

## **McEDUCATION: HAPPY MEALS FOR GOOD GRADES FAILS OUR CHILDREN**

BY KATE ADAMICK & ANN COOPER

McDonalds apparently isn't content with strategically locating its franchises near schools across America, operating food outlets within pediatric hospitals, and hosting "McTeacher Night" fundraisers at which teachers work shifts at the counters to raise money for their classrooms. No, that's not enough for the giant multi-national "food" service company. Now McDonald's has purchased the right to put a Happy Meal coupon on each of the student's report cards in a Seminole, Florida, school district for less than the price of a small bag of fries.

This is depraved. Why is it acceptable to reward our children for successful academic performance with something that will harm them? How can we, as a society, allow this kind of corporate conduct when the most recent study on Body Mass Index (BMI) states that over 19% of American children are currently overweight or obese, and that a higher BMI in children is associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease as an adult? How can we turn a blind eye to this blatant exploitation of our children when the Centers for Disease Control has stated that, of the kids born in the year 2000, one out of every three Caucasians and one out of every two African Americans and Hispanics will develop Type 2 diabetes in their lifetime, many before they graduate high school, and that this generation could be the first to die at a younger age than their parents?

What's next? Ten years from now will McDonald's be displaying the golden arches on insulin kits, artificial limbs and coffins?

In an effort to help children lead healthier lives, we and other school food and childhood health advocates work tirelessly to encourage kids to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables. We serve them whole foods cooked from scratch in schools, we teach cooking and gardening classes, and we support academic curricula that link food, health and the environment. We know that we must change children's relationship to food if we are to successfully influence their lifelong eating habits.

And McDonald's knows this, too.

But while our interest is in improving the long-term health and well-being of our nation's children, McDonald's goal is to improve its profits. So McDonald's promotes its own self interest in building lifelong brand loyalty in young children, increasing the "pester factor" (in which kids nag their parents to purchase targeted items), and convincing children and parents alike of the necessity of "kid food." All the while, blatantly ignoring the obvious: that their insidious marketing schemes could cause their young customers' BMI to rise even higher. And now they're doing it in the context of academic report cards.

There really ought to be a law.

In over 50 countries, there are laws regulating marketing campaigns that target children. But in America, millions of corporate dollars are paid to hundreds of lawyers and lobbyists to insure that the First Amendment is interpreted in a way that values corporate profits over children's health. Add this to the ubiquitous under-funding of education that drives school districts to look for innovative ways to increase revenues, and happy meals are virtually guaranteed the right to contribute to unhappy health.

What makes this so intolerable is that children are sent to school to learn. Parents and children agonize over academic performance. Teachers and administrators struggle to comply with increasingly rigorous state testing standards. Even our federal government has mandated that no child be left behind. But when we put our children in an environment in which they learn that unhealthy food is not only acceptable, but is a coveted reward for successful academic achievement, we do them a disservice that could ultimately cost them their health and their very lives.

All the adults involved in this debacle should be ashamed: the management of McDonalds who dreamed up this scheme, the school district administrators and board members who approved it, and the parents who failed to complain. But the rest of us who read the press accounts of such

events and merely shake our heads with little more than apathy should also be ashamed. As voting taxpayers, we are equally to blame.

If we are to save our children from a future plagued with diet-related illness, we must find within ourselves sufficient remorse at our own inaction and outrage at our corrupt system to demand change in our nation's marketing laws. Sadly, our fear is that we will fail to do so before our children look up at us from their hospital beds and ask us why we weren't better teachers.

*Kate Adamick is a New York-based consultant and lecturer on food systems and school food reform. She is an advisor to The Orfalea Fund in Santa Barbara, CA. Their website is [www.sCoolFood.org](http://www.sCoolFood.org).*

*Ann Cooper is the Director of Nutrition Services for the Berkeley Unified School District, a National School Lunch Advocate – her website is [www.lunchlessons.org](http://www.lunchlessons.org).*