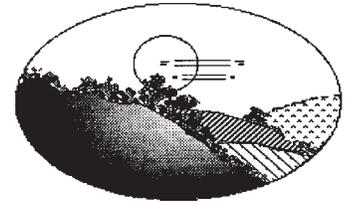


The Germinator

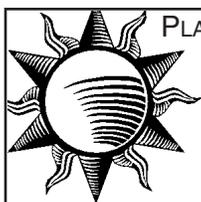


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Summer 2006
Volume 27 • Number 3

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

President's Column	3
Keeping Members	
Up-to Date	4
Newsbriefs	7
Homegrown	12
Cooking Corner	13
Livestock Pen	14
GMO Roundup	19
Local Foods	20
Classifieds	22
Calendar	23



PLAN TO ATTEND THE
**NPSAS
SUMMER
SYMPOSIUM
&
FARM TOUR**

July 12, 2006 • Carrington, N.Dak.

Hosts include:

- Carrington Research Center
- Lewis Seibold (FBC Plots)
- Dakota Pasta Growers
- Ernie & Ann Hoffert
- Pipestem Creek/Sun Florals
- Reimers Seed

See page 9 for more information.

Valued Meals

by Karen Ehrens

Several times a year, I make it a point to eat school lunch with my second grade daughter. It's a pretty typical meal for a school in a large school district. Most of the food reaches the facility in a form that is already processed in some way. Each child takes an individual meal served on a disposable foam tray. Because the children have only about nine to eleven minutes to eat once they sit down, a lot of food gets tossed into the garbage.

The meals at the school my daughter attends are okay. I have probably experienced one-third of the school meal programs in the state of North Dakota as part of my previous job. I could accept "okay" given all the challenges faced by schools in feeding children. But after I have seen what is possible in truly inspirational child feeding programs, I am convinced that "typical" or "okay" meals are not good enough for our children. There is too much to be lost by not feeding kids well at school or at home, namely their health. And the opportunity for children to enjoy the universal experience of eating together, not just eating individual meals at the same table, is missed.

This spring I had the opportunity to travel to France to experience first-hand a school lunch program that appeared almost too good to be true. Over 95% of the food came to the school in fresh form. Instead of wrinkling their noses, the children enjoyed a beautiful ruby-red fresh beet salad. They sat together in small groups, served each other, and had 45 minutes to savor the food and each others' company. In another school in the Southern part of the country, the children were able to experience a different kind of cheese with lunch every day for a month. This is a very different culture from the USA where children's palates might recognize only two kinds of cheese: American and mozzarella.

These two schools are in France, with its reputation for fine food and where meal experiences are valued. There is recognition of the places from where the food comes and of the people who grow the food. Sure this was in France, but good food in schools is possible here in the United States, too.

Maybe you have heard about the high school in Berkeley, Calif. where more kids are choosing

Continued on page 21.



Valued Meals

Continued from front cover.



food offered from the salad bar than are choosing pizza. The school's nutrition director, who was trained as a chef, is completely overhauling the meal system. She is replacing the typical school cafeteria food like white bread, pizza and chicken nuggets with whole-wheat rolls, fresh produce, and even grass-fed beef.

In still another school in Marblehead, Mass., kids are getting excited about school meals. The foodservice director is cleverly folding nutrition education into tasty international meals. Children learn about how people from other places on the globe eat, which supports what is taught in the classroom. Kids get the opportunity to help make and taste new foods from around the globe.

Common values

All the schools I have mentioned share some things in common. First, they recognize that feeding children well is an investment in the future – not just the children's future, but also in the future of society. Second, they recognize that this cannot be achieved on \$2.00 a meal, which must cover all the costs of meals including labor, storage, transportation, clean-up and planning. Finally, these programs share support from the school administration and the local community.

The citizens of the French town named Challans invested local taxes in a first-class food preparation facility and in a highly-motivated and trained leader. The chef working in the high school to make massive changes? Her salary is supported by a philanthropic foundation. The school where eating is supporting learning? It is a charter school where the parents get involved and come in to help with meals and other special events, and support the school financially.

How do we get there?

But how do we get from typical, or "not bad," to good, great or even inspirational? I believe it will first take convincing school leaders that the meal is an essential part of the school day, not just a large inconvenience that interrupts classroom learning. Many school administrators across the country encourage families to make sure their children eat a good breakfast on test days. What about all the other days of the year, the days when children are learning the things on which they will be tested? Well-nourished children tend to be better students, while poorly nourished children tend to have weaker academic performance and score lower on standardized achievement tests. Feeding kids well supports learning.

If we truly want to change the way we feed children, we must take a hard look at the attributes of food valued in the United States – cheap and fast. That's how we end up feeding our children at school. Good food isn't cheap, and some of the only "fast food" that supports health is a piece of fresh fruit or vegetable. We need to move people to help them appreciate quality over quantity when it comes to food. We need to work to change the concept of the "value meal" to a valued meal. I know this will take a chorus of many voices coming together. But this chorus could have great implications for the American waistline, as well as the waste lines in school cafeterias.

We need to look at which foods are served, how they are served and how they are eaten. Family meals are falling by the wayside in homes even though studies show that the more often families eat together, "the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use."* Robin Fox, an anthropologist

at Rutgers University notes, "A meal is about civilizing children. It's about teaching them to be a member of their culture." Can we give children a chance to sit down and eat together with others who are significant in their lives at school? Can this happen in 11 minutes? Children need good food and the time to eat it.

The United States invests a good deal of money in the school meals program, but it doesn't appear to be enough to make a difference in the health of children or adults who ate at school as children. All the schools with great meal programs that I have mentioned have used additional funding. Some school districts in North Dakota do support the meals programs with school district funds above what the

meals programs take in and do provide good meals. There are many potential funding resources including public-private partnerships, grants, charging families more for meals, recognizing that school meals programs do not have to be money-making ventures, or perhaps even increasing federal funding. This is after all an investment in our future.

Finally, visit your local school meals program. Eat there. Get to know the people who make the decisions there. Appreciate the things that are going well. Point out ways you think that they might be improved. If things don't change, offer to help. Keep talking. Help children understand from where their food comes. At home, eat together and expose your children to new and different flavors. It is not just the responsibility of the school, nor is it just the responsibility of the family. It does take the whole village to raise and feed a child well. 🐦

* quote accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1200760,00.html>

We need to work to change the concept of the "value meal" to a valued meal.

Karen Ehrens is a North Dakota native and licensed, registered dietitian (LRD) who assists organizations and individuals improve health through moving more and eating well, making informed food choices, and improving the environment in which these decisions are made. She works with the North Dakota Department of Health as a program consultant with the Cardiovascular Health Program and, among other projects, teaches cooking classes with her husband, Duane, who is a chef.