

“The Penny Lunch Has Spread Faster than the Measles”: Children’s Health and the Debate over School Lunches in New York City, 1908–1930

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A few days before Thanksgiving in 1908, the home economist Mabel Hyde Kittredge initiated a school lunch program at an elementary school in Hell’s Kitchen, serving soup and bread to hungry children in the infamous Manhattan neighborhood. The following year, she founded the School Lunch Committee (SLC), a voluntary organization composed of home economists, educators, physicians, and philanthropists dedicated to improving the nutritional health and educational prospects of schoolchildren. By 1915, just seven years after the initiative began, the SLC was serving 80,000 free or low-price lunches a year to children at nearly a quarter of the elementary schools in Manhattan and the Bronx. Most of the schools were located in the city’s poorest districts, and experience showed that the lunches were reaching those most in need at minimal cost to the organization. All the food served was inspected by the Health Department, and the meals were nutritionally balanced and tailored to the ethnic tastes and religious requirements of different school populations. Sparse but compelling evidence indicated that the program had reduced malnourishment among the children who partook, and teachers and principals at participating schools reported reductions in behavioral problems, dyspepsia, inattentiveness, and lethargy.

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In less than a decade, the SLC had developed and implemented one of the most extensive and successful school lunch programs in the United States.¹ With the hope of expanding the service and making it a permanent function of New York City’s public schools, the SLC transferred control to the Board of Education in 1919. Despite the success of the pilot program and the availability of public funding earmarked to maintain and even expand school lunch provision, the Board drastically reduced meal service. What had been a carefully planned and executed school health initiative was mostly replaced by a for-profit concessionaire system with no public health or educational mandate, no nutritional requirements, no food safety inspections, no reduced-price or free meals for poor children, and virtually no oversight of any kind.

It is overly simplistic to regard the Board’s abdication of a popular health, education, and social welfare program as a government agency’s callous indifference to the needs of the poor. Nor was this just another instance of the discrimination against immigrants that characterized many public health interventions (or noninterventions). Although these elements were present to varying degrees, they account only for part of a far more complex issue. Because school meals were a matter of public policy in numerous domains, including health, education, labor, law, and social welfare, what the SLC regarded as a simple transfer from private charity to public entitlement was in fact a socially and politically charged negotiation of responsibility for children’s nutritional health and the proper role of the public school.

New York City was but one of many American municipalities to initiate a school meal program in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1900, virtually no public schools supplied food for students, but just over a decade later, more than 40 cities across the United States served meals in at least some of the schools.² “The penny lunch has

¹For a more detailed discussion of school lunches in the United States in this time period, see A. R. Ruis, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: School Meals and Nutrition Policy in the United States, 1900–1946* (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 2011), William J. Reese, “After Bread, Education: Nutrition and Urban School Children, 1890–1920,” *Teachers College Record* 81, no. 4 (1980): 496–525, Richard A. Meckel, *Classrooms and Clinics: Urban Schools and the Protection and Promotion of Child Health, 1870–1930* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 114–27.

²At least forty-one cities had lunch programs in 1913: Albany (NY), Amherst (MA), Boston (MA), Buffalo (NY), Chicago (IL), Cincinnati (OH), Cleveland (OH), Columbus (OH), Dallas (TX), Denver (CO), Eau Claire (WI), Erie (PA), Greenfield (MA), Hartford (CT), Houston (TX), Indianapolis (IN), Kansas City (MO), Logansville (PA), Los Angeles (CA), Louisville (KY), Manayunk (PA), McKeesport (PA), Memphis (TN), Mill Valley (NY), Milwaukee (WI), Montpelier (VT), Muskegon (MI), New Haven (CT), New Orleans (LA), New York City (NY), Philadelphia (PA), Pittsburgh (PA), Rochester (NY), St. Louis (MO), St. Paul (MN), Seattle (WA), Toledo (OH), Utica (NY), Washington, D.C., Wayne (PA), and Westford (MA).

spread faster than the measles,” quipped a physician from Cincinnati. “There seems no immunity for it. Everybody is taking it.”³ Indeed, most education authorities regarded malnourishment as a significant school health problem, one that markedly reduced educational efficiency: “Boards of education are considering the problem from the economic viewpoint,” noted the Ohio State University Agricultural Extension Service, “because there seems to be a relation between malnutrition and retardation in school. A poorly nourished child is an economic liability in any school system.”⁴ School lunch and milk programs quickly became the standard response to this issue nationwide, but the rapidness with which such programs developed and the variance in state laws and local policies covering public health and education led to a range of approaches to feeding schoolchildren.

Most school lunch programs in the United States were designed and executed by home and school leagues (the forerunners of parent-teacher associations), women’s clubs, or charitable organizations, such as the SLC, often with the active cooperation of the board of education or other school authorities. Such groups hoped to convince education leaders that a school meal program was sustainable and then transfer it to municipal control, a model of development in which the private sector experimented and the public sector implemented: “The function of a private organization is to experiment and demonstrate. It cannot eventuate on a large scale, and it should not if it could,” argued Leonard Ayres, an education researcher at the Russell Sage Foundation and former superintendent of schools. “The function of a public organization is to eventuate on a large scale. It can seldom experiment and it lacks freedom and flexibility in demonstration.”⁵

This theory of development, in which private organizations developed programs for broad implementation by public institutions, presupposed clear demarcations between public and private roles and responsibilities. The growth of school lunch programs in New York City under the SLC and their reduction under the Board of Education was unusually drastic, but it reflected the uncertainty and ambiguity that existed in the quasi-official space between autonomous private agency and public entitlement during the Progressive Era.⁶ The SLC regarded meal provision as an integral part of the public school program, a

³Albertina Bechmann, “The First Penny Lunch,” *Journal of Home Economics* 25, no. 9 (1933): 760–62.

⁴*The School Lunch* (Columbus, OH: Agricultural Extension Service, Ohio State University, 1922), 3.

⁵Leonard P. Ayres, *The Cleveland School Survey*, Summary Volume (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Foundation, 1917), 234.

⁶For a recent discussion of the ambiguity between public and private in responsibility for municipal services, see Jessica Wang, “Dogs and the Making of the American

community responsibility for the health and education of children. The management of such programs, for both practical and philosophical reasons, rightly inhered to the city. The Board of Education, in contrast, tended to maintain that responsibility for the feeding of children resided in the home and should not become a public burden; it was not the duty of the public schools to feed children any more than it was to house or to clothe them. The idealized system in which private organizations developed programs that were subsequently refined and expanded by public agencies succeeded only when there was agreement on the delineation of responsibility for those endeavors.

In her thorough analysis of the National School Lunch Program, which began in 1947, the historian Susan Levine has argued that the "American public is intensely committed to the idea of a school lunch program, particularly one that offers free meals to poor children."⁷ That commitment, however, was not always reflected in policy. Numerous interests, both public and private, had a stake in the largely local school lunch debates of the early twentieth century, and the struggle over school lunches in New York City highlights just how diverse the categories "public" and "private" actually were. The Board of Education, for example, found itself at odds with the Board of Health and the Board of Aldermen, both of which supported a publicly financed school meal program. In effect, the various municipal boards represented different publics. Members of the Board of Aldermen were elected rather than appointed, and they answered to a constituency that tended to support school-based social programs. Members of the Board of Education were appointed by the mayor; they were thus more isolated (both socially and structurally) from the needs of citizens, especially the poor, and they were more susceptible to political manipulation. The private side was equally complex, as the SLC and other nonprofit or charitable entities competed with profit-making restaurant owners, shopkeepers, and street peddlers for schoolchildren's patronage. Concessionaires, private citizens who obtained exclusive licenses to sell food in public schools, further blurred the distinction.

Different municipal boards also regarded the relationship between the public and private spheres differently. To the Board of Health, the public health benefits (and resulting benefits to education) of a robust school meal program were important enough to justify bringing what had been largely a private matter—the feeding of children—under public supervision. To the Board of Education, this exceeded the purview

State: Voluntary Association, State Power, and the Politics of Animal Control in New York City, 1850–1920," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (2012): 998–1024.

⁷Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2.

of the public schools, and feeding children rightly remained the responsibility of the home; schoolchildren not sufficiently fed by their families could receive aid from private charity but not, as a general rule, from education funds.

This diversity of interests was only compounded by changes in education and public health administration that diminished the traditional divide between public and private. In the late nineteenth century, the germ theory of disease and the “new public health” made private spaces and behaviors the subject of public concern, for germs recognized no social boundaries.⁸ As urban health authorities shifted their attention from the environment to the individual, the police powers of boards of health—to disinfect homes, confine the infectious, regulate commerce, or compel vaccination, for example—expanded, as did less formal enforcement of hygienic order, the public health equivalent of what social theorist Jane Jacobs termed the “eyes on the street.”⁹ In the early twentieth century, growing concern over infant mortality and children’s health had brought child-rearing, once the unquestioned domain of mothers, into the public sphere as well.¹⁰

This transition occurred as many states were beginning to regulate child labor and require children’s attendance in school. New York passed a compulsory education law in 1874, and all states had done so by 1918. “Through compulsory attendance policies,” the historian Tracy Steffes has argued, “state legislatures and local officials extended public power over children and households. They attached new regulations and intervened in decisions about children’s education, health, labor, and welfare that had once been wholly private household matters.”¹¹

⁸See, for example, Suellen M. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Nancy J. Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1961). On the expansion of public health police powers, see, for example, Philip J. Hilts, *Protecting America’s Health: The FDA, Business, and One Hundred Years of Regulation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁰On the history of “baby saving” campaigns and scientific motherhood, see Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Richard A. Meckel, *Save the Babies: American Public Health Reform and the Prevention of Infant Mortality, 1850–1929* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), Jacqueline H. Wolf, *Don’t Kill Your Baby: Public Health and the Decline of Breastfeeding in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001).

¹¹Tracy L. Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3. For a discussion

After the turn of the twentieth century, schools increasingly became more than centers of education; they provided a context for the negotiation of social policy that redefined the boundaries between home and state, private rights, and public welfare. The debate over school lunches in New York City offers a particularly clear example of the complexity of such negotiations.

From its inception, the debate centered on the extent to which schools should assume responsibility for the health of children. An inquiry by the New York City Board of Education in 1908 concluded "that there was not sufficient ground for departure from the time honored policy under which parents are expected to provide for the personal needs of their own children," but teachers, administrators, school physicians, and social workers maintained that high rates of malnutrition were a significant impediment to health and education.¹² School medical inspectors reported a citywide prevalence of malnourishment of approximately 3 percent, itself not insignificant, but rates as high as 40 percent were found in impoverished neighborhoods.¹³ Most members of the Board adamantly opposed the belief that malnutrition was a significant problem and that school meals should be used to alleviate it. One referred to it as "hysterical sentimentality." Another publicly berated a district superintendent, telling her that she was "on the payroll of the Board of Education to do school, not settlement work."¹⁴

Despite the fact that numerous health and education organizations, both local and national, were promoting school meals as a useful measure against malnutrition—an increasingly visible public health concern and common explanation for school children's truancy, inattention, behavioral problems, and poor academic performance—the Board did not regard this as something for which the schools should take responsibility.¹⁵ Nevertheless, meetings between members of various charitable

of these issues in the context of medicine and public health, see Stephen Woolworth, "A Radical Proposition: The Brief but Exceptional History of the Seattle School Clinic, 1914–21," *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* 68, no. 2 (2013): 227–65.

¹²Edward T. Devine, "The Underfed Child in the Schools," *Charities & The Commons* 20 (1908): 413–16. See also Leonard P. Ayres, *The Relation of Physical Defects to School Progress* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, Division of Education, 1909), 8.

¹³*Annual Report of the Board of Health for the City of New York* for the years 1909–1912 (inclusive), E. Mather Sill, "Malnutrition in School Children in New York City," *Journal of Home Economics* 1 (October 1909): 370.

¹⁴"Say School Children Are Not Starving," *New York Times*, June 11, 1908, 4.

¹⁵For a discussion of the emergence of malnutrition as a public health problem, see Jeffrey P. Brosco, "Weight Charts and Well Child Care: When the Pediatrician Became the Expert in Child Health," in *Formative Years: Children's Health in the United States, 1880–2000*, eds. Alexandra Minna Stern and Howard Markel (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 91–120, Richard A. Meckel, "Politics, Policy, and the Measuring of Child Health: Child Malnutrition in the Great Depression," in *Healing the World's Children: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Child Health in the Twentieth Century*,

organizations and a special committee of the Board of Education during the summer of 1908 softened this stance somewhat, and the Board acquiesced to the installation of experimental, charitable lunch programs. That autumn, the Board officially approved the establishment of a trial lunch service to be operated at no expense to the city.¹⁶

Principal G. H. Chatfield of P.S. 51 (44th St. and 10th Ave.)—an elementary school with nearly two thousand pupils—requested a meal program after he found that 10 percent of his students had no one at home during the lunch hour to feed them. With approval from the Board, P.S. 51 became the site of New York City's first school lunch program. The school was located in Hell's Kitchen, one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. It was an apt crucible for an experimental program; if school lunches succeeded in Hell's Kitchen, they could likely succeed anywhere.

The home economist Mabel Hyde Kittredge, who had worked with Lillian Wald at the Henry Street Settlement House, undertook the daunting task of running and financing the lunch program from scratch. Kittredge recruited two assistants, and they served the first lunch at P.S. 51 just days before the Thanksgiving holiday in 1908. Full meals—typically consisting of a soup, salad, or vegetable with bread, totaling approximately 450 calories (roughly a third of a child's daily requirement)—cost three cents, with side dishes such as crackers, fruit, and cocoa available for one cent each.¹⁷ Kittredge attempted to cater to the tastes of the predominantly Irish children by serving soups that the children would recognize and like: barley, rice and pea, and clam chowder. Although only about 10 percent of the children partook of the lunch service on any given day—the same fraction of the student body whose homes were vacant at noon—they attended regularly and filled the school's assembly hall to capacity. Kittredge responded to the interest by expanding the menu to include meat-and-potato sandwiches, baked beans, farina (corn pudding), and rice pudding, as well as sides such as prunes, bananas, apples, sweet potatoes, gingerbread, and spice cakes.¹⁸ P.S. 51 served over 19,000 meals during the remainder of the

eds. Janet Golden, Cynthia R. Commachio, and George Weisz (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 235–52, A. R. Ruis, "'Children with Half-Starved Bodies' and the Assessment of Malnutrition in the United States, 1890–1950," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87, no. 3 (2013): 380–408.

¹⁶Mabel Hyde Kittredge, "School Lunch Problem, Solved, Now Strikes a Snag," *New York Times*, January 12, 1913, SM6.

¹⁷Three cents was inexpensive, but even that would have been a lot for some of the city's poorest children. A room in a tenement house, the cheapest form of housing, cost between three and six dollars per week in rent, and an unskilled laborer could expect to make around seven dollars per week.

¹⁸Mabel Hyde Kittredge, "Experiments with School Lunches in New York City," *Journal of Home Economics* 2, no. 2 (1910): 174–75.

1908–1909 school year, leading Kittredge to explore the possibility of installing the service in other schools.¹⁹

To expand her efforts, Kittredge founded the SLC in 1909. The Committee included Principal Chatfield; Luther Gulick, Director of Physical Training for the Public Schools; Margaret Poole, wife of the socialist writer Ernest Poole; and the pediatrician Ira Wile. The SLC began with three basic goals:

1. The provision of nourishing lunches on a self-supporting basis to all school children.
2. Special observation of children whose physical condition is such as to give evidence of lack of proper nourishment, in order to determine the underlying causes by a study of their homes and environment. An extension of this aim requires that these selected cases be followed up to the end that the proper agency may be appraised and appropriate action taken.
3. The formation of special classes of mothers for instruction in the proper care of children, especially in cases of poor nourishment.²⁰

Kittredge wanted the school meals to be more than just supplemental feeding; she hoped to use them as a basis for broader social and public health work, especially community and school-based health and nutrition education.

Indeed, most physicians and nutritionists regarded hunger as only part of the malnutrition problem. Insufficient food was not the same as inadequate food, and health authorities regarded poverty and ignorance as equally significant causes of children’s poor nutritional health.²¹ “I grant that our school children have food enough and, in the main, good food,” Horace Makechnie, a physician from Somerville, Massachusetts, declared at the 1897 annual meeting of the American Medical Association, “but are they nourished?” Invoking a rhetorical device that would become a platitude in later years—“What! starvation around tables loaded with food?”—Mackechnie called attention to one of the many health concerns that arose with compulsory education. With

¹⁹Olivia Howard Dunbar, “Three-Cent Luncheons for School-Children,” *Outlook* 97 (1911): 34–35, Kittredge, “Experiments with School Lunches,” 177.

²⁰Edward F. Brown, *The School Lunch Service in New York City* (New York: New York City Department of Education, Division of Reference and Research, 1914), 6.

²¹See, for example, Edward Beecher Hooker, “The Malnutrition of School Children and Its Physical and Social Consequences,” *The Clinique* 27, no. 10 (1906): 577–86, W. C. Hollopeter, “The School Child’s Breakfast,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 53, no. 21 (November 20, 1909):1727–30, E. Mather Sill, “Malnutrition in School Children in New York City,” *Journal of Home Economics* 1 (1909): 369–74.

more and more American children spending long hours away from home, Makechnie warned, “we cannot afford to systematically starve our children even by an indirect way, even in a mild degree.”²²

The SLC and other reformers acknowledged that providing free or low-cost meals only helped alleviate nutritional problems caused by poverty or lack of access to food, but malnourishment, noted one New York City physician, was “not merely a poverty problem, or a food problem, or even a medical problem. It is a problem involving adjustment between the individual and the environment in the broadest sense, and can be solved only by bringing to bear on any one case all the resources of the best medical, educational, and sociological teaching.”²³ Advocates for school meal and nutrition programs envisioned a holistic approach that combined supplemental feeding, nutrition classes, social work, community outreach, and classroom education. This application of scientific expertise and bureaucratic efficiency to address a multifaceted social problem reflected the ideological goals of Progressive reform more than the realities of urban politics.

This program was thus never fully realized anywhere in the United States, but the SLC, like many similar organizations, had tremendous success establishing and maintaining school lunch services, which quickly became popular with parents, teachers, principals, and the children themselves. In March of 1909, the SLC began a second lunch program at P.S. 21 (Mott and Spring Sts.), an elementary school with 2,100 pupils. P.S. 21 lay at the heart of Little Italy, just seven blocks north of the notorious Five Points, in an area settled largely by Genoans, Calabrians, Neapolitans, and Sicilians. The Italians were still relative newcomers in 1909: there were fewer than 20,000 living in New York City in 1880 but over half a million by 1910.

Because P.S. 21 had an exclusively Italian student body, the SLC employed an Italian cook and served meals congruent with Italian children’s tastes. One week’s menu included “minestra [minestrone] or cabbage stew, made with oil and garlic; lima beans (dried) and postu[sic]; rice and peas, cooked with oil or lard; lentils; cocoa and meat and potato sandwich; macaroni; and in addition each day two slices of Italian bread.”²⁴ In developing school meal programs, the SLC embraced different cultural diets. This evoked an agenda of health promotion—getting children to eat nourishing food—over one of

²²Horace P. Makechnie, “Problems in Feeding School Children,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 30, no. 2 (January 8, 1898): 56–57.

²³John L. Kantor, “Experience with a Class in Malnutrition: Work of the Malnutrition Clinic, Bowling Green Neighborhood Association, New York City,” *New York Medical Journal* 108 (August 10, 1918): 241–243.

²⁴Kittredge, “Experiments with School Lunches,” 176. “Postu” is likely a misspelling of *postum*, a toasted grain beverage marketed as an alternative to coffee.

cultural assimilation—getting children to eat more like Americans, which aligned with national policy recommendations.

Kittredge and her associates also instituted a new payment system. Each day before school began, they sold brass lunch checks, redeemable for one meal, for three cents each. Children too poor to buy lunch could receive checks from their teachers at no charge; charitable donations collected by the SLC defrayed the cost of those meals. Thus, when students lined up for lunch at noon, they each paid with an identical check, reducing the stigmatizing effects of receiving charity. Furthermore, distributing lunch checks in advance allowed the SLC to estimate demand on a day-to-day basis and communicate this to the cooks, reducing food waste and improving efficiency. Children could still purchase extra portions and sides for one cent each.

The SLC, despite its role as a charitable health organization, remained committed to a model of school meal provision based on the exchange of currency, a significant difference from the state-sponsored programs common in Europe.²⁵ According to American social theory, pride would prevent even very hungry children from accepting charity. Emma Winslow, a home economist at the New York Charity Organization Society, argued that if you "deprive a person of the function of spending," then "you make that person poor indeed."²⁶ Even at schools without meal programs, some teachers found ways to feed needy children without hurting their pride. "The schoolteachers in P.S. 20 appointed two of us each day to clean up after their lunch in the science room," recalled a Jewish boy who grew up on the Lower East Side. "I got the point a few years later. We thought they had 'neglected' a couple of pieces of cake and two, half-full cups of coffee, but of course they wanted us to have it, without actually calling it to our attention. 'Saving face' was a big thing on the East Side."²⁷

Between March and June of 1909, the SLC served nearly 9,000 lunches at P.S. 21.²⁸ Principal John Doty had nothing but praise for the program:

²⁵By the first decade of the twentieth century, England, France, Holland, and Switzerland had passed national legislation authorizing school authorities to provide meals in schools, and local initiatives were common in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Norway. These school meal programs were publicly funded, with meals sold to children who could afford them and given free to those who could not. As in the United States, this school meal development resulted from the high rates of malnutrition reported by medical inspectors in the military and in schools, the passage of compulsory education laws, and urbanization combined with the consolidation of schooling.

²⁶Emma Winslow, as quoted in Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 122.

²⁷Harry Golden, *Ess, Ess, Mein Kindt* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 86.

²⁸Kittredge, "Experiments with School Lunches," 176.

In my judgment, the quality of food served . . . has been excellent. It has been well chosen to suit the taste of the children and at the same time to provide, as far as possible, the kind and quantity of nourishment needed. The improvement in dietary over that formerly provided by push carts and street peddlers has, I believe, been the cause of a distinct physical improvement in the children, and through this of a corresponding increase in mental activity.²⁹

The evidence of success at P.S. 51 and P.S. 21 was not all anecdotal. Among the children diagnosed as malnourished by school physicians, one hundred forty-three took lunches regularly and eighty-one never did; after three months, medical inspection records showed that the children eating the school lunch had gained three times as much weight on average as the children who never ate the meals.³⁰ Serving food was also financially viable, incurring a deficit of just \$425 per school year to be supplied by charitable contributions. Kittredge theorized that an increase in attendance would make the programs self-sustaining, as the per-child cost of food and service would decrease.³¹

In 1912, the SLC expanded to sixteen members, including the nurse and social activist Lillian Wald and Thomas Wood, Professor of Physical Education at Columbia University. After hiring more cooks and helpers, the Committee initiated lunch programs at six additional elementary schools in Manhattan, the maximum number they could manage. Three of the six schools to gain a lunch service—P.S. 34 and P.S. 92, both elementary schools with 3,700 students between them, and P.S. 120, a special school for boys with 120 students—were on the Lower East Side, the most densely populated slum on earth, in an area inhabited mostly by Jewish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants. The SLC utilized the kitchen of P.S. 92 to prepare meals for all three schools, which were only a few blocks apart. Of the remaining three schools, P.S. 106 was in Little Italy, P.S. 107 was in an ethnically diverse, working-class neighborhood in the western part of Greenwich Village, and P.S. 11 was in a Chelsea neighborhood composed largely of Irish dock workers and laborers. Superintendent of Schools William Maxwell chose the locations based partly on need—that is, schools with high numbers of malnourished or impoverished children—and partly on whether one school could serve as a central kitchen, preparing meals not only for its own students, but also for those of neighboring schools, as most New York City public schools did not have kitchens.

²⁹ *Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1912), 186.

³⁰ Louise Stevens Bryant, *School Feeding: Its History and Practice at Home and Abroad* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913), 150, Dunbar, "Three-Cent Luncheons," 36.

³¹ Kittredge, "Experiments with School Lunches," 176–77.

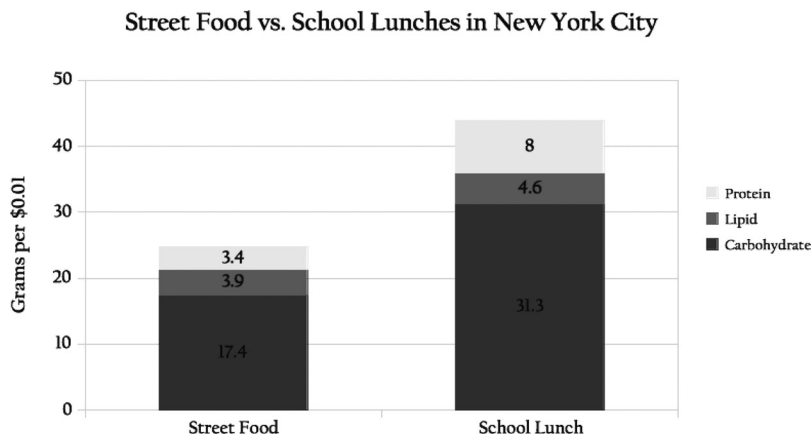


Figure 1. Comparison of street food and the New York City School Lunch Committee’s school lunch based on nutrient content per penny spent. Source: Louise Stevens Bryant, *School Feeding: Its History and Practice at Home and Abroad* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913).

To ensure the success of the newly established school lunch programs, the SLC focused on two issues: the dangers posed by commercial food vendors and the cultural tastes of the children. The Committee competed directly with the street peddlers and other purveyors of food whom students patronized during the lunch hour. Children who could not return home for lunch—typically referred to as “shutouts” because their homes were locked up while their parents were at work—often bought meals from bakeries, corner stores, and lunch carts. Social workers from the Russell Sage Foundation observed that boys on the West Side often ate “at least one meal a day in the streets. . . . Crushed fruit and stale cakes and rolls are sold to children at half price, and the stalls provide candy which . . . is usually adulterated. But the boys care for quantity rather than quality.”³² Researchers from the Nutrition Lab at Teachers College, Columbia University, discovered that at one public school, children tended to buy one of four different lunches: “A tiny frankfurter and roll, costing one cent; a Swiss cheese sandwich, costing two cents; two small bananas and two long licorice ‘shoestrings,’ costing two cents; [or] two frosted cup cakes, costing three cents.”³³ They analyzed these meals and found that the school lunches prepared by the SLC offered twice the nutritional value per penny spent (see Figure 1).

³²Ruth S. True, *Boyhood and Lawlessness* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1914), 75.

³³Bryant, *School Feeding*, 248.

Food safety was also a serious concern. One storekeeper “advertised a keg of cider for sale at one cent a glass.” When asked why the price was so low, he said the cider was so rancid that “nobody but the children would buy it.”³⁴ Thus, to “beat the pushcart man at his own game,” the SLC endeavored to match the wares being offered. “When he offers tempting sugared apples on sticks, so do the schools; when he has spice cakes in fascinating shapes, spice cakes are as like as not to be found on the luncheon tables. But the school apples are good apples, the school sugar is pure sugar, the school spice cakes are nourishing spice cakes.”³⁵ The SLC theorized that while children would tend to choose foods based on taste rather than healthfulness, careful menu planning could supply both. Once again, the anecdotal data supported the usefulness of this approach for health and education. One school had kept a medicine chest “ready for use because of the ill-effects of the push-cart diet. Since the committee had taken charge it had not been needed.”³⁶

In addition to competing with commercial food vendors, the SLC catered as much as possible to the children’s religious needs and cultural tastes; they strove “always to give the children the food-stuffs of their race, but it is quite as strongly emphasized that the lunches be made up of the best and most nourishing that the nation’s menu has to offer.” Because the SLC’s lunch programs operated largely on receipts, their success was linked to their popularity with the students. “We must constantly cater to the child’s whims in order to have the lunch counter receive the three cents rather than the candy store,” Kittredge observed, because “the child’s taste is not always in accord with the most nourishing food at the least price.”³⁷

By providing ethnically preferable foods, the SLC hoped to make the school lunches as attractive to the children as the foods available in the neighborhoods, even going so far as to recruit cooks from within the communities themselves. In Italian districts, only Italian cooks “who know how to cook macaroni with oil and garlic, as the children like it,” were employed. When Kittredge cooked the soup one day at a predominantly Italian school, a little girl said to her, “You Americans take all the nerve out of our macaroni.” Kittredge reasoned that “only an

³⁴True, *Boyhood and Lawlessness*, 75.

³⁵Kittredge, “School Lunch Problem,” SM6. See also Donald B. Armstrong, “The Hygienic Features of School Lunches,” *New York Medical Journal* (September 18, 1915): 604.

³⁶“Two-Cent Luncheon Delights Roosevelt,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1913, 1.

³⁷Kittredge, “School Lunch Problem,” SM6, Kittredge, “Experiments with School Lunches,” 177.

Italian can season to suit the Italian child."³⁸ Irish children, who would "not eat their soup thick," were served clam chowders and plain soups with bits of meat.³⁹ Schools in Jewish neighborhoods had Jewish cooks who prepared only Kosher meals, as the kitchens were periodically inspected by a rabbi.⁴⁰ At all the schools, meat substitutes were available on Fridays in deference to Catholic tradition. The SLC promoted nutritional health by taking an approach to feeding children that was individualized rather than promoting a universal diet. Although Kittredge and her colleagues utilized and promoted nutrition science in planning the menus, they did not take a completely utilitarian view of food, seeking to modify rather than supplant the diets of their mostly immigrant pupils.

Responses from the principals of all eight schools with lunch programs were uniformly positive. Word spread quickly, and the administrations of eighty more elementary schools wrote the SLC requesting lunch programs of their own.⁴¹ Because of the tremendous interest, the SLC hoped that the Board of Education would assume responsibility for the work, for the SLC lacked the resources to expand the program, could not integrate it into the larger educational mission, and had no authority to ensure that it became a permanent element of public schooling. The SLC planned to cease operations at the end of the 1912–1913 school year, "meanwhile doing all in [its] power, through a campaign in the Press and by personal appeal, to urge the Board of Education to take over the work and extend it."⁴² Superintendent of Schools William Maxwell lent his support to this proposal, but the Board declined to bring school meals into its official purview.⁴³ Although members of the Board expressed support for the programs, a change in attitude from just a few years earlier, they continued to maintain that lunch programs were a charitable endeavor and not something for which the city should take responsibility. The SLC, not wanting to

³⁸Mabel Hyde Kittredge, "Relation of Menus to Standard Dieters," *Fourth International Congress on School Hygiene* vol. V (Buffalo, NY, 1913), 313.

³⁹Ira S. Wile, "The Relative Physical Advantages of School Lunches in Elementary and Secondary Schools," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Medicine* 14 (1913): 145–154.

⁴⁰Kittredge, "Relation of Menus to Standard Dieters," 313.

⁴¹Kittredge, "School Lunch Problem," SM6.

⁴²Letter from Margaret Anne Poole to Mrs. Ingram, November 27, 1912, "Community Service Society Archives," MS 0273, box 49, folder 325.2, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collection, New York, NY. See also *Shall the Schools Serve Lunches?* (New York: New York City Public Education Association, 1913), 1.

⁴³The superintendent was the highest administrative position in the Education Department, but the superintendent's role was to manage personnel and enforce (not establish) policy. Only the Board of Education, city hall, or the state legislature could effect permanent change in school policy.

abandon its work, chose to continue providing meals for children in the elementary schools as they had done for the previous four years.⁴⁴

The SLC's desire to transfer the pilot program to the Board of Education stemmed from several limitations. The Committee could not integrate the lunches into the larger educational program, linking them to nutrition lessons and physical education and coordinating medical inspection, social work, and the lunch service, nor could it effect structural changes to school policy, such as banning food vendors on school grounds or preventing children from leaving school during the lunch hour without parental permission. These drawbacks necessitated a fee-for-service model in which the SLC competed directly with commercial food vendors. Furthermore, a private organization had no access to public funds that could support a much larger program and could formalize state responsibility for school children's nutritional health. The Board of Education, had it decided to do so, likely could have implemented many if not all of these changes, as it was given fairly broad power over the operation of schools and the governance of education. State lawmakers, however, had enacted no legislation specifically enabling school boards to operate lunch programs using public funds, which made the issue of legality unclear.⁴⁵

While there is no record of education authorities in New York City discussing the legality of school meal programs, it was an issue that arose in other cities. Most states gave boards of education fairly broad powers to oversee public schooling, but programs that were not strictly educational, such as many public health initiatives, fell into something of a gray area. Indeed, different legal authorities interpreted the powers of school boards in different ways. "It is frequently a very difficult matter to state clearly just what is an educational purpose for which the expenditure of public money will be justified," attorney Frank Hamlin told the Chicago Board of Education in 1908. "I do not think there can be any question, however, about the fact that it would not be lawful for the Board of Education to undertake the feeding of children directly, and to expend money for that purpose."⁴⁶ In contrast, when the St. Louis Board of Education requested an opinion on the legality of

⁴⁴ *Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1912), 186–89.

⁴⁵ Prior to the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, only Wisconsin and Vermont specifically authorized school boards to supplement the cost of meals for poor children using public funds. See Everett C. Preston, *Principles and Statutory Provisions Relating to the Recreational, Medical, and Social Welfare Services of the Public Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1935), H. M. Southworth and M. I. Klayman, *The School Lunch Program and Agricultural Surplus Disposal* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1941).

⁴⁶ *Reports on Underfed Children* (Chicago, IL: Board of Education of the City of Chicago, 1908), 3.

supporting a lunch service in the Central High School in 1903, attorney F. N. Judson gave a far less restrictive response. Given the distance many students traveled between home and school, Judson argued, it was “a reasonable and proper action on the part of the Board” to establish a department to administer a lunch program. As long as the Board did not provide meals free of charge, he continued, the plan would be

free from any objection, and in my opinion does not violate the character or rules of the Board. The fact that experience may develop a deficit which would require an appropriation from the Board to make good in the operation of this department, constitutes no objection, as such a deficit would be clearly incidental.⁴⁷

The issue, as most legal authorities framed it, was not about whether school boards could *operate* school lunch programs, but whether (or to what extent) they could *subsidize* them. Lacking specific authorization from the state legislature, this created a de facto separation of public and private responsibilities. School authorities could provide equipment, water, power, and other infrastructural support, and indeed, maintenance and operation of education facilities was explicitly assigned to school boards in most cases. In contrast, the purchase of food remained a solidly private responsibility; underwriting the cost of feeding children directly was widely regarded as beyond the powers of school boards (*ultra vires*, in legal terms). Labor costs tended to fall somewhere in the middle: some school systems provided menu planners, cooks, or servers, others did not. This created incentives for cooperation between public and private entities: private organizations could not retrofit schools or change education policy, and boards of education could not subsidize meals with public funds.

The New York City Board of Education was doubtless aware of the dubious legal status of school meal programs, which were still in their experimental stage, but popular support only grew stronger. Seeking to expand the service without the Board’s help, the SLC joined the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), a well-funded charitable organization working to better maternal and child health. In 1913, Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, founder of the Milbank Memorial Fund, endowed the AICP with a large trust for the purpose of expanding school lunch services. The SLC used this windfall to add lunch programs to nine additional elementary schools.⁴⁸ The Committee, in consultation with Superintendent Maxwell, chose

⁴⁷ *Printed Record of the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis* (January 12, 1904), 286.

⁴⁸ On the history of the AICP, see Dorothy G. Becker, *The Visitor to the New York City Poor, 1843–1920: The Role and Contributions of Volunteer Visitors of the New York Association*

schools in the immediate vicinities of the eight with already established lunch services (see Figure 2). Clustering the schools in this way allowed the SLC to prepare meals in four central kitchens before distribution to each school, reducing the cost of labor and equipment. Nevertheless, the newly expanded system required 45 paid workers and additional labor secured through special contracts, all of whom were paid with receipts from the sale of food and the AICP's endowment.

As a part of the expansion, the SLC employed a dietitian who ensured that each dish met the criteria of the committee. The food served could not "offend religious or racial preferences," be "injurious to child development," or "fall below the Committee's standard of food value," and all meals were to be nutritionally "balanced." The SLC also worked with schools to supplement the lunch services with "parents' meetings, demonstrations, exhibits and similar activities which seek to bring home the practical lessons of food economy."⁴⁹ For example, Principal Harriet Tupper of P.S. 95 prepared charts for a Child Health Exhibit that showed how school lunches improved both attendance and classroom performance.⁵⁰ Although these supplemental activities were conducted ad hoc, the SLC hoped to elicit more community support for the school lunch movement to increase utilization of the programs and ultimately make them a permanent, publicly funded service of the city's schools.

The SLC also received assistance from the New York City Health Department, which performed chemical and bacteriological tests on the food to ensure its quality and safety and determined the nutritive content of different dishes.⁵¹ This was, however, the extent of the Department's involvement. "Provision should be made, both by educational methods and by some community provision," Commissioner of Health Haven Emerson wrote to Kittredge, "to make it possible for [malnourished] children to receive proper and nourishing food," but the Health Department, though supportive, never took a more prominent role in financing or administering the programs.⁵² Like the health departments of other U.S. cities, the New York City Health Department had only

for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, State Charities Aid Association, and New York Charity Organization Society (DSW Thesis, Columbia University, 1960), Lilian Brandt, *Growth and Development of AICP and COS* (New York, 1942), John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City, 1866–1966* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1974), Chapter 17.

⁴⁹Brown, "The School Lunch Service in New York City," 13.

⁵⁰*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1912), 187.

⁵¹"Lunches for School-Children," *Outlook* 112 (1916): 361.

⁵²Letter from Haven Emerson to Mabel Hyde Kittredge, June 4, 1917, "Community Service Society Archives," MS 0273, box 49, folder 325.2, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collection, New York, NY.



Figure 2. Map of Manhattan showing the locations of the School Lunch Committee's first eight lunch programs (circles) and the nine lunch programs added in 1913 (squares).

a tangential role in school meal programs, supporting the efforts politically and through school medical inspection and food testing, but not taking a direct role in the planning or implementation of the lunch service. This was likely due in part to the Health Department's prioritization of contagious disease control and in part to jurisdictional tensions between the Board of Health and the Board of Education.⁵³ Although the Board of Education repeatedly declined to assume responsibility for continuing and expanding the SLC's efforts, there is no evidence that the Health Department ever attempted to do so in its place.

Just five years into the experiment, the SLC's school lunch programs were thriving. During the 1913–1914 school year, the SLC served 24,000 children 1.25 million portions of food at a deficit of less than \$5,000.⁵⁴ In fact, the net deficit was only \$0.00037 per portion of food.⁵⁵ The success of the programs attracted the attention of former president Theodore Roosevelt, who arrived unannounced at P.S. 95 on the Lower East Side to have lunch with the children. Roosevelt paid two cents for a cup of bean soup and an egg sandwich; he was so impressed with the program that he promised to work for legislation that would explicitly authorize the Board of Education to supply lunches at cost for students. (This never came to pass.) Roosevelt also noted the difference between the schools with lunch programs and those without. At one of the latter, he observed that “the children have to eat what they can get off the push carts, and it speaks volumes for their digestive powers that they don't die at once.”⁵⁶

Faced with the continued need for private funding, Superintendent Maxwell, who had been a staunch advocate for school meal programs, lobbied the citizens of New York in 1914 to donate money for school meals. Some of the city's wealthiest and most prominent residents, including John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and S. R. Guggenheim, as well as numerous other philanthropists, contributed over \$18,000 to purchase new equipment and to provide free lunches for children who could not afford to pay for them.⁵⁷ This private generosity was matched by public funding appropriated by the Board of Aldermen. In January of 1915, the Board of Aldermen issued a bond for \$26,500, “the proceeds whereof to be used by the Department of Education for alterations in the equipment of public schools in the City of New York,

⁵³On the transition of control of school health services from boards of health to boards of education, see Luther Halsey Gulick and Leonard P. Ayres, *Medical Inspection of Schools* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1908), 142 ff.

⁵⁴Brown, “The School Lunch Service in New York City,” 9.

⁵⁵*Annual Report of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor* (New York, 1914), 106.

⁵⁶“Two-Cent Luncheon,” 1.

⁵⁷*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1914), 174–76.

in order to make such schools suitable for the furnishing of nourishing lunches to school children at cost." The Board of Education approved the request and estimated that the bond would be sufficient to outfit sixty schools, ten of them with central kitchens, serving 120,000 children. After the superintendent's office identified suitable sites, the bond subsequently enabled the SLC to operate lunch programs at forty-nine elementary schools in Manhattan and the Bronx. The Board's Committee on Elementary Schools, however, upheld the position "that the serving of lunches by the Board of Education in school buildings is not a function of the Department of Education," arguing further "that there is no need for a universal service of lunches in the schools."⁵⁸

In essence, the Board of Education was willing to facilitate school meal programs—retrofitting and equipping kitchens, providing water and power—but remained unwilling to fund them or manage them despite increased pressure from the SLC, AICP, Board of Aldermen, and health authorities, including the Board of Health and the New York Academy of Medicine's Committee on Public Health. Although the Board resisted such pressure, it did begin to take on more responsibility in limited ways. In 1915, for example, the Board of Education managed the dispersal of the aforementioned funds. The Board distributed a circular to principals, offering to subsidize the cost of providing free meals to needy children. Though warning of the dangers of pauperization, the Board nonetheless offered to support the decisions of principals in distributing charity. "The principals are desired to issue free [one-cent] tickets to those who are found, after careful investigation, to be unable to pay. Free tickets should be furnished to the destitute without the knowledge of other children. Bills covering the amount of the free tickets issued should be sent to [the Treasurer of the Board] at the close of each week." Between January and June of 1915, over 300,000 of the nearly 850,000 children to eat school lunches received free tickets for all or part of their meals, suggesting considerable need for the programs.⁵⁹

Agitation from community members, health authorities, and charity organizations for the Board of Education to assume more responsibility for school meal programs intensified further during World War I. S. Josephine Baker, director of the Health Department's Bureau of Child Hygiene, argued that malnutrition rates had increased sharply as a result of rising food prices; food cost over 60 percent more in 1917 than it had in 1907, but wages had increased less than 20 percent in the same period. Despite extremely low rates of unemployment and numerically high salaries, many families could not afford the same amount

⁵⁸*Journal of the Board of Education of the City of New York* (February 1, 1915), 233 and (April 14, 1915), 649.

⁵⁹*Ibid.* (August 11, 1915), 1396–98.

and quality of food as they had previously.⁶⁰ Based on data from school medical inspections, the Bureau estimated that while only 6 percent of children exhibited symptoms of malnutrition in 1915, by no means an insignificant number, 11 percent did in 1916, and over 21 percent of New York's school children were malnourished in 1917. Some of this increase was an artifact of changes in diagnostic and surveillance procedures, but there was no dispute that malnutrition remained a substantial problem.⁶¹ Dismayed by the poor care given children, Baker remarked that it was "six times safer to be a soldier in the trenches of France than to be born a baby in the United States."⁶²

The draft board examinations produced further concern. Of the over three million young men who applied for military service in 1917–1918, more than 30 percent were rejected on medical grounds; the fifth leading cause of rejection was underweight, and 8 percent of those rejected for medical reasons suffered from some physical, developmental defect.⁶³ Surgeon General Rupert Blue and other health authorities drew a clear connection between many of these defects and chronic malnutrition during childhood.⁶⁴ Although statisticians and epidemiologists cautioned against exaggerating the importance of the findings—the purpose of the examinations was to evaluate men for soldiering, not basic health—the results revealed widespread ill health among men in the prime of life. Nor were such poor results likely limited to men: "No one doubts that if such tests had been made of our young women," remarked one health authority, "even a greater percentage of physical defects and insufficiency would have been disclosed."⁶⁵

Deeply concerned about the state of children's health, both the New York City Health Department and the New York Academy of Medicine's Public Health Committee urged the Board of Education

⁶⁰S. Josephine Baker, "The Relation of the War to the Nourishment of Children," *New York Medical Journal* 107, no. 7 (February 16, 1918): 289–92.

⁶¹*Annual Report of the Board of Health of the City of New York* (New York, 1918), 126–28, "Underfed Children Problem in Schools," *New York Times*, December 23, 1917, 18. On the changes in diagnostics and surveillance of malnutrition, see Ruis, "Children with Half-Starved Bodies," 388–89.

⁶²S. Josephine Baker, *Fighting for Life* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1939), 170.

⁶³Frank R. Keefer, "Causes of Army Rejections: What Health Officers Can Do to Remedy Conditions," *American Journal of Public Health* 10, no. 3 (1920): 236–39. See also *Defects Found in Drafted Men* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1919), Frederick L. Hoffman, *Army Anthropometry and Medical Rejection Statistics* (Washington, DC: National Research Council, 1918).

⁶⁴Rupert Blue, "Are We Physically Fit? United States Handicapped in Coming Period of Commercial and Industrial Competition," *American Journal of Public Health* 9, no. 9 (1919): 641–45, Taliaferro Clark, "The Need and Opportunity for Physical Education in Rural Communities," *American Physical Education Review* 24, no. 9 (1919): 436–43.

⁶⁵Alice H. Wood, "Nutrition Classes in the Chicago Schools," *Modern Medicine* 2, no. 5 (1920): 388–92.

to establish a special division that would oversee school meals and nutrition education and to contribute public funds to the effort. Prominent health authorities, including the pediatricians Abraham Jacobi, L. Emmett Holt, and Henry Chapin, and Chairman of the Parks & Playgrounds Association George Battle, supported making school meals a publicly funded service. The New York Federation of Labor and the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York both endorsed a public lunch program and urged the Board of Education to support these efforts. Even the traditionally conservative *New York Times*, a Republican newspaper with distinctly antisocialist leanings, implicitly sanctioned the proposal in a series of articles published in 1918.⁶⁶

This widespread public pressure for greater municipal involvement ultimately convinced the Board of Education to assume responsibility for the city's school meal programs. In 1918, the SLC scaled back its lunch service to forty-four schools, maintaining programs only in the schools most in need, to facilitate the transfer of oversight to the Board of Education. To support the transition and promote expansion, the Board of Aldermen approved a \$50,000 bond, available at the beginning of 1919, to create a Bureau of School Lunches in the Department of Education. The SLC considered its work to be done, having successfully demonstrated the importance and viability of school lunches, having secured community support for the endeavor, and having transferred management to the Board of Education, "where it logically belongs."⁶⁷ This satisfaction, however, proved premature.

Despite the large appropriation made by the Board of Aldermen for the purpose of expanding school lunch service in New York City, the Board of Education failed to act. In January of 1919, the Child Health Organization had generated a report, written by the Philadelphia school lunch expert Alice Boughton, offering a plan and specific recommendations for how to utilize the \$50,000.⁶⁸ After several months of inaction by the Board of Education, the Board of Aldermen adopted the following resolution:

⁶⁶*Annual Report of the Board of Health of the City of New York* (New York, 1918), 159–61, "School Luncheons before Aldermen," *New York Times*, February 15, 1918, 9, "May Favor School Lunch," *New York Times*, March 26, 1918, 6, "Plea for School Lunches," *New York Times*, August 9, 1918, 6, "Nation's Duty to Preserve the Health of Children," *New York Times*, August 11, 1918, 31.

⁶⁷*Annual Report of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor* (New York, 1919), 22.

⁶⁸Alice C. Boughton, *Suggested Program and Recommendations for an Experiment in School Feeding to Be Conducted by the Board of Education of the City of New York* (New York: Child Health Organization, 1919), "Community Service Society Archives," MS 0273, box 50, folder 325.2, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collection, New York, NY. As early as 1913, the SLC had presented the Board with a plan for directing school foodservice in the public schools. See *Shall the Schools Serve Lunches?* 5.

Whereas, the Board of Aldermen views with great concern the delay of the Board of Education in instituting in the public schools of this city a system of school lunches, which this Board on several occasions has advocated and an appropriation of \$50,000 for which was made in the Budget for 1919; and

Whereas, Complaints have been made to this Board that the Board of Education has unduly delayed in putting a proper school lunch system into operation.

Resolved, That the Committee on General Welfare be and it is hereby instructed to arrange an immediate conference with the members of the Board of Education, with a view to securing such action as will put a proper school lunch system into operation promptly and expeditiously, and this Board further requests the Board of Education to defer action on the adoption of any school lunch plan until such conference with the Committee on General Welfare has been had.⁶⁹

At the meeting, which included members of the Health Department and the New York Academy of Medicine's Public Health Committee as well as representatives from the SLC, Commissioner of Health Emerson "spoke of the necessity of developing school lunch work, and facetiously remarked that if the Board of Education did not see the way clear to develop it with any vision, it had better be turned over to the Board of Health."⁷⁰ Emerson's proposal, facetious or not, was never seriously considered.

Not only did the Board of Education not implement a plan to expand school meal programs, but it had neglected even to maintain the programs that the SLC had already established. Between 1917 and 1919, most of the schools lost their lunch programs; only fourteen of the over sixty once operated by the SLC still remained. Instead of centralizing and expanding the school lunch program, the Board of Education abdicated responsibility and awarded foodservice contracts to concessionaires, over whom the Board exercised virtually no oversight. The concessionaire system, though it may have contributed to some children's nutritional health incidentally, was little more than a profit-driven enterprise. The Board established no health mandate or nutritional requirements, nor did it ensure the availability of reduced price or free meals for poor children.

This resulted in part from major changes in city politics that adversely affected school lunch programs. After two unsuccessful attempts, Mayor John Mitchel enacted legislation in 1917 to reduce the

⁶⁹ Letter from Bailey B. Burritt to Albert G. Milbank, March 21, 1919, "Community Service Society Archives," MS 0273, box 49, folder 325.2, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collection, New York, NY.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

size of the New York City Board of Education from forty-six members to seven; most major cities had already done so to improve managerial efficiency. Based on the wording of the legislation, the winner of the 1917 mayoral election would also have the power to appoint all seven members, and the subsequent election of John Hylan marked the return to power—after a twelve-year hiatus—of the Tammany Hall Democratic political machine. Hylan appointed seven men to the Board of Education, none of whom had significant experience in civic or educational affairs. The new mayor exercised a heavy hand, expecting the Board to be subordinate to his wishes and serve as a source of patronage; granting exclusive rights to sell lunches in city schools was a lucrative form of political capital.⁷¹ By 1926, school lunchrooms in New York City were generating half a million dollars in business during the school year, as much as half of which went to the concessionaires.⁷² Instead of selling lunches to help subsidize free meals for poor children, as was common practice in nonprofit arrangements, such as the SLC’s, this was a business model, generating profits for the concessionaires and the Board of Education.

But the Board of Education also made other changes to the school lunch service. In the few schools not seceded to concessionaires, the Board made no effort to provide meals in accordance with racial or religious preferences, instead serving the same food at all schools. The menu for one week in April 1921, served in every school in Manhattan and the Bronx, was as follows:

Monday: Cocoa, buttered roll, stewed corn, stewed prunes.

Tuesday: Cream of pea soup, peanut and cottage cheese sandwich, brown Betty with lemon sauce, fruit tapioca (apricots or peaches, syrup served on top).

Wednesday: Vegetable soup, baked beans, vanilla cornstarch with chocolate sauce.

Thursday: Lima bean and tomato soup, buttered roll, cream tapioca, rice pudding.

Friday: Cocoa, salmon sandwiches, sliced fruit, and oatmeal cookies.

⁷¹John C. Gebhart, *Malnutrition and School Feeding* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, 1921), 14–18, E. H. Lewinski-Corwin and Elizabeth V. Cunningham, *Thirty Years in Community Service, 1911–1941* (New York: New York Academy of Medicine, 1942), 89, Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 195–96, 228–30.

⁷²*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1926), 188–89.

In addition, bread, milk, crackers, and candy could be purchased on any day.⁷³ Gone were the ethnic dishes of the Italians, Jews, and Irish; instead, schools citywide served a fairly bland, “American” menu containing less meat and less variety than the menus of the SLC.

This decision, the justification for which was not recorded, ran contrary to the recommendations of health and education authorities. Most organizations, both private and governmental, continued to advocate ethnically diverse menus. The U.S. Bureau of Education advised that local school authorities investigate the meal preparation techniques and food consumption habits of foreign-born populations, and suggested “where there is a fair representation of certain nationalities among the pupils, some of their national dishes should be served at school.”⁷⁴ The National Child Health Council urged that lunches be “prepared according to the tastes of the nationalities involved.”⁷⁵ Even the programs developed in New York state’s rural schools embraced foreign cookery: “When there are foreign-born children in the rural school, the noon lunch becomes a method for teaching them American cooking. On the other hand, the foreign-born may enrich our knowledge of cookery by teaching us their own methods of preparing food.”⁷⁶ Despite prevailing expert opinion, New York City ceased providing meals sensitive to ethnic preferences in favor of a standardized “American” menu.

The impact of the change in menu on participation in school lunch programs is difficult to assess, as detailed participation records have not survived (or were not kept). Although the experiences of the SLC suggested that providing ethnically appropriate foods was an important element of the success of the school lunch programs, it is not clear just how important it was, and the relationship that immigrant children had with food was complex.⁷⁷

Some immigrant children rejected American foods in preference for more familiar ones. Leonard Covello, an Italian immigrant who grew up in East Harlem, found that the “white, soft [American] bread

⁷³Gebhart, “Malnutrition and School Feeding,” 13–14. For more such menus, see Rowena Wellman, “Feeding Ten Thousand Underweight Children,” *American Food Journal* 20, no. 2 (1925): 76–77.

⁷⁴James P. Hornaday, “School Lunch Is Important,” *Bedford Gazette*, October 1, 1920, 3.

⁷⁵*Health for School Children: Report of Advisory Committee on Health Education* (Washington, DC: National Child Health Council, 1923), 30.

⁷⁶Mary G. McCormick, *The Rural Hot Lunch and the Nutrition of the Rural Child* (Albany, NY, 1919), 2.

⁷⁷On the history of immigrant foodways, see Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

... made better spitballs than eating in comparison with the substantial and solid homemade bread" to which he was accustomed. Other immigrant children, in contrast, rejected the foods that signaled their foreign origins. A desire to assimilate led them to forsake the customs and traditions of the Old World and embrace the promise and opportunity of the New World. "I avoid Italian boys and girls who try to be friendly," wrote John Fante of his childhood in New York City. "After the lunch hour I huddle over my lunch pail, for my mother doesn't wrap my sandwiches in wax paper, and she makes them too large, and the lettuce leaves protrude. Worse, the bread is homemade; not bakery bread, not 'American' bread. I make a great fuss because I can't have mayonnaise and other 'American' things."⁷⁸ Food was both a significant form of rebellion—eating that which is forbidden is a powerful way to reject tradition—and an equally significant cultural anchor, identifying the consumer with a particular religion, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status.

Whether the abandonment of culturally sensitive menus affected the popularity of the public school lunch programs is impossible to say, but it likely did; by 1925, the Board of Education was managing only twenty-eight lunch programs (nineteen in Manhattan, seven in Brooklyn, and two in the Bronx), fewer than half the number that the SLC had run a decade earlier in Manhattan and the Bronx alone.⁷⁹ The schools used four standard menus in weekly rotation, so that every child had identical food choices on any given day. Twice as many elementary schools (fifty-three) had concessionaire-run lunch programs operating for profit, up from zero just ten years earlier.⁸⁰

Two years later, with no indication that this situation would change, Mabel Kittredge joined with members of the city's medical, educational, and charitable organizations to found the School Lunch Inquiry Committee (SLIC). Representatives of the New York Academy of Medicine, the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association, the American Child Health Association, the Children's Welfare Federation, the Public Education Association, the Teachers' Union, the United Parents' Association, and the Woman's City Club of New York pressured the Board of Education to change its lunch service policies. They took the Board to task for leaving "the actual selection and preparation of the lunches served ... to a business manager to decide instead

⁷⁸John Fante, "The Odyssey of a Wop," *American Mercury* 30, no. 12 (1933): 89–97.

⁷⁹The SLC had a separate subcommittee for Brooklyn and Queens, which was operating approximately twenty lunch programs as late as 1917, but virtually no records of its activities have survived. See *Annual Report of the American Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor* (New York, 1915), 85, Gebhart, *Malnutrition and School Feeding*, 17.

⁸⁰*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1925), 281.

of being under the complete control of a skilled dietitian.”⁸¹ The SLIC even accused the Board of graft at the expense of the city’s children. Not only had the number of schools with publicly funded lunch programs remained well below what the SLC had managed a decade earlier, but inspections showed “a distinct deterioration in the quality of food provided and of the equipment.” Despite the increased provision in the budget for school meals—from \$50,000 in 1919 to \$78,000 in 1927—the city’s school children were not benefiting.⁸²

As a result of pressure from the SLIC, the Board of Education requested an additional \$10,000 for the school foodservice budget and agreed to phase out concessionaires. In 1927, the Board ceased to grant permits for privately operated lunch services and resolved that “concessionaires who are now operating in schools shall be shown due consideration, but as soon as practicable their services shall be discontinued.”⁸³ During the 1928–1929 school year, the Board repaired and refurbished equipment and increased the number of publicly funded programs to thirty-four, planning to add and maintain ten new programs every year if at least 20 percent of each school’s pupils utilized the service. For the first time since taking over management, the Board also established dietary standards: individual bottles of milk were to be available to all children; “white” bread was not to exceed 50 percent of all bread sold; at least half of the desserts had to be fruits; candy—restricted to hard candies and chocolates—had to be purchased with food; pie, tea, and coffee were prohibited; and no bottled beverages (except milk) could be sold without specific authorization from the Board.⁸⁴

Despite the Progressive ideology of private innovation spurring public incorporation, school lunches in New York City, which were tremendously successful as a private, nonprofit endeavor, fell victim to political corruption, the diversity of competing interests that shaped education and social policy, and fundamental disagreement over the balance between public and individual responsibility for children’s nutritional health. Although ultimately rescued by aggressive lobbying and public demand, the city’s lunch program remained less developed than those in other large cities, and it lost its distinctive characteristics, in particular the diversity of the menus and the ideology of an

⁸¹“School Lunch Protest,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1927, 24, *Annual Report of the New York Academy of Medicine* (New York, 1926), 173.

⁸²“School Lunches are Called Unfit,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1927, 21.

⁸³*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1927), 351, “Moves to Reform School Lunch Plan: Situation Called Acute,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1927, 7.

⁸⁴*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools* (New York, 1929), 213–14.

integrated school and community nutrition program.⁸⁵ The kind of program originally envisioned by the SLC, which combined nutrition and health education, meals, social work, community outreach, and epidemiological research, never materialized.

The limbic nature of school lunches in New York City reflected uncomfortable ambiguities in social theory, policy, and law when education intersected with public health and social justice. Reformers saw in schools the potential to reach large numbers of children, far more than charitable public health and social welfare programs could otherwise reach, but they also regarded schools as an institution that could do far more than educate America’s youth. The school was an ideal site for such work, for it had extensive contact with children and parents, it was integrated into state and local bureaucracies, and it already possessed much of the necessary infrastructure. But as schools tried to provide more than education, they became a contested site in debates across a wide range of social and political issues.

Even as schools were radically expanding their social role—adding facilities such as playgrounds, gymnasias, and lunchrooms; expanding the curriculum to include hygiene, home economics, manual arts, and physical education, as well as special classes for disabled children; developing new programs, such as after-school sports and clubs; and incorporating new personnel, including nurses and medical inspectors—much of this expansion, especially with respect to health programs, occurred in the liminal zone where public and private responsibilities were least clearly distinguished. Just as school physicians could diagnose but not typically treat children’s ailments, boards of education found in most cases that they could facilitate child feeding but not fund children’s meals. School meal programs, in New York City and elsewhere in the United States, were thus hybrids of public and private forces, and the details of that hybridization were negotiated according to local needs and pressures.

⁸⁵ Interestingly, New York City recently reinvented this approach to school lunches. See Kim Severson, “School’s Toughest Test: Cooking,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2009.