

About Rethinking School Lunch

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH GUIDE

Rethinking School Lunch – a project of the **Center for Ecoliteracy**
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by Zenobia Barlow, executive director and Janet Brown, Program Officer for Food Systems, Center for Ecoliteracy

How is it that a small foundation in Berkeley, California, dedicated to education for sustainability, came to be involved in a five-year process of “rethinking school lunch?”

Our original motivation for this undertaking was to resolve the inconsistencies between the lessons about food systems, health, and sustainability that students were learning in the enriched environments of school gardens and kitchen classrooms, and the contradictory “hidden curriculum” of waste and haste in the school cafeteria.

What do we mean by “rethinking”? The activity of “rethinking” calls attention to a problem-solving approach that addresses root causes, rather than the treatment of symptoms. The emerging epidemic of diet-related disease in school-age children, for example, is a symptom of profoundly deeper issues: the disconnection of farms from communities, meals from culture, and health from environment.

Beginnings Our commitment to improving the nutritional content and appeal of school meals stemmed from our examination of research into how children learn, and the role of nutrition in brain function and academic performance. We understood that the

links between nutrition and cognition had serious implications for school-age children.

Our experience with the project-based learning environments of exemplary schools we had funded made clear that cooperation and learning increased, and grades and retention improved, when learning was integrated with hands-on experiences in the natural world.

For young people, these experiences were also instrumental in the formation of values, resulting in a sense of responsibility for themselves, their larger communities, and the environment. We came to understand that these values are foundational to education for sustainability.

For these reasons, our involvement in issues surrounding school lunch grew. At the same time, parents and others in our community, concerned with the health of school-age children, were meeting regularly around issues of school gardens, cooking classes, and the quality of meals served at school. It seemed reasonable to us that a better system of providing nourishing meals at school was possible. It seemed likely that experiences of growing food in school gardens, preparing meals in the kitchen classroom, enjoying delicious lunches in the cafeteria, and visiting local, sustainably operated family farms, would contribute to an educational setting in which the connections between diet, human health, the environment and our collective future, were demonstrated.

The Food Systems Project In 1998, the Center for Ecoliteracy founded its Food Systems Project to formalize its engagement with these issues. Since then, the now widely acknowledged epidemic of diet related diseases in school-age children has become front-page news. Despite this emerging public health crisis, many positive signs of change encourage us.

Throughout the nation, boards of education have begun to adopt food policies in order to restore authority for decisions affecting the health of school-age children to parents and communities.

Several states have passed legislation to limit sales of high-fat, high-sugar, highly processed foods at school, and more are considering similar action. Nutritionists and pediatricians are conducting studies and formulating new guidelines related to the nutritional content of school lunches. The World Health Organization has declared childhood obesity to be a global epidemic, and is calling for a worldwide ban on food-related commercial messages aimed at children under 12 years of age.

A systemic approach to change When we began this process five years ago, we naively believed it was possible, despite our theoretical understanding of systemic change, to improve school lunch by focusing on school food service alone. Our experience has shown that improving the food served in schools is a complex, ongoing effort, requiring more than a focus on the food itself. It also requires the total engagement of the administrative cabinet of a school district, its school board, and the parent community, in order to realize sustainable, systemic change.

What is “Rethinking School Lunch?” Rethinking School Lunch is a Web guide that provides encouragement, tools, and innovative solutions from experts in the fields of education, food service, facilities design, communication, nutrition, and systems change. It offers readers the benefit of the experiences and inspiring successes of many practitioners in their own first-hand accounts. The guide is a multifaceted resource with common sense answers to specific problems.

Rethinking School Lunch is comprised of 10 sections intended to revitalize the important connections between learning, health, and ecological literacy. All of the sections are interconnected and mutually interdependent. Together they constitute a whole system, or pattern, for reinventing school meal services. We recommend becoming familiar with all 10 sections, with the understanding that it is possible to begin anywhere in the pattern in order to influence the whole system.

Rethinking School Lunch contains thought-provoking questions in an inquiry approach to problem solving, adaptable to diverse situations. This approach is intended to encourage change agents across the nation to develop their own models, influenced by local bioregions, communities, resources, and needs.

Gratitude and thanks to our partners Throughout these years and experiences, we have met and learned from exemplary leaders who are yearning for a better future for our children. We are humbled by the scope and persistence of the problems and challenges that face us. We have deepened our respect and appreciation for those engaged in food service and education, who daily summon the courage and determination to solve persistent problems in the face of limited resources. We have learned never to underestimate the power of a person or group committed to bringing about needed change. Indeed, it is from these daily demonstrations of optimism, and leadership by example, that we take heart.

We have convened dedicated food service directors, educators, farmers, and parents through our Fertile Crescent Network of farm-to-school projects in six contiguous Northern California counties. The allies in these counties continue to work toward improving the quality of meals served at school and linking cafeterias to core curriculum, kitchen classrooms, school gardens, family farms and public policy. We are indebted to this regional network of innovators, and to the members of our Food Service Directors Roundtable, whose best thinking and practices are a part of this guide. We also want to acknowledge our partners in the statewide network of farm-to-school projects convened by the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College, as well as our colleagues in the national Food and Society Initiative supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

We express our deepest gratitude and admiration to our partners and collaborators in this effort to improve the health and learning

outcomes of school-age children, preserve sustainable family farming as a way of life in our region, and protect and restore the ecological communities upon which human communities depend. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the parents, educators, administrators, and students of Berkeley Unified School District for their leadership as a community in the farm-to-school movement.

We are grateful for the generosity of The California Endowment, and our other funding partners, in recognizing the importance of these issue, and in funding the creation of Rethinking School Lunch. We also wish to acknowledge our friend and colleague, Alice Waters, and the staff and students of the Edible Schoolyard and Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School, through whose collective vision and energy, the progress in linking gardens and farms to schools has flourished.

The partners in this effort share a common vision of sustainability and concern for our children and their future. Together, we recognize a need to understand our place in nature and to know more about food, ecosystems, and the cycles of life, in order to create sustainable communities.

Cover photo: Tyler/Malcom X School, Berkeley/Center for Ecoliteracy

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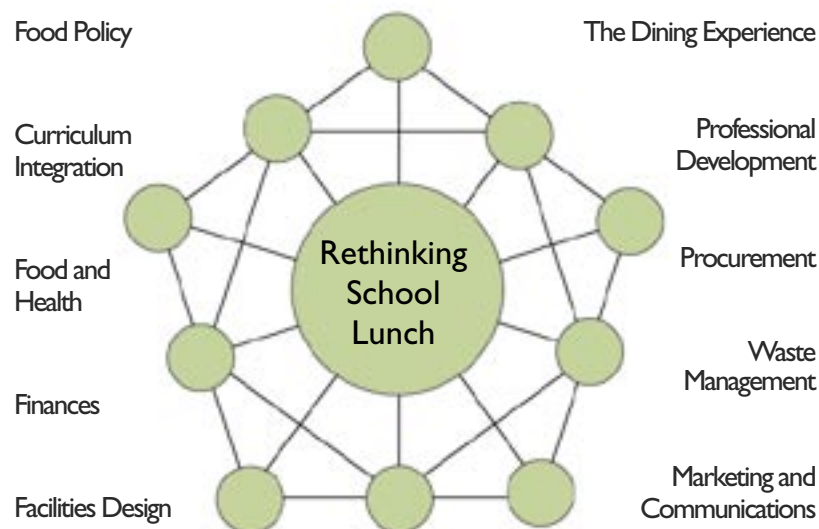
Web of Connections

This document is part of a comprehensive **Center for Ecoliteracy** project that provides helpful information on topics related to redesigning school lunch programs.

The diagram illustrates our systems approach to integrating school lunch programs with curriculum, improving student health and behavior, and creating sustainable communities.

School administrators, food service directors, teachers, and parents will each approach this project from their unique perspective. Readers can begin with the topic that interests them most, then explore the other related topics.

The entire Rethinking School Lunch project is available at: www.ecoliteracy.org/rethinking/rsl.html





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The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to education for sustainable living by fostering a profound understanding of the natural world, grounded in direct experience.

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