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Why are farmers telling kids what to eat?

By Kevin R. Kosar

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THE LAW GOVERNING America's school lunches is up for renewal this year, and the [210-page draft bill](#) now in play took more than a year to negotiate. The final result is a mélange of provisions attempting to satisfy competing interests.

When Pat Roberts, the Republican senator from Kansas who chairs the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, trumpeted the bill in late January, [he told the committee](#) that its pages “contain critical programs of importance for Kansas and to every state — our farmers, our ranchers, our growers, and our friends and neighbors that need help including, of course, hungry children.”

Note who comes last.

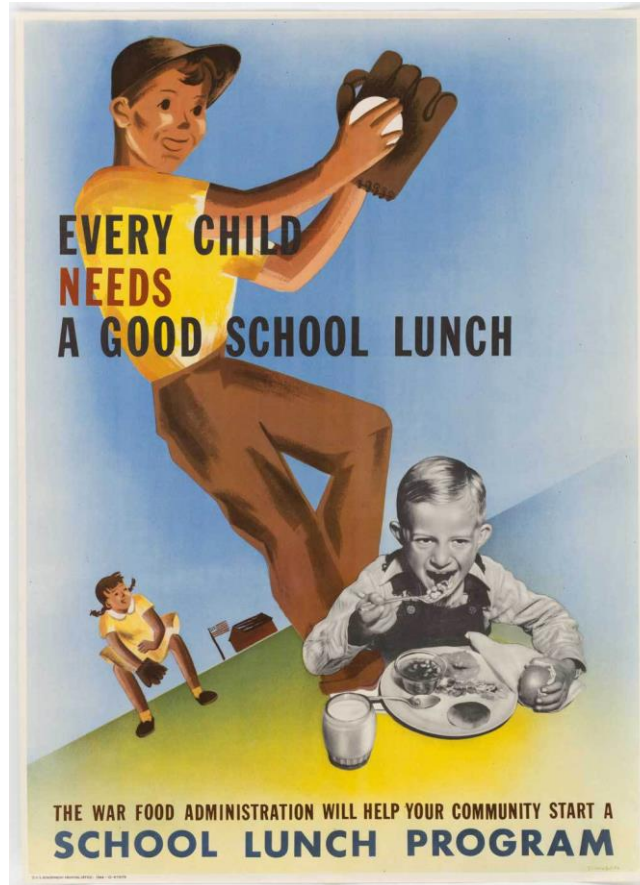
The School Lunch Act and the complementary Child Nutrition Act are the primary vehicles for Washington to affect kids' nutrition, spending \$13 billion to provide food to 30 million children a year. But it's hard to see “kids' nutrition” at the root of its requirement to continue directing schools to spend federal dollars to buy excess farm commodities. Nor is it clear how kids will be aided by grants to “increase

2 | Kosar - Why are farmers telling kids what to eat?

awareness of, and participation in, farm to school programs” by “agricultural and aquaculture producers or agricultural producer groups, including beginning, veteran, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.”

To get the bill out of committee, Roberts and ranking member Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), had to broker deals regarding the amounts of whole grains, sodium, and fresh fruits and vegetables. To appease senators concerned over waste and mismanagement of the program, the bill contains a litany of new federal compliance and oversight requirements. To satisfy demands for local control, Roberts and Stabenow added a provision allowing more “culturally appropriate” foods at schools serving Native Indian students. Recently, a new element arrived from left field: Alaska’s senators, hoping to get more of the state’s salmon on lunch plates, introduced [a bill](#) that would count fish from American waters in the lunch program’s “buy American” commodity provision.

Since its creation 70 years ago, the school lunch law has grown in scale and reach far beyond what their authors would have imagined, and it’s easy to look at today’s draft – and the arguments over what should go on kids’ plates — and imagine we’re watching policy get distorted by powerful agricultural interests. But that would be getting the bill precisely backward. The School Lunch Act, in fact, has served a scrum of agricultural and other interests for the entire 70 years it has existed, each angling for a bigger share of the federal lunch plate. And if you go back to the beginning, it turns out, the School Lunch Act wasn’t created just to feed children. First and foremost, it was a bill to help farmers



Source: National Archives and Records Administration

WASHINGTON BEGAN TO worry about children's diets during World War I, according to Susan Levine, author of the 2008 book [School Lunch Politics](#). In sizing up recruits, the government found surprising levels of malnutrition and stunted growth. Kids' diet and well-being became a matter of interest to the national state. So, she wrote, at the behest of "women's clubs, community groups, health departments and teachers ... examinations and weigh-ins [of pupils] became common in schools throughout the country."

The Great Depression's calamities heightened the national worry over malnutrition. Millions of Americans lost their jobs; children nationwide began suffering the effects of insufficient food, including malnutrition and leg-bowing [rickets](#). Demand for food plunged, and so did prices for crops. Farmers responded by growing more, worsening the situation, and the government stepped in to stabilize food prices. Congress established the Commodity Credit Corporation in 1933, which bought up excess food. Some of it was just allowed to rot, but some was distributed through relief programs. One of the key places it ended up was school cafeterias.

Building hunger-relief programs around the crops that farmers needed to unload seemed like a win-win proposition, so Congress expanded the program repeatedly.



It enacted an additional policy in 1936 that empowered the Department of Agriculture to purchase more excess farm products and distribute them to state welfare agencies for the hungry and for schools. The federal Home Economics Bureau supplied schools with suggested recipes to make use of the surplus commodities, and invented the idea of “recommended daily allowances” for calories, vitamins and food groups.

School cafeterias even absorbed people who needed jobs. The Works Progress Administration funded the manpower (and womanpower) to help operate school-lunch programs in 35,000 schools, and the National Youth Administration employed approximately 16,000 pupils to clean cafeterias. By 1936, 350,000 schoolchildren in 60,000 schools participated daily in the lunch program.

World War II led the program to grow even further. America still clearly had a malnutrition problem. Recruits in large numbers were disqualified for service because of pellagra and other afflictions from inadequate diets. War needed strong men. Then-Rep. John Flannagan (D-Va.) thundered that democracy “is not the creature of intellectual weaklings any more than it is the creature of physical weaklings. It sprang from the loins of men of strong minds and bodies. And if it is to be preserved it will be preserved by the same kind of men.”

Proponents of school lunches also pointed to Rosie the Riveter. No longer could children leave school to eat lunch — Mom wasn’t home anymore. As the program grew, so did its costs. In 1943, school lunches cost \$50 million and served five million pupils – a quarter of all those who were enrolled in school. That same year, the Roosevelt administration moved the program to the War Food Administration and relaunched it as the Community School Lunch program.

The program might well have disappeared at the end of the war, but for [Sen. Richard B. Russell](#), the Georgia Democrat who chaired the Senate subcommittee on agricultural appropriations. He was a great admirer of what the school-lunch program had become: an immense, modern federal scheme for shifting calories from farms to children. Farmers got higher prices and a guaranteed market for their foodstuffs; poor children, like those back in Georgia, got fed.

Richard B. Russell. Source: Wikipedia.

Not everyone saw it as he did. Up to that point, the federal government had played [little role](#) in America’s schools, and many in Congress wanted to keep it that way. Some critics found the program too costly; others thought it was creeping socialism that was driving a wedge between children and their mothers.

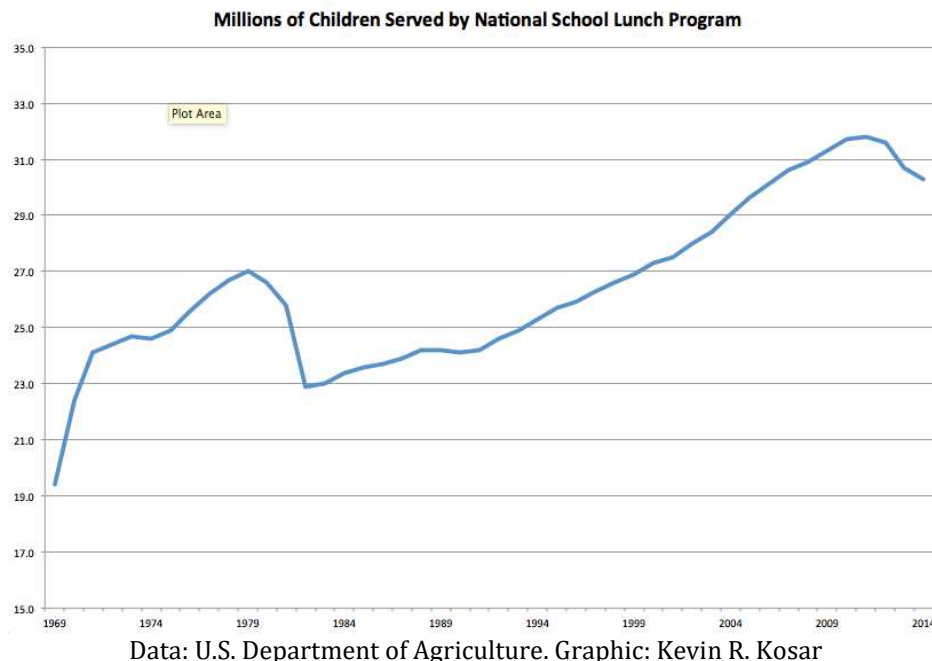
Congressmen from segregationist states also feared a lunch program might be a camel's nose for the government to tamper with segregated schools.

Russell was not swayed by these concerns, and introduced legislation in 1944 to make the program permanent. Senators from other heavily rural states quickly joined in support. The legislation, which ran a mere [three pages](#), proclaimed: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food." The program would again be handled by the Department of Agriculture. The law authorized the USDA to offer grants to state education agencies, who could use the money to buy surplus farm products and operate school lunch programs. Diverse interest groups aided Russell's effort: children's welfare advocates, Parent-Teacher Association chapters, farm and food-industry lobbies, physicians, nutritionists (who cared about children, but also wanted to be hired by school lunch programs) and educators. The Roosevelt administration was supportive, and Surgeon General Thomas Parran testified in favor.

Russell, who was openly racist, assured his anxious colleagues that the bill gave federal officials "no authority whatever over the management of the schools." His legislation limited the USDA to interacting with state education agencies, not local school systems. States were given great discretion on how to administer the program and would decide which schools and children would participate. Russell garnered additional congressional support by allowing private and parochial schools to participate.

Congress voted overwhelmingly for the legislation, and President Harry Truman, a former farm-state senator who had taken over when FDR died two months earlier, signed it June 4, 1946. In its first year, the program got its largest appropriation ever: \$75 million.

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL lunch program has proven fabulously popular with politicians and interest groups, if not the children who eat the meals. Congress has [expanded it repeatedly](#), and today Russell's act is [135 pages](#) long. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 added to it free breakfasts; a 1968 statute created summer food giveaways. Congress added preschools and daycares to the program in 1975, as well as an after-school snack and supper benefit. [Non-school institutions](#), like temporary shelters for abused children and juvenile-detention centers, also benefit from the school lunch program. Additionally, the federal government helps with states' administrative costs and offers grants to help purchase cafeteria equipment. The program literally circles the globe: children in Puerto Rico, Guam and the American Virgin Islands participate.



About 99,000 institutions get money or food from the program, and [five billion lunches](#) are served annually. Three-quarters of the children fed are sufficiently poor to receive their lunches at no cost. Another seven percent of participants qualify for reduced-priced lunches. The remaining students pay the full lunch price, which tends to be paltry (it's [\\$2.10](#) in Washington, D.C.).

The program has changed in many ways: excess farm foodstuff is only about 10 percent of the total value of the program now; mostly, the government just provides direct funds. School lunches operate as a quasi-entitlement, a form of welfare. Schools spend money to feed children, and the federal government reimburses them based upon the neediness of the children served. The poorer the child fed, the higher the reimbursement.

But in many ways the National School Lunch Program is still a creature of its original priorities and their built-in contradictions. It is a USDA program and agricultural interests inevitably conflict with the interests of children. It's right there in the program's statute, which has not been changed since 1946. The program's goals are "to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food."

In its early days, the problem lay in the commodity surplus aspect of the program. Feeding people un-bought produce was no guarantee of balanced meals. Unexpected gluts meant school districts often found themselves with heaps of almonds and apricots one month, then surfeits of onions and eggs the next. School administrators reported massive amounts of food being rejected by children.



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Today, with surplus providing far less of the meals, the problem has become jousting over nutrition standards. School food (lunches, snacks, etc.) is a huge market – the federal government alone spends [\\$19 billion](#) on it, which does not count the billions spent by states and localities. As school-lunch standards are rewritten and updated, agricultural interests rely on congressional allies to help them, particularly the farm-state members who dominate the committees.

Should the meals' makeup be guided by the goal of supporting farmers, or by the advice of nutritionists? That's a surprisingly loaded question. Indicative of the sensitivity of the issue, the Senate Agriculture Committee's title did not include the word "nutrition" [until 1977](#). Russell himself nudged the USDA to have lunches use more Georgia products, like chicken and peanuts. Five years ago, [Sen. Susan Collins](#) (R-Maine), famously battled the Food and Nutrition Service over the white potato. The FNS' proposed nutrition standards would have reduced its place on lunch trays in order to curb children's starch intake. With the help of another spud-state senator, Mark Udall (D-Colo.), Collins beat back the rule by winning an amendment to the farm appropriations bill. The potato survived.

IT DID NOT have to be this way. One can imagine a school lunch program run solely for the purpose of promoting the health and well-being of children. The Department of Education would disburse the funds and set basic benchmarks for healthy meals. States and localities would remain free to purchase the foods they deem best, but their efforts would be graded. Each year, the Department of Education would release annual report cards on school systems' meals relative to the nutrition benchmarks. Instead of a national food fight, with agricultural interests fighting for plate space, America would have a basic food-support system for children that

respects local dietary diversity but encourages schools to achieve higher nutritional standards.

This is not a new reform idea. In fact, it's as old as the act itself. When Congress was debating the original School Lunch Act, another bill was offered to lodge the program under the federal education commissioner. Russell fought it, knowing it would weaken the hand of agricultural interests.

Today, the lunch legislation remains a tug-of-war between nutrition advocates and food-industry interests, played out on the tilted playing field of Congress' agriculture committees. Ironically, nutrition advocates have found a new ally: military leaders. Where the military was once concerned about malnourished soldiers, today it worries about obese ones, blaming schools in part for making too much "high-calorie, low-nutrition food" available. Recruits, they grouse, are often "[too fat to fight](#)," and have to be discharged and replaced.

The road to reauthorizing the school lunch program is long. The full Senate has not voted on the legislation. The House has yet to unveil its own bill. When it does, it too may have to consider a fish bill, as Rep. Suzan DelBene (D-Wash.) has introduced one and garnered eight cosponsors.

And while fish fights for its spot, a different strange sideshow is underway over the definition of "fresh fruits and vegetables." Advocates of canned and frozen foods want access to a 13-year-old program called the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program, which subsidizes school purchases of fruits and vegetables as snacks. [Rep. Bruce Poliquin](#) (R-Maine), has sponsored the oleagiously named [Fruit and Vegetable Access for Children Act](#). It would redefine the words "fresh fruits and vegetables" to mean "fresh, canned, dried, frozen or pureed." Poliquin argues that changing the law would help Maine farmers. It also is good for the children, he says: "By enabling schools to serve fruits and vegetables, in a variety of forms, we are teaching children that nutritious foods come in many different sizes, shapes, colors and packages — from frozen blueberries, to canned peas, to fresh peaches and dried apricots." Wyman's, a frozen fruit company, happens to be in Poliquin's 2nd District. The bill has 17 co-sponsors.

Thus, come autumn 2016, students coming back to schools may find more salmon and canned pears awaiting them. It may or may not be what kids want to eat, but there's not much argument that the school-lunch bill will still be working on behalf of the people it was written for in the first place.

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