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# School Lunches: We Can Do Better Than \$1 Per Meal

*Photo by SpecialKRB*

Did you know that french fries are a vegetable? According to US school lunch guidelines, they are.

That's just one grim fact I came across while researching what kids eat in school these days. The most shocking fact is that schools only receive \$2.74 per meal through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which translates to less than a \$1 on actual ingredients (and even less in cities with higher labor costs).

It's no surprise that school lunch menus look more like carnival food than lunch. French fries, corn dogs, pizza, and soda are staples. Meals arrive frozen and are heated in school kitchens. It's difficult to do more on just \$1.

Yet lack of funding isn't the only problem. Many argue that the U.S.D.A. has a looming conflict of interest since one part of the agency is responsible with providing school children nutritious food and another helps agricultural companies sell surplus meat. One USA Today article reported that schools have received millions of pounds of meat from the government that wouldn't even meet quality or safety standards of many fast-food restaurants. And a followup article reveals that the chicken sent to schools by the USDA are otherwise used in pet food and compost.

Pet food? Kids deserve more. As Congress prepares to discuss the Child Nutrition Act, President Obama has asked for an additional \$1 billion, roughly 30 cents more per lunch, in funding. Others, like mom and activist Dana Woldow are lobbying for more.

"The only way to move towards acceptable meals is more funding," she says.

Woldow is a full-time volunteer and Founder of the Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee for the San Francisco school system. She is responsible for removing soda machines, bringing in more fresh produce, and developing a solution to reduce the stigma for kids receiving free lunch, a debit-like card where either parents or the government add money for kids to make their food purchases.

All three of her kids have since graduated, yet Woldow continues to fight. When I asked her why, she responded: "I know way too much to walk away now. I can't let these kids eat like this. Someone needs to fight

for them. I'm up for the battle."

### **TAKE ACTION**

**Educate Yourself:** Attend the *Putting Children's Health on the Table* free web forum on February 1st.

**Sign a Petition:** Slow Food USA has launched the *Time for Lunch* campaign to urge congress to raise funding for school lunches.

**Volunteer:** Action for Healthy Kids lists ways to volunteer in your community.

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