

Letter about the School Lunch Program

Missy McNatt

On February 7, 1946, in response to an urgent bulletin sent to all Florida school districts by the state's department of education, Mrs. [Janette] Morton Livingston wrote to Senator Claude Pepper. The December 1945 bulletin expressed concern that the federal government might cease to fund the nation's school lunch program. In her single-page letter, featured in this article, Livingston, president of the Parent Teacher Association of Fort Ogdan, Florida, urged the senator to support the program. Her earnest plea was among many letters and telegrams that the senator's office received as Congress held hearings on H.R. 3370, The National School Lunch Act.

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, private societies and associations interested in child welfare and education initiated school lunch programs in cities throughout the United States. The Children's Aid Society of New York City started a program in 1853, serving meals to students attending the city's vocational school. The Starr Center Association in Philadelphia began serving penny lunches in one school in 1894. In Boston, The Women's Educational and Industrial Union served hot lunches in 1908 to high schools that were under the supervision of the Boston School Committee. Similar programs began in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that year and in Cleveland, Ohio, the next year.

Schools in rural communities met lunch needs differently. Because many children came from long distances, their lunches usually consisted of cold sandwiches, and preparing and serving a hot lunch was problematic. Usually there was no space for a kitchen, and little or no funding. Sometimes, ingenious teachers devised methods for preparing nutritious and warm meals for students. Former students who attended a one-room schoolhouse in rural Calvert County, Maryland, in the 1920s, recalled that their teacher would encourage students to bring in vegetables such as potatoes, turnips, and cabbage along with a ham bone to make soup for a cold winter day. The contributions to the soup would be placed in a large kettle on the top of the wood stove when the students arrived in the morning, and by noon, the students enjoyed a hot and wholesome lunch.



Fort Ogden School
Fort Ogden, Fla.
Feb. 7, 1946.

The Honorable Claude Pepper, Senator
House Office Building
Washington, 25, D. C.

Bramberg

Dear Senator Pepper:

In regard to an Urgent Bulletin just received from Superintendent Colin English, Tallahassee, Fla., I am writing to you on behalf of the P. T. A. and the citizens of Fort Ogden, Fla., concerning Federal aid for school lunches.

The Federal aid has been beneficial to the school and for the majority of those in this community it is mandatory that such aid be continued. There are several children in our school who cannot afford to pay the full price for their lunches and this is the only well balanced meal some of them have per day. If the Government aid is discontinued it will be necessary to close the lunch room.

With this thought in mind, I urge you to use your influence in supporting the House bill HR 3370.

Thank you for your help and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Morton Livingston RDE

Mrs. Morton Livingston
President, P. T. A.
Fort Ogden, Fla.

ML/RDE



Surplus Commodities: School Lunch Program, ca. 1936

Formal and informal school lunch programs continued to expand during the early twentieth century, supported by charitable organizations—associations such as the Parent-Teacher Association, school districts, and individuals. By 1931, it was estimated that there were 64,500 school cafeterias in operation throughout the nation. With the advent of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, concern increased about hunger and malnourishment among school children. Many state, municipal, and local governments initially adopted legislation to enable schools to serve noonday meals to children.

As the Depression worsened, however, most state and local governments could no longer fund the increasingly heavy burden of providing lunches for students, and charitable organizations did not have the necessary resources. Another source of funding was needed, and the federal

government stepped into sponsorship of a school lunch program.

From the outset, a federal school lunch program had two purposes: (1) to help dispose of surplus agricultural commodities owned by the government as a result of price-support agreements with farmers and (2) to help prevent nutritional deficiencies among low-income schoolchildren.

The earliest federal aid to a school lunch program was a component of legislation intended to decrease unemployment. Under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, created during the Hoover administration, loans were granted to towns to cover the cost of labor employed in preparing and serving school lunches. Federal assistance to school lunch programs expanded in 1933 and 1934 under the operations of the Civil Works Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. These

programs reached 39 states and employed more than 7,000 women.

With the start of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, additional federal aid to the school lunch program came through assistance to farmers. Farmers had suffered economically from low prices and overproduction since the end of World War I. During the Depression, these conditions worsened as surpluses of farm products mounted, and prices of farm products declined dramatically. Meanwhile millions of schoolchildren were unable to pay for school lunches, and limited resources at home often meant that families could not provide meals from home. As danger of malnutrition among children became a national concern, greater federal assistance was essential to aid agriculture and fund a national school lunch program.

In 1935, Congress passed legislation that enabled the secretary of agriculture to purchase surplus agricultural commodities. The Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, an agency under the direction of the secretary of agriculture, purchased surplus commodities such as pork, dairy products, and wheat, and made them available to schoolchildren who could not afford to pay for lunches and needed nutritional food. Almost 4,000 schools received commodities for lunch programs by March 1937. Within two years, the number of participating schools increased to 14,075 and almost 900,000 children took part in the school lunch program. The school lunch program continued to increase, and by 1942, the peak year, more than 5 million schoolchildren participated in the school lunch program. After 1942, the effects of World War II upon the food supply became evident; surplus food was needed for the troops.

The Works Project Administration (WPA), another New Deal program, had an impact on the school lunch program. The WPA, established in 1935, created jobs on public works projects for those in need. The Community Service Division of the WPA gave jobs to thousands of unemployed women in cities, towns, and rural communities across the nation. These

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Missy McNatt and Lee Ann Potter

1. Write the words “School Lunch” on the board. Give the students one minute to write as many words or phrases that come to mind when they think about those words. Invite student volunteers to share their responses.
2. Distribute copies of the featured document to students. Ask one student to read the letter aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion by posing the following questions: What type of document is it? What is the date of the document? Who is the intended recipient? Who created it? For what purpose? What unusual marks are on the document? Why? What other questions are elicited by the document?
3. Ask students the following question: “True or False? Tax payers all around the country help pay for your school lunch.” Ask for a show of hands for both true and false. Next, briefly share information from the background essay with students about the history of the Federal School Lunch Act. Remind students that the purpose of our federal government is spelled out in the Constitution’s preamble. Ask students to write a paragraph explaining under which role of the government they think the school lunch program falls. You may choose to do this as a blog. This activity may also prompt a class debate about the role of the federal government.
4. Invite small groups of students to research the school lunch program in their school district. Tell them they may research on the Internet and/or interview the director of the district’s school lunch program, other students, and school administrators. Suggested questions for research include: What is the price of a school lunch at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? What percentage of students participates in the free and reduced lunch program? What percentage of funds for the lunch program comes from the federal government? What surplus food does the school district receive through the Department of Agriculture? What would be the approximate cost of lunch if there were no subsidy? After the students have completed their research, lead a class discussion about their findings. Ask the students to consider what areas of the school lunch program are beneficial and what areas could be improved. At the end of the discussion, invite the students to write a letter to their congressional representatives, suggesting changes or offering opinions on the program.
5. Tell students that one of the purposes of the National School Lunch Act is to establish, maintain, operate, and expand nutrition-education programs. Nutritional standards as developed by the federal government have changed since 1946 when the National School Lunch Act was passed. Inform them that the Department of Agriculture has the most recent government nutritional standards as well as the Food Pyramid (established in 1992) available online at www.usda.gov. Invite students individually or in groups to research the changing nutritional standards and share their findings through posters or through a dramatic performance. (Students might be interested in the *My Pyramid* activity on the USDA website at www.mypyramidtracker.gov/planner/launchPage.aspx)
6. Tell the students that Section 106 of H.R. 3370 makes funds available to the secretary of agriculture to purchase surplus agriculture commodities that are distributed to the states: “Each school shall, insofar as practicable, utilize in its lunch program commodities designated from time to time by the Secretary as being in abundance, either nationally or in the school area, or commodities donated by the Secretary.” A concern that has occurred as a result of this part of the School Lunch Act is the nutritional value of the available commodities. Typical foods include fruits and vegetables; meats; cheese; dry and canned beans; fruit juices; vegetable shortening and vegetable oils; peanut products; and rice, pasta products, flour, and other grain products. Many of the above foods are high in fat content and calories. Divide the class into two teams and hold a class debate. Assign one team to support the current language and the other team to support a change to the School Lunch Act that would permit the Department of Agriculture to purchase surplus food that is lower in calories and fat content. 🌐

MISSY McNATT is an education specialist and LEE ANN POTTER is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor for “Teaching with Documents,” a regular department of Social Education. You can reproduce the images that accompany this article in any quantity.

women were responsible for preparing and serving school lunches. In March 1941, the WPA school lunch program operated in all states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, employing more than 64,000 people. During World War II, as the growing defense industry employed greater numbers of people, the school lunch program became less important as a means of alleviating unemployment.

Federal funding of the school lunch program during World War II continued on a year-to-year basis. As the war drew to a close, many school boards hesitated to include the school lunch program because of the decrease in federal support through donated food, and the concern that yearly appropriations would not assure a continuation of the program. At the same time, however, many young men responding to the World War II draft call were being rejected for service due to malnutrition-related conditions. As a result, support increased for a permanent program.

Support for the program came from individuals such as Mrs. Livingston, as well as organizations. Joe Hall, supervisor of health and education in Tallahassee, Florida, wrote on February 15, 1946: "I consider that proper food is the greatest contributing factor to the health of our children and will do more for their physical well being than any other one thing that can be done." Dozens of parent-teacher associations sent telegrams, letters, and resolutions requesting support for H.R. 3370. They ranged from a single line: "Urge Your Support Of School Lunch Program Vitally Important Here," from

the Largo Parent-Teachers Association in Florida, to an eloquent appeal from the Rotary Club of Perry, Florida: "Now is the time to establish once and for all that serving hot lunches in school is not an emergency relief measure, not a device for the disposal of surplus food, but a necessity for our children's health and educational progress." Special interest groups set forth their needs. The National Fisheries Institute, Inc., wrote on February 25, 1946, to ensure that the words "and other food" were retained in House bill 3370 to give "the necessary protection that the fish and shellfish industry has long sought in the school lunch program."

Mildred Hezian, a student at St. Stephen School in Chicago, Illinois, brought up the issue of federal government subsidies for students who attended parochial schools. On June 1, 1944, she wrote: "I would like to get free milk just like public school. We all pay our taxes and [milk] makes us all healthy. Everyone likes milk. I know I do. I never drink coffee. So please try to send it."

In 1944 and 1945, both the House and the Senate held hearings on the creation of a permanent school lunch program. Following the hearings on the proposed legislation, the House Committee on Agriculture issued a report stating the need for permanent legislation for a school lunch program. The report pointed out that operating on a year-to-year basis was inefficient and depending solely on agricultural surpluses could lead to a "nutritionally unbalanced or nutritionally unattractive" diet.

The report also noted that "for the past 10 years, [the School Lunch Program has] proven for exceptional benefit to the children, schools, and agriculture of the country as a whole." Through permanent legislation, the school lunch program could be nationally coordinated and the program would encourage and increase financial participation and active control by the states. Finally, the report pointed out the importance to children and their families of learning proper nutrition.

The National School Lunch Act was signed into law by President Harry S. Truman on June 4, 1946. Upon signing the bill, Truman said:

Today, as I sign the National School Lunch Act, I feel that the Congress has acted with great wisdom in providing the basis for strengthening the nation through better nutrition for our school children. In my message to Congress last January, I pointed out that we have the technical knowledge to provide plenty of good food for every man, woman, and child in this country, but that despite our capacity to produce food we have often failed to distribute it as well as we should. This action by the Congress represents a basic forward step toward correcting that failure. In the long view, no nation is any healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers; and in the National School Lunch Act, the Congress has contributed immeasurably both to the welfare of our farmers and the health of our children. 🌐

Note about the document

The February 7, 1946, letter from Mrs. Morton Livingston to Senator Claude Pepper, as well as the other letters and reports referenced in this article are in Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46. Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives, Washington, D.C. The photograph titled "Surplus Commodities: School Lunch Program, ca. 1936," comes from Collection FDR-PHOCO at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y. The poster, entitled "Your community can sponsor a school lunch program for its children," comes from Records of the Office of Emergency Management, Record Group 46, and is in the Still Pictures Records Section, National Archives at College Park, Maryland. Both the photograph and the poster are available online in the National Archives ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc, ARC Identifiers 195892 and 514939, respectively.

Background information for the article came from "The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development" by Gordon W. Gunderson. Administrator's Reference manual, United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. The *National School Lunch Program Background and Development* by Gordon W. Gunderson, FNS 63-Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

The complete statement by President Truman at the signing of the National School Lunch Act is in the *Public Papers of the President: Harry S. Truman, 1945-1953*. Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Mo., and is available online at www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php.

Photo courtesy of Sagamore Hill National Historic Site



HE HUNTED WILD GAME WITH
HIS RIFLE
AND SAVED THEM WITH
A PEN

MEET TEDDY ROOSEVELT AND THE REST OF
THE PEOPLE BEHIND OUR NATIONAL PARKS.

A FILM BY KEN BURNS
THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

USE PROMO CODE
NP20SE
AND RECEIVE
20% off*
For Social Education Readers

Transport students out of the classroom and into a story of democracy at its best: a story of people from all walks of life who fought to protect the most treasured places in our nation.

Choose the Educators Edition and receive a bonus disc with video clips, curriculum ideas, and modules for virtually all academic subjects and grade levels!



PBS | Educational Media • shopPBS.org/education

* Educator edition and combos only. Item Numbers: NPAB653, NPA653B, NPAB700, NPA700B. See web for details. Valid for purchase orders, mail, and online orders received by 11:59 pm (EST) 10/15/09. Offer is good while supplies last. Not applicable through group sales and may not be combined with other offers.

CONSTITUTION DAY

SEPTEMBER 17TH



Are you ready for Constitution Day?

Constitution Day is September 17th – do you have all the materials you need for your classroom?

Purchase the BRAND NEW Constitution Day Kit for just \$35!

Kit includes:

- 31" x 55" laminated copy of the original Articles and 27 Amendments
- "To Sign or Not to Sign" lesson plan
- 35 pocket Constitutions
- "Creating the Constitution" DVD
- Dry erase marker for signing

Visit www.constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday for details!



The ANNENBERG FOUNDATION

SCHOLASTIC

Be Heard!

Following Constitution Day, continue the conversation with your students during The Exchange, a live video conference connecting your students with other classrooms across the country to debate a current constitutional topic.

2009 - 2010 topics include:

September 25: Immigration Reform

November 6: Same-Sex Marriage

January 21: Healthcare Reform

Visit www.constitutioncenter.org/exchange to join us for this event!