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## The Importance of Chefs in School Nutrition

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

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## **Abstract**

Employing a chef in school nutrition may play a vital part in the all-around health and development of school age children. Children from kindergarten through twelfth grade spend anywhere from six to eight hours, five days a week in school. Students participate in the National School Breakfast Program (NSBP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Due to all the federal regulation and restrictions many students do not eat the meals that are prepared for them due to taste or lack of. Children taste buds change over time. Younger children prefer sweet foods over bitter or unsweet foods (Elliott, 2009). Research shows that as children grow and develop so do their taste buds (Elliott, 2009). This information could be vital when preparing menus for elementary, middle, and high school students. This research paper delves into the discussion of the Importance of Chefs in School Nutrition. If using the same items that are regulated by the government but enhancing the taste without adding sodium or sweeteners would the participation increase?

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

## Table of Content

Introduction.....	4
Literature Review.....	5
Methodology.....	5
Findings.....	6
Limitations.....	11
Implications.....	11
Conclusion.....	12
Reference List.....	13

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

## **Introduction**

Children are eating less farm to table meals than before and or eating more ready to eat meals such as canned fruits and vegetables, frozen meals, and processed items (Skinner, 2014). Many children live in households where both parents are working full time and food insecurity may be an issue at home, along with the lack of knowledge of healthy food preparation (Muzaffar, 2018). This is where School Nutrition can play a vital role in the daily lives of children from kindergarten through twelfth grade. School nutrition is responsible for feeding thirty-two million children breakfast, lunch and afternoon snacks every day (Ogden, 2014). Children spend most of their day in school. One of the ways to counteract the increasing rise of obesity in children and promote the Proper handling of food, is to employ Chefs and culinarians in school. These professionals are equipped with the knowledge of managing food, writing menus, and overseeing the kitchens (Park, 2015). This will help with the taste, preparation, waste, and well-balanced diet (Muzaffar, 2018).

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

## **Literature Review**

Henna Muzaffar 2018, Narrative Review of Culinary Intervention with Children in Schools to Promote Healthy Eating: Direction for Future Research and Practice discuss the importance of poor culinary skills contributing to the rise in childhood obesity. The article dives into the correlations between making the healthy choice over the unhealthy choices. Author A. Park 2015, School Lunch Solutions: Get Chefs Involved they discuss the difference in food preparation and placing of healthier items on the food lines for the students. The use of fresh items and color displayed in eye view and reach. Ashley Cockrell Skinner 2014, Prevalence, and trends in obesity Among Children examine the trend of obesity among school age children and the ways society can amend to reverse childhood obesity. “Chef-prepared food gets kids to eat more school lunches, study says” (McGill, 2014). This article discusses the increase in students eating school lunch when a chef volunteered to come and cook at a high school. The article states that the increase was about 19.3 percent (Haigney, 2018) article investigates can this chef solve the problem of school lunch? Haigney interviews chef Dan Giusti about his decision to use his fine dining experience to make school meals more active and enticing to students.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of qualitative research and comparing and contrasting will be used for this research paper. Using peer review articles with both pros and cons pertaining to the importance of chefs in school nutrition. Looking at the salary of employing a chef in school nutrition vs school nutrition managers who currently run school cafeterias.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

### Findings

What if you were able to have a personal chef plan your menu, order the food and prepare two meals a day for five days a week. Would you be interested? Well, chefs move to schools' program is one organization that is doing just that (Park, 2015). This move is to reintroduce school children to farm to table foods. The chefs collaborate closely with the school cafeteria manager with menus, ordering, production, and execution. They also collaborate with The National School Lunch Program which is a federal funded program that provides free and reduced meals to students in schools across the nation (McGill, 2014). Implementing things like the smart café system, that purposefully placing fresh fruits and vegetable in eye view of the student's cafeteria line (Park, 2015). The schools used in this study were assessed in diverse ways. Juliana Cohen from the Harvard School of Public Health and her associates conducted the research (Park, 2015). The study was done in a low-income urban school district in Massachusetts. The research was performed over a seven-month period following students from third through eighth grade. Cohen and her colleagues watched what students put on their plates and what they ate and threw away (Park, 2015). The school that had a chef prepare the meals the students took more fresh fruit and vegetables than the schools without a chef (Park, 2015). The increase for fresh fruit went up by seventeen percent and sixteen percent with vegetables (Park, 2015). The schools that used both chefs and a smart café had mixed results. The students still took the fresh items, but the result showed that the chef had a real impact on the choices that the students made (Park, 2015).

At an Upstate New York high school, a chef volunteered to and made new pizza dishes it resulted in a 19.3 percent increase in the students purchasing lunches (McGill, 2014). During this study as a chef was preparing the lunches students ate more fresh fruits and vegetables, like a

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

salad with their entree. The results showed that 87.1 percent of the students consumed more fresh vegetables with the new pizza dishes, compared to the 75 percent of schoolchildren in the past (McGill, 2014). Due to all the guidelines that school nutrition professionals must follow it is not easy to just change the menu. Creativity is the key when it comes to using the items that are regulated for schools and creating new and exciting dishes. For example, in this study the chef made three various kinds of pizza. One of the pizzas featured a ranch-flavored hamburger (McGill, 2014). Totality 33 percent of the students purchased a meal from the National School Lunch Program meal, compared to just 27.2 percent prior to the launch of the new pizza, this was a 19.3 percent increase in lunches purchased. An additional 9.3 percent of students who already take part in the NSLP purchased the new dishes, this resulted in an increase from 65.3 percent, to 74.6 percent (McGill, 2014). Getting students to eat healthier and liking the items that they are consuming can be a bit tricky. This another reason that Chefs Move to Schools program is an added advantage to getting students to try new menu options (McGill, 2014).

In New York chef Dan Giusti took on the challenge of transforming school lunches into dishes that the students will want to eat and are healthy. Chef Giusti was a chef de cuisine at Noma, two-Michelin-starred restaurant and was named the best restaurant in the world (Haigney, 2018). Chef Giusti left the world of fine dining due to fatigue and decided to enter the world of school lunch (Haigney, 2018). Chef Giusti started working for the New England public school system where he and his team of chefs feed 3,300 students daily (Haigney, 2018).

Chef Giusti and his team got to work they ordered bottled water, snack carts, and served the lunch on plates instead of Styrofoam trays (Haigney, 2018). They revamped the menu to be kid-friendly, cost efficient and abide to the nutritional school lunch program guidelines and the most important of all the changes was to make the food taste better (Haigney, 2018). Chef Giusti



## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

says “The fact of the matter is, on one eats the food. So, the food can’t be nutritious if no one eats the food (Haigney, 2018 p.5).” Chef Giusti model was successful though no data was available prior to these changes that were made, but the school district maintains that food waste has declined, and participation has gone up (Haigney, 2018). Chef Giusti model has been looked at in many school districts and a pilot program has been formed (Haigney, 2018). The Department of Education chose the Bronx school district to be in the pilot. The Bronx has the largest school district in the nation feeding 1.1 million students daily (Haigney, 2018). They hope that implementing this pilot will reduce the waste by using fresh ingredients and making meals from scratch (Haigney, 2018).

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and The National School Breakfast Program (NSBP) are federal assisted meal programs responsible for feeding 30.4 million of school age children Monday through Friday as well as twenty-two million students are low-income and qualify for free or reduced meals (Izumi, 2018). The NSLP was established in 1946 to feed students from kindergarten through twelfth grade a well-balanced meal while they were at school. Since then, they have made amends to the meals and requirements from feeding undernourished students in the past generations to overnourished children who are dealing with obesity (Izumi, 2018). Because schools are regulated by the federal government it is not easy to modify the menu and the ingredients that are used. The involvement of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has tied the hands of school nutrition directors and school food service staff with the quality of food that is served. In the past few years Big Food companies spent millions of dollars to lobby the federal government to change what the students are consuming (Izumi, 2018). In 2014, the USDA gave in to the pressure and allowed schools to serve pizza and fries every day (Izumi, 2018). In 2018 the USDA once again loosened their restriction with the

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

amount of sodium, flavored milks, and refined grains can be served to students (Izumi, 2018). As recently as 2020 when then President Trump wanted to make the rules more flexible (Izumi, 2018).

While the movement of fast and easy precooked food is making its way through school districts nationwide, there is a movement that support scratch cooking and farm to school programs (Izumi, 2018). Due to the movement of farm to school programs school districts have been able to move \$789 million of public subsidy away from Big Food companies to local farms (Izumi, 2018). The farm to school program benefits both school nutrition and schools to add classes like agriculture and garden-based courses (Izumi, 2018). This allows the students to learn firsthand how food is grown and how it is prepared (Izumi, 2018).

Districts that participate in the USDA breakfast and lunch program are expected to operate as a financially self-sustained not-for-profit business (Gaddis, 2019). To cover the cost of self-sustainability school that participate in the NSLP have two ways of generating income. The first is by getting federal reimbursements dollars for all qualifying meals and the second is selling extras, such as sodas and chips from the a la carte menu and payments from students for their meals (Gaddis, 2021). Some districts are funded by their local school board, in most situations the funding goes towards the education budget (Gaddis, 2021). In the school year of 2014-2015 the average cost per meal to produce was \$3.81 for lunch and the federal reimbursement rate was only \$3.32 (Gaddis, 2021). The cost per meal for breakfast was \$2.72 and the NSBP reimbursement rate was only \$1.88 (Gaddis, 2021). This makes it hard for the school nutrition department to make money. The funding that each district receives depends on a few different variables, school size, daily participation rates, food prices and local markets

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

(Gaddis, 2021). With those variables not every district will qualify for a substantial amount of funding (Gaddis, 2021).

To make ends meet School Nutrition directors have to find ways to close the financial gap, while paying for labor, manager salaries, and association dues (Gaddis, 2021). Some districts resort to serving cheaper and easy to prepare foods. Such as canned, frozen, and precooked (Gaddis, 2021). These items are usually less healthy, but they still meet the federal guidelines to be able to make the meals rememberable (Gaddis, 2021).

Due to the financial dilemma that many school nutrition directors face they may not be able to afford to hire a chef to work in the district full time (Muzaffar, 2008). In the New London, Connecticut school district Chef Giusti received \$130,000 annual salary and his team of six chefs received \$60,000 each per year (Carman, 2016). Chef Giusti and his team were responsible for feeding 3,300 students daily (Carman, 2016). Some residents had an issue with the salary that chef Giusti and his team were offered. They stated, “why spend so much cash on chef-driven fare- on kids who will just sneer at it anyway- when the school system has other problems (Carman, 2016)?” According to ZipRecruiter the average school lunch manager salary in 2021 is \$31,350 (Dayton, 2021). No culinary education is required or mandated, some school districts do require more than a high school diploma or GED (Dayton, 2021).

These financial predicaments make it difficult for a school nutrition director to hire a full-time chef in their school district. Chef Giusti makes a good point. “He states that when he was touring different school districts the director did not know what was happening in the kitchen. Since they cannot be at every school at the same time (Carman, 2016).” Having chef based in the school kitchens will ensure that the recipe is being followed, executed, and presented as it was intended (Carman, 2016).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

### **Limitation**

This research was conducted using the methodology of qualitative research. Due to the limitations of being able to conduct quantitative data this research relies on the data past research. Conduction a survey at different school districts would have been ideal. Using a chef-run cafeteria and one that is more traditionally run. Due to COVID, such research would not have been possible because student contact and in person learning has changed in the past school year. Relying heavily on previous research was imperative to the outcome of the study.

### **Implications**

Research led to understanding the importance in chefs in school nutrition. Schools are experiencing challenges persuading students to consume the meals such as mac and cheese, Asian chicken, and rice etc. that are provided to them. It could be various reason, but taste, quality and presentation seem to be at the top of the list. Students seem to respond well when the same food and ingredients are prepared for them daily by a chef. Chef's use spices to enhance the meals without adding any sodium or sugars. They can create dishes that meet the federal requirements and the reimbursable guidelines. Visual presentation is vital, thoughtfulness, imagination and quality of the items are presented in meals like ranch hamburger pizza and lemon zest fries. School nutrition programs rely heavily on the NSLP and the NSBP's reimbursable funding to keep their program running. If a school nutrition department cannot afford to hire a chef for every kitchen, simply adding one chef to oversee the menus for the entire district. The Chef can also oversee the implementation of the dishes to get the students to consume the meals might be worth it.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

### **Conclusion**

This research can be reviewed as the years go by; other papers may produce new number that support the importance of chefs in school nutrition. As well as finding that the way things have previously been done since 1946 when the School Lunch Program began are still working. Employing chefs in the school system will attract more students from kindergarten through twelfth grade to participate in the NSLP and the NSBP. In turn raising the school and districts participation which then sets the ripple in motion. The school district will be able to get more funding to balance their budgets and employ chef's. Chef Giusti said throughout this research "The fact of the matter is, on one eats the food. So, the food cannot be nutritious if no one eats the food (Haigney, 2018 p.5)." Children need a well-balanced meal to learn and grow into healthy productive adults. If the schools are making breakfast and lunch, why not make it delicious?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEFS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION

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