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Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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Obama's New Chef Skewers School Lunches

Before he agreed to cook for the Obama family in the White House, Chicago chef Sam Kass was already talking about changing the way American children eat.

During weekly Tuesday gatherings at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, Mr. Kass hosted "Rethinking Soup," which he described as "a communal event where we will eat delicious, healthy soup and have fresh, organic conversation about many of the urgent social, cultural, economic and environmental food issues that we should be addressing."

In May, over a meal of locally-produced beef and barley soup, Mr. Kass lamented the sorry state of the National School Lunch Program, which provides low-cost or free lunches to schoolchildren. He noted that what gets served up to kids is influenced by government agricultural subsidies. As a result, he says, meals served to students are low in vegetables and disproportionately high in fat, additives, preservatives and high-fructose corn syrup. (He also links the high consumption of sugary foods and food additives to learning difficulties and attention deficit disorder, although the medical community remains divided on that issue.)

Here's the text of his talk, as posted on the Hull House Kitchen Web site.

Providing our children healthy food at school, it is easy to say but a monumental challenge to realize. I will quickly give a lay of the School Lunch landscape as it stands, and then let's hear from our guests.

Malnutrition stemming from the Great Depression had disqualified many potential soldiers from being eligible to fight in World War II; this legacy was still vivid in the minds of our leaders as the U.S. began preparing for the next fight against the Soviet Union. In response, the government launched the National School Lunch Act as a means to boost overall health and nutrition of the population in 1946. Today the program serves about 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools feeding 28 million children a day.

The National School Lunch program also serves another vital role in our agricultural system. The government subsidizes various agricultural industries, creating overproduction in commodities such as beef, pork and dairy. This

overproduction depresses prices, endangering the vitality of producers. The U.S. government purchases the overproduction it has stimulated and then disposes of the excess by giving it to schools. In return for the government donation, the schools have to ensure that the lunches reach basic nutritional requirements as set by the government.

In 2003, U.S.D.A. spent \$939.5 million dollars buying surplus commodities for School Lunch. Two-thirds of that bought meat and dairy, with little more than one quarter going to vegetables that were mostly frozen; and we should not forget that potatoes are the top selling vegetable in our country. The problem that arose is that between 80 and 85 percent of schools fail the basic government standards for the percentage of fat in the lunches due to the food it supplies schools.

There are a couple major repercussions of this program felt by our children. The first is their ability to learn. There is overwhelming evidence that confirms that additives of colors and preservatives common in lunchroom food hinder a child's ability to learn. In addition, the abundance of high fructose corn syrup in lunches and snacks has been shown to have a direct link to the attention deficit disorder epidemic.

The second is physical health. According to the Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine and the International Journal of Pediatric Obesity, by 2010 nearly half of the children in North America will be overweight or obese.

Type 2 diabetes is the new name for adult onset diabetes; the name was changed due to the fact that children are now suffering from this form of diet-induced diabetes. Indeed, the youngest generation might very well live substantially shorter lives than their parents due to diseases related to obesity.

So it is in this context that the speakers who have joined us today spend their lives working. With us is Josephine Lauer from the Organic School Project, which is now working in six schools trying to cook fresh healthy food for students in Chicago; Jean Saunders from the Healthy Schools Campaign, which is doing groundbreaking work in creating a healthy learning environment of which food is a central component; Stephen Menyhart, the brilliant chef of Perspectives-Calumet Charter School; and Angela Mason, coordinator of school and community gardens for the Chicago Botanic Garden.

And if you want to know how Mr. Kass thinks more people should be eating, check out this menu from his private chef business, Inevitable Table. Menu items include citrus salad with fennel, oranges and grapefruit and orange vinaigrette; ancho chili rubbed pork loin with rapini and polenta; and braised chicken in Madeira with root vegetables and prunes, Himalayan red rice, and sautéed escarole with pine nuts.