

SEARCHING FOR FOOD IN THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

By Kate Adamick, JD

It's not too early in 2007 to notice that the media darlings this year include edible schoolyards, renegade lunch ladies, and angry moms protesting the poor quality of school food. That's great news for those of us who believe that healthier bodies lead to healthier minds, and that school food plays a critical role in that equation.

But the increased media attention often leaves average parents – those without access to tens of thousands of foundation grant dollars, full-time professional chefs and costly consultants – feeling more frustrated than empowered. “But what can I do?” they ask, “How can I make sure that the foods my children are being offered in school are healthy?”

Here's a simple suggestion. Start your own personal “Take Your Child to School Lunch Day.” Surprise both your child and the school with an unannounced visit to the cafeteria during lunchtime. Not only will you experience the joy of delighting your little one (and embarrassing your teenager) with your presence, but you'll have the opportunity to observe exactly what your children are eating during the hours in which you've entrusted their wellbeing to the school authorities.

While on your intelligence gathering mission, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **Are the foods aglow with colors not found in nature?** A cafeteria should be filled with color. But the colors should remind you of a farmers market in August, not of a box of neon crayons. If a product is day-glo blue or a similar psychedelic hue, it probably originated in a chemistry lab, not on a farm.
2. **Does it smell like a cheap diner?** If the aroma of stale fryer grease lingers in the air, you can be sure that French fries, popcorn chicken and onion rings can't be far away. A cafeteria should smell like Grandma's kitchen on a holiday, not like a fast food chain. Deep fryers have no place in a school cafeteria. End of discussion.
3. **Could you have accidentally taken a wrong turn and ended up at a professional sports arena?** School is not a once-a-year outing to a big league sporting event. Your child doesn't need to choose among hot dogs, burgers, pizza and nachos every day. Only one of those items should be available at a time, and not more than once or twice a month for each.
4. **If you melt down the cans from which the food came, will you have enough metal to build a small submarine?** Food doesn't grow in cans, and shouldn't be served from them. Fruits and vegetables should be fresh and, whenever possible, local and seasonal. Even frozen vegetables should only be used as a last resort.
5. **Is the chicken masquerading as a dinosaur?** Chickens don't have fingers. Nor do they grow in the shape of dinosaurs, hearts or stars. The food industry likes us to think that children will only eat poultry in cute little shapes so that it can lower production costs with cheap soy and vegetable fillers, not to mention chemical preservatives, trans fats and high fructose corn syrup.
6. **Are you sure you're not in the library?** Real food doesn't come with labels requiring a PhD in chemistry to decipher. Believe it or not, it's possible to operate a cafeteria in which there are no labels other than on the side of the milk cartons. The more time you spend “reading your food,” the less likely it is to be real food.
7. **Do the snack foods for sale remind you of your favorite Super Bowl commercials?** Children eat enough chips, candy, cookies, donuts and artificially sweetened and flavored beverages during the week. Schools shouldn't be tempting kids to spend their lunch money on those items every day in the cafeteria. Fresh fruit and vegetables make perfectly good snacks.

8. **Would you be able to see the bread in a blizzard?** White is the preferred color for snow, but not such a great color for bread. Beware, too, of the spongy brown stuff that's been colored with molasses and filled with high fructose corn syrup. Bread should be various shades of tan, and come in different shapes and sizes, with chewy, flavorful crusts and visible whole grains and seeds.
9. **Are colorful toucans and leprechauns running for student body president?** Real food doesn't come tattooed with cartoon characters. When adorably animated personalities are promoting products the way pushers peddle drugs, the food industry is misusing its first amendment rights by exploiting your child.
10. **Are the beverages the kind favored by long distance truck drivers, night watchmen and stock exchange floor traders?** Kids don't need a caffeine-induced jolt, boost or buzz to get through their day. They need balanced meals made with fresh, whole foods prepared in healthful ways to keep their blood sugar levels even and their energy levels high. Caffeine is addictive. Canned and bottled beverages, coffee and teas should all be caffeine-free.

Now that you know what to look for, make that surprise visit to dine with your child at school, gather your data, and tell your friends to do the same. Then channel the collective anger that will undoubtedly be triggered by your discoveries into demanding that your school cafeteria feed your children real food. With this generation of children facing shorter life expectancies than their parents and a nearly 40% risk of acquiring Type 2 Diabetes, you owe it to your children to be the next school food reform media darling.

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