing Practices of Lehigh Valley School Districts

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Food Policy and Social Justice: Evaluating the Food Purchasing Practices of Lehigh Valley School Districts

by

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A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in
Environmental Policy Design

Lehigh University
8/17/2012
Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Environmental Policy Design.

FOOD POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: EVALUATING THE FOOD PURCHASING POLICIES OF LEHIGH VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Policy and the Barriers to Providing Healthy Options in Schools</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young’s Conditions for Justice and Why Lehigh Valley Schools are not Meeting Them</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Lehigh Valley Schools can meet Conditions of Self-Development/Determination</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A Map of the School Districts of Lehigh and Northampton Counties 3
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Food Budget Information from 6 Lehigh Valley School Districts 25

Table 2: Breakdown of food Cost Allocations for Easton Area School District 28
ABSTRACT

This paper applies Iris Young’s theory of social justice to evaluate food purchasing practices of school districts in the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania. For Young, justice is achieved when institutional processes and procedures support individuals’ self-development and self-determination. Drawing on budgetary information from six school districts attained through “Open Records Requests,” I argue that Lehigh Valley schools are not meeting basic conditions of justice. However, there is much to learn from other school districts and schools throughout the country. Achieving food justice in the Lehigh value will require food purchasing practices that bring more healthy and nutritious foods into school food programs. It will also require greater transparency in school districts’ food purchasing practices, and increased public discussion through which parents can learn about the long-term impacts of unhealthy food, and therefore hold elected school board officials accountable for food choices that undermine students’ capacity to learn.
Food Policy and the Barriers to Providing Healthy Food Options in Schools

Theories of social justice provide a useful lens through which societal welfare can be evaluated. Food policy significantly impacts all members of society, making just food policies a requirement for societal well-being. This paper examines the ways in which food policies meet conditions of social justice by applying Iris Young’s theory of procedural justice. I use this theory to determine whether the food purchasing practices of school districts within the Lehigh Valley are promoting justice for their students and the parents who represent them. This evaluation is intended to aid the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) in its effort to create a Fresh Food Access Plan for the Lehigh Valley. This plan is part of a larger 3-year project, called “Envision Lehigh Valley,” which is funded through a grant by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The purpose of the project is to create a “truly sustainable Lehigh Valley,” and determining the valley’s access to fresh food is a crucial part of that (About Envision Lehigh Valley, 2012).

The Lehigh Valley is an area in southeastern Pennsylvania comprised of 2 counties, 17 school districts, and 62 municipalities (Figure 1). As part of the Fresh Food Access Plan, the food purchasing practices of all mid-level institutions, or institutions that offer a public service to the local community such as schools and hospitals, need to be assessed. Many people interact with these institutions every day and as a result, their food policies largely impact public health. Schools in particular have a significant impact on community health because all children under 18 are required to attend them, and many opt to purchase lunch there. Further, most schools have breakfast programs, and some have dinner programs for students who need additional assistance getting food. This
means that students who participate in these programs have the majority of their diet provided for by their schools. Even for students who eat breakfast and dinner outside of school, participating in just the lunch program accounts for nearly a fourth of their total caloric intake during the school year.

Figure 1: A Map of the School Districts of Lehigh and Northampton Counties

This paper first provides background information on food policy in the United States by explaining national-level policy issues that are increasing the availability of unhealthy food and decreasing the overall physical health of the nation. I argue that to solve this problem, solutions should be implemented on the local-level, because national-
level solutions are not politically feasible. This paper then explains the three models that define food purchasing processes present within Lehigh Valley school districts and the various barriers that these districts would face on the local level if they wished to implement food service processes that better protect and promote the health of their students. In order to find a way to overcome these barriers, this paper then draws on Young’s theory of justice to suggest an approach to food purchasing that is more socially just. Here I answer the question “why are Lehigh Valley schools not meeting Young’s conditions of justice?” by analyzing their current buying practices. Finally, this paper outlines how Lehigh Valley schools can meet these conditions by providing examples of other schools that have overcome various barriers to make their food purchases healthier.

In order to examine the current purchasing decisions in Lehigh Valley school districts, Open Records Requests for contracts with food distributors/food service management companies, detailed food budgets, and general school budgets were submitted to all 17 districts, as permitted under Pennsylvania’s Right to Know Law (Right to Know Act, Laws of Pennsylvania, 2009). Eight of these districts provided the requested documents, though the received results provide information about food purchasing practices that speak to the broader set of school districts that have yet to provide any requested information.

Background

Before examining Lehigh Valley’s schools, it is important to understand why people make unhealthy food choices and how these choices impact human health from a broader, national perspective. For individuals, many purchasing decisions are driven by
economic factors, which also include decisions about food. People, especially those who are on tight budgets, look to minimize expenditures, leading them to favor inexpensive food items over pricier ones. The same is true of school districts, which must have balanced budgets and a sufficient supply of cafeteria food. In the United States, the cheapest food choices are foods that are “energy-dense,” or have a caloric composition of predominately fats and sugars. These energy-dense foods are typically processed foods containing numerous ingredients, many of which are byproducts from crops such as corn and soy (Drewnoski & Specter, 2004). It may seem counter-intuitive that foods with long ingredient lists are less expensive than say, an apple; however national-level legislation can explain this phenomenon.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (FCE), colloquially referred to as “the Farm Bill,” is a multifaceted piece of legislation that undergoes review and reauthorization every four to five years and funds numerous projects: from food stamps to bioenergy research. Next to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest expenditures allocated in the Farm Bill are designated in Title 1, which apportions subsidies to farmers for only a few basic commodity crops. The five major crops subsidized through Title 1 are soy, corn, wheat, rice, and cotton, with corn and soy being the most widely harvested (Johnson & Monke, 2008). This subsidy program originally began in the 1930s as a form of agricultural support for farmers during the Great Depression. At that time the price supports made it possible for farmers to continue to grow large quantities of grains without going bankrupt from the plummeting market prices, which in turn supplied America with a reliable supply of food at a time when it was desperately needed (Gardner, 1987).
Today, the effects of these ongoing subsidies are less constructive. Specifically, the price supports that were originally intended to keep farmers afloat now act to keep the market prices of these crops unnaturally low. Additionally, subsidies generally work as direct payments to the producer, meaning that the more a farmer grows of one crop, the more money (s)he receives from the federal government, and the more profit is (s)he subsequently makes. This can be viewed as a positive impact: the consumer benefits from lower prices and the farmer benefits from direct payment for growing these crops (all on the government’s dime). However, in practice, it encourages the overproduction of the subsidized crops as opposed to a more balanced production of crops, including ones that have high nutritional value, such as most fruits and vegetables. Because the yield of subsidized crops is so high, and because they are so cheap in value, they are often made into byproducts such as soy lecithin and high fructose corn syrup and then sold at low prices. In short, these non-nutritious byproducts are subsidized as well as their parent crop. By providing farmers with compensation for growing corn, soy, and wheat, the government is also indirectly providing financial incentives for producing processed foods that contain these inexpensive byproducts.

Because these byproducts are usually high in sugar and fat, the subsidized production of processed foods is having a disastrous influence on the health of Americans. In the past decade, the United States has seen a decline in average life expectancy while other nations experienced increases, despite the fact that the US spends more per capita on health care than any other country (Kulkarni et al., 2011). This is largely due to the increase in the national prevalence of obesity, which rose from 15% in 1970 to 31% in 1999. Obesity is linked to innumerable health problems, ranging from
heart disease to early onset diabetes. Such problems are quite costly, and even potentially fatal to those suffering from them.

What is more disquieting is that certain vulnerable populations are more deeply affected by this unsustainable agricultural system. Children, for example, have been hit especially hard; since 1980, the percentage of obese school-aged children doubled, and rates among adolescents tripled. In 2004, it was estimated that 18.8% of 6-11 year olds were obese with an additional 20.4% being overweight, and 17.4% of 12-19 year olds were obese with an added 15.3% overweight (O’Toole, et al., 2006). Further, the onset of Type 2 Diabetes has also increased among school children, with African-American, Hispanic American, and Native American adolescents being particularly susceptible (Goren, et al., 2003). This fact is largely relevant to schools within the Lehigh Valley because 22% of the students enrolled across the 17 school districts are “Latino/Hispanic” compared to the statewide average of 7%.

In addition to causing and contributing to widespread health problems, the overproduction of the crops subsidized by the Farm Bill are typically produced using environmentally damaging agricultural practices, such as monoculture cropping that uses heavy machinery (and thus petroleum as fuel), chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and large quantities of water. Although the price of subsidized crops may be considered “low,” this is simply because the costs are externalized elsewhere: both to health care costs that accrue from treating obesity-related illnesses and to environmental damage that impacts the land, water, and air.

The Farm Bill’s subsidies also shape the overall structure of our domestic food system. American farmers are encouraged to grow one or two crops in mass amounts and
export them all over the country; most of these crops are turned into processed and packaged food sold at a relatively low price. Americans therefore have to rely on imports from countries such as Chile and Mexico to get fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other crops not subsidized by the Farm Bill (Huang, 2004). These countries are able to ship large amounts of fruits and vegetables at a time, just as the US can do with crops like corn. Market processes of this sort follow the classic philosophy of Adam Smith, who favored the specialization of labor for the purpose of reducing costs (Stigler, 1951). However, this overall approach to buying food items in large quantities and at lower prices makes it difficult for farmers in the United States who may prefer to grow their own fruits and vegetables, and for consumers who may prefer to eat locally sourced food.

Because the Farm Bill makes energy-dense, unhealthy food the cheaper option for consumers, many food policy reform advocates seek a national-level solution to the problem. Such a solution would include getting rid of the subsidies on corn, wheat, cotton, rice, and soy, and instead replacing that expenditure with programs that fund farmers’ markets, co-ops, farm-to-school programs, and so on. Because the estimated annual health care costs related to treating obesity related illnesses in the US are around $147 billion, many also argue that the government could justify investing in such measures even without defunding the Farm Bill. Finally, government could apply reforms by implementing a tax on obesity-promoting foods, similar to a cigarette or soda tax (Chait, 2010).

While such broad and clear-cut fixes to the situation are enticing, they are not feasible options. The Farm Bill is up for revision only once every five years, so any change to the subsidy system would not be instantly implemented. As it stands now, the
proposals for the 2012 Farm Bill do not involve cutting subsidies in any way, but merely replacing the mechanism of direct payments with an “Enhanced Crop Insurance” program, which some experts have predicted may end up giving farmers more money over a five year period than the direct payment system from the 2008 Farm Bill (Shields & Schnepf, 2011). True cuts to the subsidy program are unlikely because agribusiness special-interest groups have incredible power and influence over politicians, which is entrenched through a history of large campaign contributions (Lopez, 2001). To internally “fix” the Farm Bill with by rewriting Title 1 would be nearly impossible; likewise ideas such as an unhealthy food tax or government funding for healthy food to offset healthcare costs are also unlikely. Because “food” encompasses so many items, unlike soda or cigarettes, which can be clearly defined, implementing a tax would be difficult and subjective. Some food items are blatantly damaging to health, but others require people to weigh the extent of their nutritional benefit versus harm. For example, ice cream is high in fat and sugar, but also has important nutrients like calcium and protein. Further, taxes are already unpopular in contemporary domestic politics, and making these relatively subjective decisions as to what foods are “unhealthy” would not be compatible with important political values, such as “individual choice” and “freedom,” which many politicians champion during their campaigns. In an era of intense political gridlock over how to cut a massive budget deficit, new spending to offset potential future health care costs would be unlikely to get the necessary legislative support (Dyck, 2010).

Though there may be other national-level solutions that could reduce both the prevalence of and the economic incentives supporting unhealthy food, any solution would
face these same barriers: political stalemate and the influence of established lobbyists from the dominant agricultural and processed food industries. For this reason, regional and local-level solutions offer a more promising alternative when addressing the rising obesity epidemic. This is particularly true with regard to schools’ food purchasing decisions because these decisions are always made at the local-level, either by hired school administrators or elected school board representatives, where ordinary citizens can more easily have their voices heard.

In order to evaluate the ways in which schools in the Lehigh Valley can increase the provision of healthy food options, it is important to understand how food purchasing decisions are made. Based on the information obtained through the Open Records Requests previously mentioned, three different models of purchasing practices in the Lehigh Valley can be identified. In the first model, a school district hires a food and facilities management company and creates an annual contract with it. The management company in turn finds vendors, hires cafeteria staff, and places all food orders. Any specific stipulations as to the nature of the provided food that a district might want to include, such as designating a percentage of food purchases to be locally sourced or certified as a “fair trade,” must be negotiated in advance of the contract’s implementation. Additionally, in this model the management company appears to reserve its right to withhold vendor information as trade secrets. As a result, if a school wants to utilize a particular farmer or vendor, this too must be made explicit in the contract.

The second model of food purchasing that is practiced in the Lehigh Valley is in which the school district manages and selects all food services. Here, the school administrators have direct control over all decisions made, such that if the school board
or administrators decide they want to change vendors or increase the percentage of locally sourced food, they would not have to wait until the beginning of a school year, as is the case in those districts contracting with food service management companies. To save costs, school districts that maintain this kind of control over their food purchases typically form coalitions with other school districts to place bids through an online website called “Interflex,” where canned, frozen, and dried foods are sold in high quantities. Interflex gets its food from large-scale distributors that are usually regionally-based, which purchase foods and commodities from companies/suppliers such as Heinz, Tyson, Kellogg’s, and Kraft. These food distributors can post their available foods in bulk (and thus at wholesale prices) on Interflex’s website, on which schools can then place bids. School districts form bidding coalitions to lower their costs, because placing bigger orders tends to be less expensive than placing smaller orders. School districts in the Lehigh Valley supplement the food purchases they obtain through Interflex bids by also purchasing produce from regional wholesale distributors. Kegel’s is the most common wholesale distributor from which schools in the Lehigh Valley purchase produce. It is located in Lancaster, PA, which is 80 miles away from the Lehigh Valley. Kegel’s buys produce from both larger farmers and some small-scale, local farmers who can afford to sell at wholesale prices.

The third model of food purchasing found in the Lehigh Valley is like a hybrid of the first two. In this model, the school district contracts with a food services management company, but the company becomes responsible for only some (not all) of the food orders. The management company will still staff and run the cafeteria, but school administrators make some food purchasing decisions independently. For the most part,
these independent orders placed are for fresh produce from a regional wholesale distributor.

It is important to keep these three models of food purchasing in mind, because what it means to increase healthy food options in schools will be different depending on how a school provides food in the first place. This institutional complexity of these different models creates barriers to changing the nature of a food program because it is difficult for citizens to learn what their school district’s purchasing model looks like, how it differs from others, and how that affects food policy. Without making this information openly available, both parents and school officials will not be able to have a meaningful discussion about what can practically be accomplished. In addition to knowing the purchasing model, it is equally critical for citizens to understand the other kinds of barriers that schools face when looking to alter their food systems.

One of these barriers is the fact that school districts have large budgetary constraints. Schools spend at most 3.2% of their budget on food services, which pays for the salaries of kitchen staff and the upkeep of the cafeteria facilities, in addition to the actual food (Monk *et al.*, 1997). Fortunately, schools are able to receive financial aid from the federal government. Under the National School Lunch Program, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimburses school districts $2.47 for a free lunch, $2.07 for a reduced-price lunch, and $0.23 cents for a paid lunch so long as the lunches meet their dietary guidelines (Newman, 2008). These reimbursement amounts are low, especially in light of estimates that a quality, healthy meal would cost at least $3 to $4 per student. Yet in order to avoid losing money, school districts are implicitly encouraged by the USDA reimbursement rate to keep food costs below the rate required
to provide a healthy meal. As a result, a typical public school district will spend under $1 per student per meal. This pricing model actually allows schools to earn a profit (Chait, 2010). The less that is spent on a meal, the more money schools earn from federal reimbursement.

In addition to these cost constraints, school districts usually have inadequate kitchen equipment to prepare fresh food for their students. Most school kitchens have only large burners and microwaves intended to quickly heat, reheat, or thaw already processed food. A school working with unprocessed food, on the other hand, would require more traditional kitchen appliances such stove-tops, ovens, cutting boards, and large sinks. Another element missing from most cafeterias is a way to store food items, such as large-scale freezers or coolers that would allow fresh produce to keep longer than the day of delivery. On top of those demands, members of a food service staff are usually no longer trained to know how to handle fresh food. Such training would be difficult; food preparation involves learning numerous skills, like working with knives, food safety, learning how to properly handle fresh produce, and knowledge of general nutrition so that the quality of a meal can be assured. Further, this type of work would be more time consuming, as preparation-time would be increased from a few minutes to a few hours, and would most likely necessitate additional workers who are trained in food preparation in order to get lunch out on time (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2010). Both the hiring of new workers and the acquiring of new appliances are quite costly. While some schools have adopted these cooking methods by relying on volunteers to handle the increased labor demands, this is simply not feasible for many school districts, and volunteer labor is not necessarily guaranteed.
Food safety is another concern for school districts looking to move towards a healthier food system. Training the kitchen staff to learn about the proper ways to handle food is definitely part of that, but any food coming into a school also needs to be inspected before preparation. The USDA inspects already packaged and processed food, thereby eliminating any concerns about safety for those items. However, with fresh food, especially from small-scale, local farmers, quality is not as highly monitored. This means that inspections of food that is not pre-packaged and processed will be an increased cost to the school because someone will have to be paid to make sure that all farms and food vendors are producing food in a safe and clean way. Further, there is concern about the mismatch between food supply and demand. Schools have a steady demand for food regardless of what local farmers are able to supply. If there are crop blights or if it simply is not the growing season for a particular crop, a smaller farmer may be unable to meet a school’s weekly order. Schools need to know that they have a reliable source of food coming in, which is why processed food that is always readily available has become such an attractive option to schools, in addition to its lower price and guarantee of food safety.

Another major hurdle for school districts seeking to provide healthier lunches and foods in their cafeterias is the fact that many districts rely on “competitive food” for revenue. Competitive food consists of any food sold outside of or in addition to federally reimbursed school meals. This includes items found in vending machines and at snack bars, as well as food that is sold off an a la carte offering in the cafeteria. These competitive foods and beverages tend to be high in fat and/or sugar; one simple and ubiquitous example is soda found in vending machines, which are common-place inside most middle and high schools. In fact, competitive foods can be found at close to 90% of
schools across the country and are not required to meet USDA nutritional standards (Story, et al., 2008). As a result, schools have more leeway when purchasing these types of competitive foods that supplement school lunch programs. This demonstrates the power of both school administrators and food service management companies to select food types and quantities, and therefore, to directly impact students’ health and well-being.

However, schools do not necessarily use this power in a way that has a positive impact. A case study of Minnesota schools revealed that a la carte offerings were largely unhealthy. In all but one school, chips, crackers, ice cream, and other frozen desserts were made available and accounted for 21.5% of all a la carte items. Produce, on the other hand, only accounted for 4.5%. Soft drink vending machines were also found to be available at two-thirds of the schools studied (French et al., 2003). While some may suggest that a la carte foods have the advantage of providing students with choice, the fact remains that the presence of a la carte offerings in a school cafeteria is positively associated with students who have their mean percentage of daily calories comprised of trans and saturated fats. Moreover, schools without the presence of a la carte options averaged daily calories from fat that fell within USDA recommendations, whereas schools with these programs exceeded them (Kubik, et al., 2002). This may be unsurprising because the same study reveals that adolescents were more likely to choose fried potatoes as a vegetable rather than fruit and traditional vegetable selections. Thus, even though the concept of choice is appealing, there may be good reasons to provide and incentivize foods that support rather than undermine children’s health. Unfortunately, because a la carte programs and other competitive food sources bring in revenue for
schools, getting rid of them may be unpopular and seemingly impossible when it comes
time to balance their budgets.

While the provision of non-nutritious foods that bring revenue to the school
represent a large barrier to implementing a healthier food system, the provisions of school
lunches that must meet the nutritional standards set by the USDA can also act to prevent
schools from providing healthier and fresher food. As previously mentioned, the USDA
pays for the National School Lunch Program, and requires that school lunches funded by
this program meet at least one-third of the “Recommended Dietary Allowances” that the
department sets for vitamin C, iron, calories, and calcium. Additionally, a variety of milk
must be offered with every meal, and only 30% of the total calories in these meals can
come from fat (Newman et al., 2008). Some states set even stricter standards. Although
these standards may seem advantageous for anyone hoping to provide healthier lunch
options in schools, in reality they can prove to be quite the hassle. Specifically, meeting
these standards requires lunch staff and food directors to have knowledge of the vitamins
and minerals found in produce, of how cooking affects the nutrient content, and how
large a serving of a food needs to be in order to possess a given amount of a nutrient.
With processed foods, this information is easily ascertained from the nutritional label.
Though it may not seem like a large amount of additional work to figure this out for fresh
food, it would require expert knowledge and additional time inputs in preparing meals on
an already over-extended staff.

The last significant barrier facing schools that are looking to provide students with
healthier food has to do with the concept of preference. Because energy-dense food is
less expensive, diets across the country have become higher in fat and simple
carbohydrates. This is why obesity trends are increasing. These trends are particularly significant in low-income communities, because individual food preferences can easily adapt to what options are available. For example, a study focusing on diets in low-income African American communities found that fruit and vegetable intake rose by one-third for every additional supermarket in these communities, which are often the only place to get fresh produce (Vallianatos et al., 2004). It may not be surprising that people tend to eat what’s around them, but the point is that when children are accustomed to diets that are high in fat and sugars, they become more likely to select such foods when given a choice. This is the reason that a la carte offerings are predominately desserts and chips; children of America are getting less healthy, and so are their food preferences.

Given the many constraints and barriers facing schools that wish to increase healthy food options in cafeterias, solutions can take many different forms based on which problem schools seek to address. As the above discussion suggests, the current cost-driven approach to making food policy decisions has produced significant failures in children’s health and ignores the long-term externalized costs that make these seemingly cost-effective decisions wholly inaccurate. In the following section of this paper I therefore propose an alternative criterion to guide food policy choices at the school and school district level—a criterion of justice that prioritizes transparency in decision processes and substantive health outcomes.

Young’s Conditions for Justice and Why Lehigh Valley Schools are not Meeting Them

Theories of justice are useful for evaluating the food policies and practices that schools adopt. Theories of justice broadly define what conditions must be met for a
Many justice theorists focus on issues of distribution; that is, they focus on how a society allocates material things among people and whether this allocation is unjust. However, Iris Young explains that focusing on only distributive justice eclipses important procedural issues, such as the ways that culture, decision-making, and division of labor influence these substantive outcomes. She argues that a just society is one that “contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the realization of values that constitute the good life” (Young, 1990). Young asserts that different social groups exist; some are oppressed and some are privileged within the processes that organize institutions. For justice to be achieved, decision-making processes must be critically examined. Specifically, Young identifies two conditions that occur within these processes that constitute injustice: oppression and domination (Young, 1990).

Young posits that oppression is the institutional constraint on self-development and domination is the institutional constraint on self-determination. Although these two concepts may seem similar, there are differences in how a lack of self-development and self-determination can manifest. Oppression occurs when the systematic institutional processes “prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings” or in any setting that limits people’s “ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings” and be listened to. Domination, in contrast, is comprised of those institutional practices that “inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or conditions of their actions” (Young, 1990). Here, the distinction she makes is an important one; oppression refers to the internal limits on one’s self. These limits impede fundamental internal capabilities such as
learning or communicating. Self-determination, however, is more external; it concerns one’s participation in processes that determine the conditions of one’s actions, and therefore influence the actions one is able to choose.

The institutional processes shaping school food policies are an issue of justice because these policies can significantly undermine the self-determination and self-development of students that are subject to them. The influence of school food policies on self-development is the clearest. When children are not provided healthy food options, their risk of being overweight, obese, or developing diabetes increases drastically. The conditions of being overweight and obese are associated with many risk factors for cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, hypertension, and musculoskeletal disorders that may manifest either during childhood or later in life. The increase in these conditions for 6-17 year olds has become so widespread that annual hospital costs for obesity-related illnesses for this age group alone average $127 million per year (Goran, et al., 2003). Also, for children who develop Type 2 Diabetes, these risk factors are only aggravated further, and continue into adulthood (Wang, et al., 2003). Certainly a decline in physical health strongly undermines self-development because children’s abilities to play, communicate, and pursue an education are thwarted by ongoing illness.

Even for students that are not obese, the risk behavior most positively associated with any type of chronic illness found in youths is an unhealthy dietary pattern, or a diet that is low in fruits and vegetables and high in fats (Kubik, et al., 2002). Similarly, for children that are able to keep their weight under control, the mere ingestion of unhealthy food is linked to more sickness. Given the patterns of increasing numbers of overweight children, coupled with the fact that many students get a significant portion of their
calories from school lunches, one can assume schools play an important role in children’s physical health by simply offering these obesity-promoting foods; these foods limit children’s self-development.

The ingestion of foods that are high in fats and sugars can lead to more than just physical side-effects. Children who eat unhealthy foods have been shown to exhibit low self-esteem as compared to those consuming more nutritious options. Further, low self-esteem decreases one’s capacity to face developmental and daily challenges and produces overall negative attitudes. Low self-esteem can also impede cognitive and social development in children, both of which are crucial to their development (Wang & Veugelers, 2008). This suggests that the emotional side-effects of unhealthy food options can be especially damaging, particularly given Young’s definition of self-development as including the ability for people to “express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen” (Young, 1990).

Additionally, cognitive abilities have been proven to decrease with unhealthy eating habits and a resulting associated body-mass index (BMI) that is above average. In California, it was found that students whose BMIs were higher than the “healthy” limits set by the Centers for Disease Control, or whose run/walk times in their physical education tests exceeded California Fitnessgram standards, performed poorer in the state’s standardized reading, math, and language tests than students whose BMIs or fitness levels fell within the proper sex and age specific standards. These results remained the same even when controlling for significant factors such as parental education, thereby demonstrating just how impactful an unhealthy diet can be (Roberts, et al., 2010). Further, studies show that meeting basic nutritional requirements throughout childhood
are essential in promoting complete intellectual development (Brown & Pollitt, 1996). That is, without proper nutrients and healthy food, children may not develop their cognitive abilities as well as they could, thus explicitly limiting self-development.

Overall, unhealthy diets tend to be higher in glucose and fats. These are known as “empty calories,” though their consumption results in significant short-term gains in energy and cognition. Yet the gain from empty calories is fleeting, and contrasts with the longer-term cognitive gains that are associated with the consumption of nutrients such as iron and protein (Filgio & Winicki, 2002). For all these reasons, the decision to serve foods that undermine students’ capacities to learn is important. It is a decision that undermines the very aim of schools as institutions that promote the life chances of children through learning. Thus, to take self-development seriously as a condition of justice is to define institutionally created processes of food choice and consumption that impede self-development as unjust. From this perspective, when public health data shows that specific foods cause declines in student cognition, school administrators must take this data seriously.

For example, if data supports that having food with sugar content above a certain percentage negatively impacts a child’s capacity to learn, then the processes providing such food should be treated as a threat to justice because they are impeding the precise form of self-development schools are intended to support and foster. Far from enabling genuine choice, such processes are actually limiting the range of students’ future choices. Food policies eliminating such foods would provide the conditions of self-development that justice requires and would be aligned with other policies that prohibit minors from making choices that threaten their well-being, such as alcohol consumption and drug use.
In short, when the processes that define food consumption choices are fully just, they will provide choices that enable rather than thwart the capacity of students to develop their learning and cognitive abilities to their fullest potential.

The conditions of self-determination, which Young defines as integral to justice, also have important implications for food policy. Self-determination, as I explained previously, requires that people participate in the processes that determine the conditions of their actions, which thereby influence the actions they are able to choose. Because current food policy decisions are made solely by administrators and school board officials, rather than students who are most significantly impacted by their decisions, there are good reasons to question whether conditions of justice are met in this context. Schools do have systems intermediate of accountability in place. In the Lehigh Valley, for example, each district’s school board is comprised of members that citizens directly elect. In this system of representation, even though students are the beneficiaries of school board decisions, parents stand in as proxies for children, representing their interest when they vote for the school board members that will influence food policy. This influence can be either direct, in that the board may determine the food purchasing practices of the district, or indirect if board members instead appoint administrators who are then tasked with the job of determining food policy.

When parents act as proxies for their children, it is not an act of domination, because parents ought to have the best interest of their children in mind. However, for parents to be able to successfully promote their child’s self-determination in the case of food purchases, they must be able to fully participate in the processes that determine who makes decisions about these purchases. Full participation requires that parents both know
and understand the information necessary to evaluate the decisions of those they elect to protect their children’s interests. For this to occur, there must be transparency of purchasing records, the presentation of a wide range of information about what constitutes healthy food, and discussion and dialogue about the rationale for existing food purchasing decisions.

Transparency is an important step towards promoting justice not because school districts are hiding something troubling from parents, but because the information that administrators and school board representatives have is essential to any discussion on food policy. If the school district is constrained by costs, then parents need to know this. Understanding these fiscal concerns allow parents to learn why unhealthy food choices are present in school cafeterias. With this information, parents can then fruitfully participate in a discussion about what should be prioritized within a school’s overall budget. Having this information could lead to solutions not previously considered by school administrators and board members. Parents may favor reallocating funds to place a larger emphasis on healthy, quality food while decreasing an emphasis that the school may have traditionally placed on athletics, after-school-clubs, and so on. Parents may even come up with a budgetary solution that is less revolutionary, such as reallocating funds within the food budget; they could argue for a shift in purchases from foods that are heavily in animal protein and dairy to foods that instead favor high protein from legumes and beans, which are inexpensive in comparison. However, until this information is made readily available, parents cannot participate in discussions about feasible solutions.

In addition to understanding the process of food policy decisions, understanding what constitutes healthy food is equally vital to all participants in this process. Here, there
is a space for nutritional and dietary experts to educate parents, school administrators, and board members alike. These experts should not drive policy, but they should provide and adequately explain the information to all participants with an immediate interest in the policy making process. Furthermore, these experts should not have any affiliation with entities that have a special interest in a school district’s food contracts, such as food service management companies or regional wholesale distributors. Otherwise, the information provided by the experts may be biased towards a solution that favors the organization with which they are associated. The nutritional information experts provide needs to be clear and unsubjects to extreme bias.

Such information is vital to a kind of participation and dialogue that enables self-determination. Even in the event that parents, once provided with all the information about cost constraints facing the school district and the nutritional values of food choices, come up with solutions that are infeasible, the process of dialogue and discussion is invaluable because it offers parents the opportunity to create a vision regarding the direction that the school district should be headed in its food purchasing. As budgets evolve, these visions may be able to become more of a reality. This involvement, facilitated by parents’ understanding of the decision-making processes and the actual priorities of the school district is crucial to parents having a voice in the decisions that directly influence their children and the conditions of their actions. A process that provides transparency, allows experts to explain relevant information to all participants in the decision-making process, and it enables inclusive discussion in a process that protects the self-determination of those affected by food policy decisions.
Given the above conditions of self-determination and self-development, the information obtained through the Open Records Requests for contracts with food management companies and detailed food budgets suggests that Lehigh Valley schools’ food purchasing policies are not close to achieving food justice. First, unhealthy food options that pose a significant threat to students’ self-development due to their negative impact on students’ cognitive capabilities and overall health are widely available at these schools. Second, there is little if any transparency about food spending, which is necessary both to hold school officials accountable and to foster dialogue that would empower parents to be a part of the decision-making process about food choices. Let us consider these points in further detail.

Table 1 below summarizes information from 6 school districts that responded to the Open Records Requests. Although these requests were sent to all 17 schools within the Lehigh Valley, 2 districts responded with information that was not quantitative, and the remaining 9 districts either denied the request, filed for a 30-day extension (still unfulfilled after 5 months), or did not respond at all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Total Food Budget</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>$/Student/Yr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bethlehem Area School District</td>
<td>$202,457,943.00</td>
<td>15,434</td>
<td>$179.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easton Area School District</td>
<td>$1,429,735.51</td>
<td>8,223</td>
<td>$173.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Area School District</td>
<td>$329,099.06</td>
<td>5,757</td>
<td>$57.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Penn School District</td>
<td>$1,263,850.00</td>
<td>8,050</td>
<td>$157.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazareth Area School District</td>
<td>$872,460.00</td>
<td>4,716</td>
<td>$185.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Lehigh School</td>
<td>$523,990.24</td>
<td>3,032</td>
<td>$172.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Food Budget Information from 6 Lehigh Valley School Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Budget ($)</th>
<th>Meals ($)</th>
<th>Cost ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitehall School district</td>
<td>$577,436.45</td>
<td>4,126</td>
<td>$138.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though only 6 school districts provided quantifiable food budgetary information, their responses provide examples of what we can expect from the other Lehigh Valley schools. The data indicates that the most a school spends per student per year is $185. Given that 177 lunches are provided throughout the school year, this amounts to a cost of approximately $1 per student-lunch. That figure is similar to national averages of meal costs, though childhood obesity is rising across the nation. For this reason, inasmuch as school-food policies are contributing to the obesity problem, the national average should not be treated as an ideal.

Both the Bethlehem Area School District (BASD) and the Easton Area School District (EASD) contract with a food management company called Sodexo. Both of their contracts were obtained through the Open Records Requests. In the BASD’s contracts, there was no language about what food Sodexo should or would order. However, the BASD Director of Food explained in that the BASD purchases local apples from Lancaster to supplement the food provided by Sodexo (Personal Correspondence with Kim Hayes, 3/12/2012). Lancaster is 80 miles from Bethlehem and not part of the Lehigh Valley. While this appears to be a positive step in the direction of relying on locally-grown foods, depending on some definitions, the produce grown in Lancaster does not meet the “locally-grown” criterion for schools within Lehigh and Northampton Counties. Within the Lehigh Valley, “local” food is typically defined as food grown within 50 miles. (Personal Correspondence with Lynn Prior, April 2012). Further, these “local”
apple costs are unable to be analyzed as a portion of the overall food budget because the BASD files their food costs under an umbrella category within their general budget. This category includes all food costs in addition to other food service costs. Without a more detailed breakdown of their budget, it is impossible to tell how much the district spends on local produce, including these regionally-grown apples. The BASD conceives of their produce spending as a “huge percentage” of their food budget (which is then spent by Sodexo), though without information on the amount of the food budget spent on produce rather than all food expenses, it is impossible to compare their produce spending to other similarly situated school districts. On Sodexo’s side of the relationship, their pricing structure is determined at a corporate-level, which suggests that the BASD has little latitude when it comes to determining food prices. In the actual contract between the BASD and Sodexo, there is no explanation of any proposed breakdown of expenses, no commitment to the inclusion of local food as a percentage of local purchases, or any food pricing figures (BASD Contract, 2011). It is possible that Sodexo would not sign a contract that made agreements to such items in advance, but given that it is a multimillion dollar contract, Sodexo may be receptive to a slow integration of certain commitments to categories such as local sourcing, produce percentages, and so on.

The EASD, on the other hand, did try to assert this type of control in their contract with Sodexo. Though much of Sodexo’s pricing structure relating to food service was redacted in the documents requested for this analysis, the EASD budget breaks down their $1,429,735.51 spent on “food costs-including commodities” into seven food categories, with specific costs associated with each one, as can be seen in Table 2 below.
The EASD’s food expenditures overall totaled around $173.97 per child per school year, or about 97 cents a meal per student (Deegan & Borick, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Name</th>
<th>Money Allocated</th>
<th>% of Total Food Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baked Goods</td>
<td>$145,079.71</td>
<td>10.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverage</td>
<td>$141,880.00</td>
<td>9.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk and Ice Cream</td>
<td>$228,884.66</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groceries</td>
<td>$372,574.25</td>
<td>26.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat/Seafood/Eggs/cheese</td>
<td>$248,635.57</td>
<td>17.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce</td>
<td>$157,313.71</td>
<td>11.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed Commodities</td>
<td>$135,367.58</td>
<td>9.47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Breakdown of Food Cost Allocations for Easton Area School District

The EASD’s Food Director explained that the “groceries” category consists of dried, bulk foods such as pasta, #10 cans, or bagged snacks. “Produce” may be either fresh or frozen, but there is no guarantee of the percentages that will be fresh. “Processed commodities” are comprised of already prepared foods, such as chicken fingers, pizza, and so on (Personal Correspondence with Andrew Chandler, 04/19/2012). Here, it is clear that although EASD has these breakdowns in their contract, their provision of this information does not necessarily reflect a strong commitment to make their foods healthier. The expenditures on produce almost matches baked goods, which consists of items like muffins and bagel chips, indicating that the nutrient level of the foods being purchased may not be the primary consideration during the allocation of the food budget. As with the BASD, the EASD’s contract with Sodexo also makes no commitment to purchasing local food, and it mentions nothing regarding the quality or freshness of produce purchases.

The Wilson Area School District’s (WASD’s) contract with their food services management company, Chartwells, is less detailed than the BASD’s or the EASD’s
contracts, though much of this is because their $329,099.06 that was allocated for food costs only amounts to food-spending of $57 per student per year, suggesting that the food provided by Chartwells is heavily supplemented through other buying practices that they have not yet disclosed (WASD Contract, 2011). Another possible explanation is that school lunch participation in the WASD is much lower than in the Easton and Bethlehem areas.

The WASD’s provided 2011-2012 “A La Carte” price list ranges from including items like “toasted cheese” ($1.50) to a “wild greens salad” ($2.65). Saltines, dinner rolls, and Goldfish crackers are the three least expensive items on the menu, whereas a salad, a 12-oz Vitamin Water, and a 20-oz Vitamin Water are the three most expensive. Fresh and canned fruits are offered at the same price, which is equal to the cost of string cheese and soft pretzels. Less healthy foods, such as fresh fries, nachos with cheese, and Chipwiches, are all available for purchase alongside healthier menu options, such as celery and carrot sticks, yogurt, and vegetable salads.

Interestingly, however, the only price increases from the 2010-2011 school year are on “entrees” (school meals), as well as on cheese sauce, toasted cheese, Nestea Cool beverages, Jungle crackers, Pop Tarts, and all forms of ice cream (Wilson Area School District Contract, 2011). This may be due to undisclosed market forces, though the WASD may also be targeting less nutritious food items for price increases in an attempt to promote healthy eating. Still, a 10 cent increase in price may not be significant enough to change the purchasing behaviors of students.

The East Penn School District also contracts with a management company, Nutrition Inc., though its contract is equally vague, revealing only that 1.17% of their
total budget is spent on food, and that overall they spend $157 per child, per year (East Penn School District Contract, 2011). Neither the WASD nor the East Penn School District specified food spending in categories such as groceries, baked goods, and so on, so it is not possible to determine how money was allocated into these categories as it was with the EASD.

The remaining four responses to the open records requests all came from schools that did not contract with a specific food service management company like Sodexo. This practice was explained in detail by the Director of Food Services for the Nazareth Area School District (NASD). The NASD is similar to the BASD and the EASD in that spends $185 in meal costs per student per year. Of this, $159 is spent on food and $26 is spent on milk (NASD Budget, 2011). However, unlike the BASD and the EASD who leave this money in the hands of Sodexo, the NASD makes their own food purchasing decisions using a combination of Interflex bids and orders to Kegel’s. The NASD is part of a coalition called “LeNorCo”, which includes 21 other school districts. Most of its members are located in the Lehigh Valley, though some are located in neighboring counties throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey. This coalition bids together on Interflex’s site to reduce costs (Personal Correspondence with Sharon Ryba, 03/06/2012). For the NASD specifically, 88-90% of weekly food expenditures are allocated toward making Interflex bids. The other 10-12% is allocated to purchasing food from Kegel’s. Kegel’s offers a large variety of local produce, though they also carry non-local fruits and vegetables. The produce at Kegel’s is sold at wholesale prices, which is why schools are able to purchase them. Unfortunately, as I previously explained, produce from Lancaster is not necessarily considered “local” when purchased by consumers in the Lehigh Valley.
Additionally, there is no guarantee that the produce carried by Kegel’s is organic, which means that there could be traces of chemical pesticides or fertilizers in the food. Nevertheless, it should be noted that buying seasonal produce from an area only 80-100 miles away is decidedly better for the environment than the typical inter-state and inter-country shipment of fruits and vegetables.

The buying practice of placing large bids online and also buying produce from wholesale, local distributors is not unique to the NASD; the Parkland School District also uses Interflex and supplements this with produce purchased from a wholesale distributer. Their exact expenditures were not disclosed, nor were their food orders. However, Parkland is also a member of LeNorCo, the same Interflex buying group of which the NASD is a member (Parkland Open Records Data). Though information on LeNorCo is sparse, the Parkland School District disclosed their order guide for Interflex. This guide provides information on the types and quantities of food purchased over the website (at least for Parkland). The regional foodservice distributor (denoted “bidding vendor”) from which the food was being offered was also disclosed. Parkland placed bids on food offered by two major bidding vendors: Feesers Foodservice Distributer, which serves Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, and Delaware, and the Allentown branch of the U.S. Foodservice, which is conveniently located within the Lehigh Valley. Both distributors carry major food brands, such Frito-Lay, Gatorade, General Mills, etc. (www.feesers.com).

Some of the orders placed by Parkland (or at least recommended in their ordering guide) appear to be for relatively healthy food. For instance, an order for 2264 cases containing 100 bags of sliced apples (or 226,500 bags of sliced apples total) certainly
constitutes a relatively healthy food choice, even if these apples are not locally sourced or organic. However, Parkland’s orders also included 9320 pounds of salted, corn tortilla chips, 29,125 Apple & Eve juice boxes (which are high in sugar), 6850 cases of Schwan Food Company pizzas sold in groups of 9, and 4262 cases of mayonnaise packets, sold in packs of 200, among many other unhealthy food orders (Parkland Open Records Data). It would be nearly impossible to evaluate Parkland’s order guide on an item-for-item basis to determine if they buy more “healthy” or “unhealthy” food because of the amount of listed purchases and the subjectivity of determining the “health” of some foods; for instance, would the 9900 breaded veal patties with mozzarella that they ordered be considered “healthy” due to its protein content or “unhealthy” due to its high sodium and fat content?

With respect to produce for Parkland it only comprises a small percentage of the total order, and it is almost always frozen. In the rare case produce is not ordered frozen, it is instead either canned or placed in pre-packaged bags. Though canned and frozen foods are not necessarily lower in nutrient content, they often include added sodium and are rarely locally sourced (Rickman, Bruhn, & Barrett, 2007). This suggests that cheap, processed, and packaged produce sold through Interflex at wholesale prices is generally thought of as more desirable to schools such as Parkland than pricier fresh and local produce, which would not only be a bit more expensive, but would also require more preparation than opening a can or bag.

Another important conclusion to draw from the ordering guide is that meat, juice, and snacks like chips comprise the largest percentage of the foods purchased (Parkland Open Records Data). However, this may not be representative of Parkland’s complete
purchasing history; they did not disclose any orders placed with Kegel’s or any other produce distributor.

Only two other schools disclosed significant food purchasing information without filing for a 30-day extension or denying the request out-right: the Whitehall School District, and the Southern Lehigh School District. The Whitehall School District’s total food expenditures totaled $577,436.45 for the 2011-2012 school year, which equates to 1.09% of their total budget expenses and averages $138.74 per student, per year (Whitehall Public Records Data, 2011). This figure is surprisingly low, though it is possible the disclosed food expense was a partial number. The Southern Lehigh District, on the other hand, spends 0.97% of their total budget on food, yet averages $172.82 per student per year, revealing that they have a proportionally larger budget than most of the school districts.

Overall, this information provided by the 8 districts suggests that the current food purchasing practices of Lehigh Valley schools do not meet Young’s conditions of justice. All schools demonstrated a heavy reliance on less expensive, processed foods; the NASD, for example, does place orders with Kegel’s, yet these orders account for only 10% of their total food expenditures. From the perspective of justice, the problem is that schools are purchasing unhealthy foods that are known to undermine self-development due to their high fat and sugar contents. Based on the limited information provided, it appears that these foods are wholly present in the schools’ purchases. This was most apparent in the WASD’s a la carte price list, where unhealthy foods such as nachos with cheese and Rice Krispy Treats were more predominant than healthy foods such as their relatively expensive salads. The presence of these unhealthy foods inhibits the self-
development of the students through impeding long-term health impacts and cognitive abilities.

School districts are also failing to support the conditions of self-determination because they are not providing a way to allow parents to act as needed in order to protect their children’s interests within the current food purchasing procedures. Specifically, there is little to no transparency about food purchasing decisions and actions. In order to obtain the sparse information that was gathered for this paper, Open Records Requests forms had to be filed, which is time consuming. Additionally, the Open Records Requests must ask for specific documents with titles that are not provided on a school district’s websites. For example, if a request was filed asking for a “detailed food budget” and a school district does not have a document with that specific title, then they are within their rights to deny the request, which many of the school districts exercised. Therefore, filing Open Records Requests is very difficult unless the filer knows how school districts title their documents. Further, the process of submitting an Open Records Request is not one with which parents would necessarily be familiar. Because this information is so difficult to obtain for an individual such as myself, who has time and knowledge about the Freedom of Information Act, we might predict that a typical parent would be unlikely to ever see or even know about these documents. Without this information, in addition to impartial input from experts on nutrition and health, parents cannot attempt engage in dialogue about these decisions that impact the conditions of their children’s choices and environment. Neither can they then hold school district board members accountable for protecting their children’s interests. For both of these reasons, current school district policy undermines self-determination and fails to meet the conditions of food justice.
How Lehigh Valley Schools can meet Conditions of Self-Development/Determination

Lehigh Valley school district officials and administrators are not blatantly attempting to inhibit students’ self-development and self-determination; they are operating under a series of constraints that currently make it difficult to adopt food purchasing policies that successfully promote Young’s conditions of justice. However, there are feasible ways to implement a food purchasing system that comes closer to meeting these conditions.

The promotion of self-determination requires that parents, acting as representatives for their children, understand information necessary to foster dialogue about the food purchasing decisions. This would necessitate two things: greater transparency about food purchasing practices and related budgetary considerations, and a forum in which parents can become better informed and able to speak with those they elect. Filing Open Records Requests is not an easy or effective way to get information on the nature of food purchases from the majority of school districts in the Lehigh Valley school districts, as many districts refused to provide the requested information.

Information on the overall structure of a school’s food purchases, the nutritional value of food ordered, the budgetary and administrative constraints that the school faces, and any contracts the school makes with a food service management company or regional food distributor needs to be readily and easily accessible. Schools should provide parents with the information about what food they are spending money on and about how food policy decisions will impact their children. In the case of food, there needs to be a way for experts to explain to parents which foods promote health and which foods significantly
undermine it. Parents should also be made aware of the constraints facing school
administrators, so that the dialogue fostered as a result of this information remains
realistic to what the school district is capable of changing and implementing. If experts
are also able to provide their own recommendations, then the ensuing dialogue would
create a more just process of food policy decision-making. In such a process, board
members could come to more reasoned and defendable decisions, to which they could
also be held accountable.

While these conditions for fostering dialogue might seem a bit abstract, the
Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) provides a concrete example of a school
district that was able to successfully promote the conditions of self-determination in their
school lunch reform process. At the start of their reform, the BUSD faced the same
barriers other school districts confront. Of the 16 schools within the district, just 6
cafeterias had stoves. Their Nutrition Services staff was largely untrained in food
preparation, and the food quality was considered poor overall. However, starting in the
1990s, parent-groups concerned about their children’s health began to put pressure on the
BUSD administration. The school district responded by allowing these parents to form a
group, called the Superintendent’s Group, that would meet each month with the BUSD’s
food services director and superintendent. These monthly meetings would also be
attended by the school board president and the Nutrition Services director (Chez Panisse
Foundation, 2008). At the same time, parent-volunteers implemented a “Fresh Foods
Fridays” program at one of the elementary schools within the BUSD, where they served
foods like fresh organic vegetarian soup, salad, and bread. The Fresh Food Fridays
program demonstrated that children were willing to eat healthy, fresh foods, if offered the
opportunity. This, coupled with the ongoing monthly meetings, pushed the BUSD to make positive changes; within a few years, the BUSD was awarded a grant sponsored by the USDA, and was then able to then improve school meals as well as provide gardens within school areas.

In this case, the BUSD took the lead in becoming a school district where healthy food was not only offered, but also part of the curriculum (Chez Panisse Foundation, 2008). The BUSD’s experience shows how a school district can foster dialogue with parents and make them part of the education and decision-making process; the superintendent did not have to let the parents meet monthly in a group with school representatives, yet did so anyway. Here, parents were included in the process, and were able to even help participate in new initiatives that would later become part of the BUSD’s new purchasing policies. While the BUSD’s case is somewhat unique because the pressure for food policy change began with the parents, it nonetheless demonstrates how school districts can promote their involvement. More importantly, it demonstrates the importance of parent involvement in discussions about food purchasing decisions, because through their involvement, the BUSD was able to secure grants and overhaul their entire lunch program. This promoted self-determination; parents were able to learn and discuss information that influenced the conditions of their children’s choices and actions.

Lehigh Valley school districts can certainly take similar steps to promote self-determination, most obviously, by increasing transparency, involving experts to explain nutritional information, and creating a more public culture around dialogue related to food policy choices. Promoting self-development, however, will be more difficult given
the numerous constraints placed on the actual food that is purchased. In order to promote the self-development of students, schools can take two approaches: (1) provide a greater number of healthier choices in cafeterias, and/or (2) to eliminate the food options that definitely undermine health. Currently, the choices Lehigh Valley schools provide are not predominately healthy options, which are most significantly evidenced by the a la carte menu that offers fried and fattening foods at lower prices than salads. Schools with a la carte offerings may for this reason be fostering less healthy students, but the problem is that such food provides important revenue to the district.

School districts in Iowa provide an example of one way to get around this dilemma. There, a farm cooperative of only eleven members, called GROWN Locally, teamed up with a school district to provide fresh produce for salad bars at four schools, which were featured in the schools’ a la carte menu offerings. Part of the reason for the success of this program is that no additional funding was required to introduce these foods into the existing menu; the salad bar produce was purchased at wholesale prices, and a la carte sales made up for this expense (Harmon, 2004). One of the school districts involved in this program, the Decorah Community School District, also offered horticulture classes to its students through the local Future Farmers of America chapter, further connecting students to their food.

Other schools also use a salad bar as a means through which they can provide healthier options. In the Santa Monica, California school system, where half of the students are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch, a salad bar was also implemented. Rather than being a la carte, however, this district chose to include the salad bar as a portion of the federally reimbursable lunch. Their system is also successful because the
salad bar is able to include culturally significant foods; for instance, students demanded lemon wedges because lemon juice is a staple on salads in many Hispanic households. Because of this local, cultural tie to the food, along with the ability to offer students choice about what they put on their plate, participation on school lunches has increased in the Santa Monica lunch program since the introduction of the salad bar, thereby boosting revenue and lowering the need to offer competitive, commercial foods and drinks (Tropp & Olowolayemo, 2000). This salad bar provides a way for students to eat healthy food from an option that is both attractive and significant to them; students selecting to eat lunch from this salad bar are selecting to eat nutrient-rich foods, thus increasing their self-development due to the positive health benefits associated with such foods.

Salad bars are a good starting point, but they are just one small step. In the context of the broader food system, a major barrier to increasing the availability of healthy food is the lack of appropriate kitchen appliances and trained kitchen staff to cook fresh, nutrient-rich food. Schools in Kentucky were able to overcome this constraint through the help of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. The state department helps facilitate communication between farms and schools, so that schools don’t have the burden of understanding what supply farmers have to offer. Once schools order their food, farmers ship it to larger, regional distribution centers where the Kentucky Department of Agriculture inspects it all, guaranteeing food safety. To deal with the issue of kitchen appliances, Jefferson County has only one “model” central kitchen that processes large amounts of food. Here, school lunch food can be prepared locally and then sent to individual schools, reducing the need for preparation inside of buildings that likely have outdated equipment, while still providing fresh food. This central kitchen is also heavily
supported by the state government and able to supply all school districts within the county (Harmon, 2004).

Food safety is another barrier facing schools that seek to increase the availability of healthy food options. In North Carolina, meeting food safety standards was achieved by a program that combines support from the state’s Department of Agriculture and the Federal Department of Defense (DOD)’s “Fresh Produce Program.” In this North Carolina program, the closest DOD Produce Buying Office is in Wicomico, VA. North Carolina’s Department of Agriculture works hard to create a strong tie with this office in order to increase the awareness of the DOD Fresh Produce Program among local North Carolina Schools. This program is similar to the one implemented by Kentucky’s Department of Agriculture, only in the case of North Carolina, it is the DOD who receives orders from schools, selects vendors, and inspects all food rather than the state department. This guarantees food safety even though the food is fresh produce from smaller farmers. The DOD Produce Buying Office also works to mainly target purchase grown produce, and can be quite successful in issuing a statewide bid. This also takes the trouble of ordering and placing bids away from schools, thereby relieving some staffing pressure and allowing schools to focus solely on the preparation of lunch food (Tropp & Olowolayemo, 2000). Such approaches to getting and preparing healthy food improve the quality of children’s nutritional health and thereby contribute to their successful self-development.

Each of these examples demonstrates how schools can feasibly provide more healthy food options—options that support rather than undermine the internal capacity of children to develop and communicate in ways that fully expand their potential. Even
school districts that have contracts with food services management companies can require the provision of a locally sourced salad bar within their contract. Yet increasing the availability of healthy food is only one method achieving basic conditions of food justice. The other approach schools can take in order to promote the self-development of their students is to decrease or eliminate unhealthy food options.

To pursue this approach, school administrators must critically evaluate their current buying practices and consider supporting the food policy decisions they are making. Although the USDA sets standards for the percentage of calories in a school lunch that can come from fats and sugars, these standards do not apply to a la carte offerings. Administrators, therefore, should be asking themselves questions like: Do we need a la cart offerings? If so, should a la carte offerings also follow USDA caloric guidelines? Should we make fatty, sugary foods more expensive?

The categorical breakdown of foods that school districts purchase should also be examined. For instance, in the EASD, 16% of the total food budget is spent on milk and ice cream. Even though the USDA requires a school lunch to offer milk, does this much money need to be spent on it? If the EASD offered filtered water as an option, children might opt to take it over milk, which would lower costs. Additionally, should 17% of their budget be spent on meat, seafood, and eggs, which are generally pricier than other high-protein foods like beans and legumes? Is there a way that more money could be allocated towards fresh produce if it was prepared in conjunction with cheaper, nutrient rich dry foods such as quinoa and lentils? The list of questions can go on, but the crucial point is that food purchasing decisions should be examined critically, and options such as the removal of unhealthy foods or the reallocation of expenses to more nutrient rich foods
should be considered. These questions should also be brought before parents as part of efforts towards greater transparency and fostering dialogue. Such efforts may be highly successful in fostering positive food policy changes. Simply creating discussion and dialogue does not initiate a process that requires immediate spending, but rather initiates a conversation that requires school districts to justify where their dollars are already allocated and to start planning to provide options that more genuinely support students’ self-development.

One critical question that the School District of Philadelphia asked itself was “do we really need to offer drinks in our school other than 100% juice, water, and milk?” With the help of The Food Trust, a local non-profit, the Philadelphia Coalition for Healthy Children (PCHC) was formed in order to provide a reasoned response to this question. The PCHC reached out to local media outlets to inform the public about the health care costs of obesity for the city of Philadelphia, and connected that information to popular drinks, particularly soda. The coalition also organized hearings where everybody from obesity researchers to students, could testify in favor of or against banning soft drinks from schools. The overwhelming majority was in favor of the ban and all unhealthy beverage options were eliminated not long after the ad campaign (The Food Trust, 2004). Lehigh Valley schools could follow this example as well and eliminate many of the unhealthy vending and a la carte offerings currently being sold.

Conclusion

Using Young’s theory of justice as a lens for evaluating the food purchasing policies of school districts within the Lehigh Valley reveals that that the procedures and
processes in which these policies are made do not protect individuals’ self-development and self-determination. In order to meet these conditions of justice, Lehigh Valley school districts should look to some of the innovative programs that other districts are adopting around the country, which are successfully bringing healthy nutritious foods into schools and involving parents in the process of food program design and decision-making.

I have argued that protecting self-determination requires that parents, acting as proxies for their children, be included in the process through which food purchasing decisions are discussed and decided. This will require greater transparency with respect to information about current purchasing practices, constraints facing school districts, and the real options available. Elected school board officials should work toward making this information publically available and thoroughly explained. Full involvement in the food policy decisions that determine the well-being of their children will also require that parents have knowledge of nutrition and how given foods affect their children’s long term health and cognitive development. Conversation and dialogue, fostered by school board members, is one way to attain this understanding and it requires creating places and contexts in which parents can discuss the various options, and engage in reasoning about food choices through collective dialogue. In this way, parents will be better equipped to hold elected school board officials accountable to crafting food purchasing decisions that better serve their children’s health and well-being.

I have also argued that in order to successfully promote self-development, school districts should purchase foods that provide students with healthier options and they should prohibit foods that are well-documented as being unhealthy. One way to increase the purchase of healthy foods is through the reallocation of food budget funds from less
nutrient-rich items to ones that are more so. Unhealthy foods should be eliminated from the food budget when there is existing data that clearly suggests consumption of such foods will undermine the capacity to learn, which directly conflicts with the goals of self-development implicit in providing free education and requiring school attendance. Students’ capacity to learn is most likely negatively impacted by foods with a caloric composition containing a high percentage of fat and/or sugar. I have argued that school administrators should take data revealing such damaging consequences seriously, because allowing foods that explicitly inhibit self-development is similar to allowing children to use illegal substances that negatively influence both cognitive and physical development, such as alcohol or cocaine. Because high-sugar food products are increasingly known to produce a decline in reasoning and intellect, school officials have good reason to question whether such foods should be provided by schools, which have the primary aim of strengthening both of these abilities.

While current food purchases are driven by costs and largely placed in the hands of large corporate distributors that have adapted to a national food policy that subsidizes the use of processed food high in sugars and fats, justice requires food purchasing decisions be driven by different goals. Lehigh Valley schools should aspire to purchase foods that promote the self-development of students and the self-determination of parents who serve as proxies in decisions that determine their children’s well-being. This will make the purchasing of more local and organic produce a real option, and will be better for both students and the environment. Achieving food justice requires that school districts tackle the existing barriers that prevent the increase of healthy cafeteria options in a way that empowers students and those who will prioritize their interests.
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