

Robbin' in the Hood

By Kate Adamick

In my role as a school food consultant, I'm often asked why I left the practice of law for a career as a professional chef. While I sometimes say that I was drawn to the instant gratification that comes with cooking the best meals of people's lives, the truth is much darker. In reality, I left the law because I had become a specialist in manipulating regulatory loopholes to employees' detriment, and funneling the corporate savings into the already over-inflated compensation packages of the companies' highest paid executives. In so doing, I had become Robin Hood in Reverse.

As a result, I spent countless sleepless nights racked with guilt, and my workdays found me fruitlessly arguing the virtues of social justice with my law firm's partners. As my own ascension to partnership approached, promising more of the same, I chose a new path. I became a chef and now use my culinary and legal skills to help put into action the social justice arguments that had previously fallen on deaf ears.

Without question, consulting for school districts that wish to improve the quality of their school food is far more personally rewarding than practicing law ever was. It's no secret that the food currently served in many school districts is nothing less than noxious, and the amount of money provided by the government to help pay for school lunches is pitifully low. Although assisting school districts in overcoming these challenges is immensely gratifying, I am often surprised to find myself again confronted with situations in which all too many people are willing to take from the poor to give to the rich, albeit with less deliberate intent.

When I'm called to consult in school districts where the homes have more garages than many urban apartments have rooms, and where freshly mowed lawns are decorated with signs exclaiming "Save Darfur" and "Justice for All," I am often shocked to find that residents of those homes pay less for school lunches than the government reimbursement rate – a rate already so low that it doesn't come close to covering the cost of a meal prepared with healthy, whole foods.

Even worse, this almost always presents an ethical dilemma. When those same school districts also serve students that qualify for free or reduced meals because of low family income, there is a redistribution of wealth reminiscent of my lawyering days that leaves me feeling uneasy.

Consider this. The federal government currently reimburses school districts up to \$2.42 for every qualifying school lunch served to students whose family income falls below a range loosely tied to food stamps eligibility income levels. However, the amount that more affluent students pay for lunch varies by school district.

The result? In districts in which the paying students are charged less than the value of the federally-reimbursable meals, those students are being indirectly subsidized by government funds for which they are otherwise ineligible.

For example, if a school district serves lunch to 1000 students a day, 200 of whom are eligible for a free lunch reimbursed at the rate of \$2.42 and 800 of whom pay \$1.75 for the identical meal, the district will bring in \$1884 in revenue a day. That means that each of the 1000 lunches served has a value of roughly \$1.88, even though the federal government has determined that the nonpaying students eligible for a free lunch should be receiving a meal valued at \$2.42 (i.e., what the government figures is the average cost for a school district to produce a meal that meets school lunch guidelines). Thus, the federal subsidy intended for low income students winds up funding part of the meals of those students who are financially able to pay.

Obviously, the financial value of this subsidy fluctuates from school district to school district depending on both the percentage of nonpaying students eligible for free and reduced meals and the amount paid per meal by those who are not eligible. Nonetheless, the ethical dilemma is undeniable in every district in which nonpaying students eat side by side with paying students who are charged less than the reimbursement rate. The subsidy intended for low income students winds up filling the gap created by paying students who simply aren't paying enough to cover the cost of their meals, and lowering the amount of money actually spent on those students rightfully entitled to the subsidy.

When I explain this to my clients, I'm often met with an initial appearance of confusion, followed quickly by a look of surprised comprehension and, finally, a glimmer of guilt. I then often listen patiently to tales of rising property tax rates and endless explanations for why people who pay \$4 for a cup of coffee cannot possibly afford to pay more for their children's school lunch.

Of course, after a few sleepless moments of their own, most of my clients come around to the realization that fairness, if nothing else, requires them to charge at least the federal reimbursement rate if they want to improve the quality of their children's school food in the most equitable way.

As I struggle with my latest round of insomnia, my hope is that the federal government closes this regulatory loophole and mandates that school districts charge at least as much for nonreimbursable meals as they receive in government subsidies for reimbursable meals so that our children can grow up in a world a little closer to the goal of justice for all . . . and so that my clients and I can sleep peacefully through the night.

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