



The Problem Is Federally Subsidized School Lunches, Not Michelle Obama's Healthy Food Initiative

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Some people are grumbling that the First Lady has taken the joy out of school lunches. She's identified with the "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010," which uses federal funding to coerce schools into providing meals with fewer calories.

Here's a radical idea for the First Lady. Parents should be responsible for their own kids.

But I think this criticism misses the point. The problem is not overweight kids, as one side argues, or politically correct micro-managing, as the other side claims.

Instead, we should be asking the fundamental question about whether subsidizing school lunches is an appropriate function of the federal government.

I've previously argued that the federal government should get out of the business of income redistribution and means-tested programs. In part, this is because the Constitution does not authorize any federal involvement in this area.

But I also think the evidence is very clear that the [welfare state is undermining progress in reducing poverty](#), often by [trapping people in lives of dependency](#).

And it also sometimes brings out the worst in people, as you can see in this [horrifying story about a welfare couple in Florida](#) and this [sad story about a girl in Connecticut](#) (though England has equally reprehensible examples, as you can see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Getting back to the main topic of this post, here are some passages from a [report in the New York Times](#).

Outside Pittsburgh, they are proclaiming a strike, taking to Twitter and Facebook to spread the word. In a village near Milwaukee, hundreds staged a boycott. In a small farming and ranching community in western Kansas, they have produced a parody video. And in Parsippany, N.J., the protest is six days old and counting. They are high school students, and their complaint is about lunch — healthier, smaller and more expensive than ever. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which required public schools to follow

new nutritional guidelines this academic year to receive extra federal lunch aid, has created a nationwide version of the age-old parental challenge: persuading children to eat what is good for them.

No big surprise here. Kids want junk food. I'm actually on Michelle Obama's side on the general issue of wanting kids to eat better and exercise more.

Where we part company is that I think bureaucrats and politicians in Washington are ill-suited to do anything right, and they're especially unlikely to succeed in a task that has more to do with parents than government.

Here are some details about the meddling from DC.

According to the new restrictions, high school lunches must be no more than 850 calories, middle school lunches no more than 700 calories and elementary school lunches no more than 650. Before, there were no maximums. At the same time, prices have gone up about 10 cents in many districts for students who do not qualify for free lunch, both to pay for fresh fruits and vegetables and to obey a federal requirement that lunch prices gradually increase to help cover their cost. ...In New York City, where school officials introduced whole-wheat breads, low-fat milk and other changes several years ago, the most noticeable change this year is the fruit and vegetable requirement, which has resulted in some waste, according to Eric Goldstein, the Education Department official who oversees food services. It is not hard to see why. At Middle School 104 in Gramercy Park on Friday, several seventh graders pronounced vegetables "gross."

Again, I don't sympathize with the kids who prefer junk food.

But the federal government's clumsy efforts to intervene generate nonsense like this.

Few school districts have been as extreme in their efforts as Los Angeles, which introduced a menu of quinoa salads, lentil cutlets, vegetable curry, pad Thai and other vegetarian fare last fall. When students began rejecting the lunches en masse, the district replaced some of the more exotic dishes with more child-friendly foods, like pizza with whole-wheat crust, low-fat cheese and low-sodium sauce. But this year, even the whole-wheat pizza is gone, replaced by calzones, fajitas and other, smaller entrees with side dishes of fruits and vegetables. Nicole Anthony, the cafeteria manager at one Los Angeles school, Nimitz Middle School in Huntington Park, estimated that out of the 1,800 students, almost all of whom qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, only 1,200, "on a good day," now eat the cafeteria's offerings.

At the risk of being politically incorrect, allow me to stress my earlier point that parents should be responsible for raising their kids in general, and feeding them in particular.

P.S. I can't resist sharing [this post about the "Battle of the Bums."](#)