Brianna Costa

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Lunch-time Blues

The most powerful country in the world has won two world wars, is highly advanced in technology, and its citizens live happy. Where people are granted the freedom of speech and religion, you can also find approximately one third of the population obese. America, having 36.2% of the population obese, was ranked the highest percentage from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development(OECD) (“Obesity Update 2017”). In America, kids are often found indulging on sweet treats, and greasy chips during lunch time instead of buying the lunch made by the school. After the Hunger-Free Kids Act, schools find their trash cans filling up with untouched food, and a huge decline in their receipts (Murphy). Kids are served “mystery meat” and given a scoop of an unpromising meal without knowledge of what they are eating during lunch at schools (Moore). While in France, kids are served a four course meal during lunch, and hold the lowest childhood obesity rate in the Western world (Murphy). America needs to changes its lunch-time menu and shifts towards France approach in an effort to decrease obesity rates.

The definition of obesity is an excess amount of body fat on a person, being found in one in three adults nationwide, and sixteen percent of American kids. That is more than 23 million children in the United States being overweight or obese which has serious health effects. Being obese as a child has detrimental effects on your health and raises your chances of accumulating diseases such as type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, and hypertension (Green). While there are many causes to obesity, a main contributor is the failure to teach proper nutrition in schools. Failing to teach kids how to eat correctly by serving non-nutritious meals sets the example that eating that way is okay to do. After all, Gregory Green says, “research has shown that environment is the most critical factor” (Green).

School is meant to educate kids, but one category that has fallen to the bottom of priority has been nutrition. Ann Cooper said, “We have to educate kids about healthy eating. If a kid wasn’t reading at a grade level we would work harder to get them to read at grade level, but with food we’ve somehow abdicated the part of their education,” (Murphy). The US Department of Agriculture(USDA) set nutritional requirements for school lunches. These requirements state that school lunches must provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowance for all fields such as calories, protein, and vitamins. Also, the fat content is to be limited to thirty percent of total calories provided (Bornstein). Even with these requirements, in school cafeterias nationwide nutrition requirements are not met and making lunch from scratch has almost disappeared. Instead kids are served food that is pre-made and just heated up, along with only twenty minutes to eat it. Eighty percent of the meals being served exceed the fat limit per meal, and are way above the sodium content for the whole day (Hinman). How are kids supposed to learn proper nutrition when they are not even being provided healthy meals during school? A study in Michigan received the results that eating school lunches everyday is a greater risk to obesity than watching TV for two hours a day (Hinman).

In France, lunch is an hour long class used to teach kids what nutritious foods to eat and a proper way of eating them. The French Ministry of National Education set a minimum of thirty minutes required for kids to sit at the table and eat the food slowly, while the rest of the time is to be spent playing or relaxing (Smith). The kids are served a four course meal to their tables that is prepared from scratch in their kitchens, along with water (Moore). The chef from each school meets with dieticians, city and school officials once a month to put together a menu. Here they make revisions making sure that nutritional requirements are met and the meals are well balanced (Moore). An example of a day's lunch in a school in Paris consists of tomatoes with boiled eggs and mayonnaise for an appetizer, a main dish of smoked beef with a  gratin of zucchini with potatoes and a sauce. For dessert organic applesauce and a crepe is served (Smith). The students are just being served smaller portion of adult food, teaching kids to be conscious of what they're eating from a young age; since the French government considers it essential to teach proper nutrition (Smith).

A shift in lunch towards the French model is needed in America. Being obese at a young age is emotionally damaging to kids. Girls are very self-conscious about their bodies as they develop and grow. When obese, even though it is more common in girls, both genders are found to be teased (Green). Teasing of children can be detrimental to their emotional health, and it is believed that emotional health is tied to your physical health.

Wilson says, “If you don’t teach kids what’s bad, you don’t solve a whole lot by restricting things. Education is our fat burner” (Bornstein). Teaching kids proper nutrition by providing healthy meals during school has had positive effects in some schools. A school in St. Louis began to change their lunch menu after superintendent, Linda Henke, decided a change needed to be done. She began with removing vending machines along with chips, candy, fries and other junk food. Also, Henke required that no more processed chicken is to be bought, and all starches must be whole grain. If possible, the schools were to be buying ingredients from local places, and the food was to be pesticide-free. This allowed the district to control calorie intake, fat and sodium content while preparing the food from scratch. The results were astonishing as a teacher revealed he lost weight just from eating the school lunch everyday. The kids supported this change in menu and were giving positive vibes (Hinman).

A reform may not come cheap, which many are concerned about and hold back from changes. The USDA provides schools with $2.57 per student per a meal, but the cost to prepare the meal is $2.88 (Bornstein). When preparing a proper lunch from scratch that meets all the nutritional requirements the lunch will cost $3.75-$4.25 per person per a meal (Hinman). This may cause tax dollars to increase and this worries many people who already struggle with their bills. A change in meals will be beneficial and worth the increase in tax dollars. With the lunches being served to kids now, most of the food ends up in the trash can which is wasting the money being spent on the meals. When served proper food kids will eat all of it making the money spent worth it and prevent it from being wasted. Also, in the year 2008-2009 the medical costs spent on childhood obesity were around 71 billion dollars (Green). Changing the lunch model will help to decrease childhood obesity leading to a decrease in the amount of money spent on it from the government. If childhood obesity decreases, tax dollars will see a decrease since the money will be no longer needed.

Changing the lunch model in America and shifting it more towards France’s healthy four-course model would show vast differences in obesity rates. People are not asking for their kids to be served five-star worthy meals but at least receive meals that are teaching them proper eating habits. After all, America has been looking towards France’s model since 1909 when Caroline Hunt noticed Paris had the best system for feeding children in schools (Smith). What is stopping the government in solving the problem when the answer is right in front of them? A reform is needed or else the obesity rates will keep increasing and the number one country’s flaw may become a big problem.

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