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Calling All Interested Historians

This article is for those interested in the history of the Child Nutrition Programs, those interested in how we got to where we are now and for those new to the programs who want background knowledge about the programs. This will probably be a series of articles to cover the topic thoroughly. We have posted links to various aspects of the history under Legislation on the Website. Drop down to the topic *Archives* and read through the topics in the links for more details.

I must give credit to Gordon W. Gunderson who compiled much of the very early history including Programs by States prior to the National Programs. Early pre-national programs will be our focus in this article.

Europe was providing school meals to its children so we had a frame of reference. The evolution was the same, private groups interested in child welfare provided varying degrees of food programs to students prior to government involvement and subsidy in Europe. Then the process spread to the United States.

There was a book titled "Poverty" published in 1904 by Robert Hunter that had a strong influence on the United States effort to feed hungry, needy students in schools. Hunter's book showed the correlation between hunger and learning.



As far back as 1853, the Children's Aid Society of New York served meals to students in vocational schools but we needed more programs. In 1894 The Star Center Association began serving penny lunches in one school in Philadelphia, which then expanded to 9 schools. Around 1909 the responsibility for the operation of the school lunch program was transferred from the charitable organizations to the Philadelphia School Board.

Boston started its programs with the Women's Educational and Industrial Union. In 1908 they started serving hot lunches, developed a central kitchen and transported lunches to other participating schools. In 1910 Elementary Schools started with a meal prepared by Home Economics three days a week with sandwiches 2 days a week. This expanded to 5 schools and 2,000 students. Teachers were unanimous in their support of the benefits of the program citing increased mental and physical capacity of the students receiving the meals.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin began its efforts with the Women's School Alliance of Wisconsin furnishing meals in 3 centers in an area where both parents worked outside the home and the need appeared to be the greatest. Lunches were prepared in the homes by women who lived close to the schools. Improvement in attendance and scholarship were noted from 1904 forward. At that time the preparation and serving of the meals was transferred to the schools

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staffed with one employee. The cost was 1 cent and those who couldn't afford to pay were fed for free. The meal consisted of all the soup and rolls students could eat. The school board refused to take responsibility for the program because "it would encourage parents to be indolent and shift parental responsibility to the municipality"

Cleveland has a very interesting history. The program started as breakfast provided by the Cleveland Federation of Women's Clubs in 1909 primarily in one Special Needs school with 19 students. By 1915 it expanded to all schools with Special Needs students, in total 710 students were fed per day. Then it was expanded to all high schools. The Board of Education decided to provide equipment, lunchrooms and one supervisor per high school to oversee the caterers they hired for an a la carte menu per day. The caterer's profit was from \$125 to \$952 per school year. In some schools, 2 meals were served at 10 am and 2 pm every day and then some students went home for lunch at noon and others stayed at school for a noon meal. Milk was supplied to all schools by one Dairy. The Board of Education decided in 1914-15 that the "Superintendent" of Lunches should have the same rank as a director and be compensated accordingly. Its summary of the rationale for the recommendation says "The school lunch division should reach all children, it should provide wholesome and nutritious food for them at cost, train them in sane habits of eating, and teach them to choose wisely what foods they buy."

Cincinnati followed the precedent of Cleveland. Their penny lunches provided 5 food items served every day, 2 of which were hot and every food item cost a penny. The salary of the cook was paid for by the Council of Jewish Women. All other costs were covered by student payments.

In 1911, St. Louis selected 5 schools in congested areas for their experiment with school meals. High schools already had some form of lunch service so they expanded it to elementary schools. Originally the cost of food was paid by the Board who then decided it was not legal to use Board funds for food so they made the program self supporting except for the cost of equipment.

Chicago started its experiment with school meals in 1910 and by 1921 received a declaration from the Department of the Interior of Education, Bulletin # 37 that said "Chicago has the most intensive school lunch system in America". Every high school and 60 elementary school were providing school meal programs fully funded by the Chicago Board of Education.

Los Angeles had a substantial program by 1921. The Board of Education sponsored the program in many schools but not all schools. The intermediate and high school programs were managed by student associations and the elementary schools were managed by a cafeteria director selected from the Home Economics Department. Some students paid for meals and some were served

free, if unable to pay. The PTA paid for free elementary students and the high and intermediate students who could not pay were required to work in the school somewhere.

In a 1918 survey by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research of 86 cities, it was determined that only 25% of those with an enrollment over 50,000 students provide school meals. Only 5 of those cities surveyed, indicated that lunchroom services in high school were instituted as a means of overcoming malnutrition among the students.

In Pinellas County, Florida the Health Department decided to experiment with providing each student with a half pint of milk a day. They put a cow in the playground with signs of what was going on, specifically providing the milk. (I can't tell if it was a real cow or a sign) The health officer was so impressed with the results that a group of mothers decided to provide a bowl of soup with crackers in addition to the milk. The meat, potatoes and utensils for the soup were donated by the mothers and the principal provided the vegetables grown in the school garden.

Rural school classrooms were heated by wood stoves. Students came long distances to the schools so they brought a cold sandwich. Some teachers suggested that students bring pint jars of soups or stew to school. The teacher put a big pot on the stove, put the pint jars in the pot and filled it with water. The food was usually hot by lunchtime.

The above all took place between 1904 and 1921. It was the beginning of the school meals programs as we know them today. Isn't it interesting how the original ideas morphed into the current programs. We mentioned milk programs, breakfast programs, varied lunch programs, a la carte programs, 5 menu items, free meals, paid meals central kitchens, transporting meals, staffing, salaries, students required to work for free meals, equipment and lunchrooms in schools, the link between nutrition and learning, and the requirement to be self supporting. The original volunteers, mothers, principals, teachers, school boards and organizations gave our predecessors many ideas for what a program should look like plus who should run it and how it should be run and funded.

In the next article, we will look at what happened next and continue the story with the evolution of the formal programs we now know and provide to students and how they became law in the United States.

Mary Klatko, MdSNA Webmaster