

## WHO'S GOT A DOG IN THIS FIGHT?

By Kate Adamick and Ann Cooper

A friend of ours often says, when alluding to a person's motives, "What dog do they have in the fight?" We've spent the weekend discussing this as we try to wrap our heads around the stories from the New York Times and the Associated Press this week that relate to school lunch.

Here's our confusion, as all in the same week we read:

- 1) A study concluding that getting kids to eat healthier school food is not as hopeless as we've been led to believe (and, as the Director of Nutrition Services for the Berkeley Unified School District and a national school food consultant, we can attest to this fact);
- 2) A report that states that 20 states – 40% – get "F" Grades for their "school food policies;"
- 3) A New York Times article reporting that a federal law limiting junk food in schools is facing hurdles, and that some school food advocates, ourselves included, are opposed;
- 4) That Public Hearings have been scheduled by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to petition and revise salt and sodium labeling requirements, the impetus for which is the high amount of salt and sodium in processed foods so prevalent in our diet; and,
- 5) Finally (and we want to remind readers that all of these stories were reported in the past week), a New York Times report that the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center has unveiled a rating system based on federal guidelines to rank grocery store foods according to their "healthiness".

So back to our original question, "Who has a dog in this fight?"

Our answer is that an interesting array of groups does: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the American Beverage Association (a lobbying group for the likes of Pepsi and Coke), the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation.

Scratching your head yet?

Before we explain our theory on this, we want to weave the connections among these stories:

- All of the stories are about food, additives and/or school lunch;
- All of the stories refer to the CSPI as influencing, in some way, the issue;
- Three of the five stories refer specifically to school food;
- All of the stories have, at their core, processed foods;

- Most processed foods are made by large multi-national corporations like Coke, Pepsi, Unilever and Kraft; and
- The USDA is responsible for both the National School Lunch Program and the success, (often through marketing) of the very same multi-national companies that produce the above mentioned processed foods.

Head spinning yet?

So, here's our distillation of the issue:

A study is released stating that children will eat healthier school food. We believe that most of us think of "school food" as the meals served in schools, i.e., the school lunches. But how many of us realize that the term school food often refers to non-meal foods sold at schools, also called "ala carte" or "competitive foods?" In fact how many people realize that school meals are regulated by the federal government and that competitive school foods are regulated on the state level?

The question we should be asking is, "Why are we selling competitive food in schools at all, especially if those sales are regulated by a different governing body than the one that regulates school meals?" The answer is profit. Profit both for food corporations and, frankly, for schools themselves.

The fact that kids will eat healthy food should thrill school lunch advocates, especially those of us who live and work in communities that set a high bar on regulating both school meals and competitive school foods. But we have to wonder why we ever thought kids *wouldn't* eat healthy food and why we're even discussing it. Hmmmm, could the reason be that if kids ate lots of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole foods Corporate America would lose profits? Hmmmm...

Next we go to the CSPI press release stating that 20 states flunk "school food." Huh? So do they mean school meals or competitive foods? The answer is competitive foods, the sales of which are regulated by the states. There are numerous states, Oregon, Kentucky, California, Alabama, Arkansas and Nevada, to name a few, that rank high on CSPI's list of states doing the "right" thing around food sold in schools. Apparently, some states are figuring this out, but over 50% of the states (including New York, which has the largest school district in the country) get a "D" grade or worse. So perhaps federal regulation is in order?

Well, CSPI, the American Beverage Association (which is working with the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association) and Senator Harkin propose that an amendment be attached to the Farm Bill that would regulate competitive foods sold in schools. In our opinion, the amendment should ban the sale of all competitive foods in schools and focus on raising the nutritional guidelines on the school meals program, but we'll let that pass for the moment.

At first blush, federal legislation regulating the sales of competitive foods in schools seems like a good idea. Except why would the American Beverage Association be allowed to have a hand in writing legislation that dictates what they can sell in schools? Are we the only ones who see this as a conflict of interest? And if you read the proposed amendment, it permits continued sales of Gatorade (a so-called “sports drink” that is extremely high in sodium), as well as the sale of milk or dairy drinks with calories as high as 170 per portion. We won’t argue the merits of milk (although we could), but allowing chocolate milk (which often has more grams of sugar per ounce than soda) into schools benefits only Corporate America, not the children our government should be protecting.

All of that aside, the real issue we have with this amendment, which is endorsed by CSPI, is that it pre-empts states from setting their own standards higher than the proposed national standards. These are the same states that CSPI touts as role models for the flunking states. Why?? Because the American Beverage Association and the mega-corporations involved would lose potential profit if they had to deal with differing standards in each state. Hmmm. And we thought this was about the health of our children.

While we’re on the subject of what CSPI would allow in schools, the next report we read is that CSPI has urged the FDA to raise regulations on salt and sodium in foods. That sounds great, but then why would CSPI endorse legislation that will allow Gatorade in schools? One 32-ounce bottle of Gatorade has almost 25% of the daily recommended allowance of sodium. Do kids, as sedentary as they’ve become, need sodium replacement? We don’t think so. But, of course, sports drinks are a way for Corporate America to make profits in schools. Crazy, huh?

Well, if that’s not crazy enough, to tie all of this together there is a new proposed rating system for food in grocery stores. The system will rate the “nutritional benefits” of items such as Chunky Chips Ahoy cookies which, as it turns out, is slightly worse nutritionally than Nilla Wafers. Of course, this rating system will undoubtedly end up being used for competitive foods sold in schools, as well, because the same mega-corporations selling junk food to parents in stores are selling the same junk food to kids in schools.

The moral of the story, at least for us, is that politics and profit have totally obfuscated our ability to assure that all children in America will receive a nutritious and delicious breakfast and lunch, which we believe should be as much a part of their education as learning to read and write.

If it wasn’t for politics and profit, perhaps all children would eat healthy and delicious food in schools, schools would not be allowed to sell junk food to kids, federal guidelines would assure all of the above, states wanting to enact even higher guidelines (such as organic and local) would be welcome to do so, and all children would learn the importance of a balanced diet that emphasizes fresh, local fruits, vegetables and whole foods and minimizes processed foods.

And, gee, if that happened we wouldn’t need rating systems, FDA revised guidelines or the proposed regulations on competitive foods, because then children would make life-long healthy choices for themselves and the planet. As it stands, however, it is incumbent upon all of us who care about the well-being of our nation’s children to be truly leery of all of the conflicting “dogs” in this fight.

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Links to the articles mentioned above are listed below.

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~comm/registe7.html>

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~comm/registe7.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/us/AP-Diet-School-Lunches.html>

[http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2007/11/school\\_nutrition.html](http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2007/11/school_nutrition.html)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/us/02school.html>