



What's for Lunch?: A History of the School Lunch Program By LuAnn Soliah

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What was your favorite school lunch? Maybe it was the popular chili and cinnamon roll combination sometimes referred to as “a bowl and a roll.” Regardless of what it was, chances are you attended a school that provided lunch. Did you ever wonder how this came to be?

The early beginnings of school lunch in the United States take us all the way back to before World War I. In fact, school lunches started in elementary schools about 170 years ago. As early as 1853, The Children’s Aid Society served meals to children at various schools in New York City. In the Midwest and beyond, children ate sack lunches or were dismissed from school to return home for lunch. As early as 1900, hot lunches were served in Boston schools. As time went by, community school boards and concerned citizens decided to hire Home Economics professionals to manage a school lunch program. The goals of the program were to provide a simple, wholesome meal for about 3 cents per meal.

By the mid-1920s, school lunches were gaining considerable momentum and increasing in both quality and frequency, but then in the 1930s, the Depression occurred, and the school lunch program was diminished in both size and scope. In 1935 and 1936, some improvements were implemented, and community citizens were hired to once again prepare school lunches.

The primary goal of early school lunch programs was to merely feed the children. Nutrient specifications came along with the passing of the 1946 National School Lunch Program. Certain rules had to be followed for a school to be an active participant in the program—for example, schools had to follow various nutrient requirements, offer free/reduced cost meals, using agricultural commodities, and keep records of food purchases. As time went by, the National School Lunch Program continued to evolve --the 1965 Milk Authorization clause came along and the Pilot Breakfast program was also launched. By 1970, Free and Reduced Price Lunches became routine using published income guidelines for participation.

Today’s school lunch program is more elaborate, and the menu requirements fluctuate based on nutrition research. There is an emphasis on proportion, variety, balance, and moderation. The overall food selection is based on the need to moderate kilocalorie intake without losing nutritional value. What’s your favorite school lunch? Let us know by tagging Humanities Kansas on Facebook or Instagram.

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