



FoodHub in the News

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Online FoodHub Creates Community Centered Around Food

PORTLAND - Jodi Taylor is [nutritional services manager](#) for the [David Douglas School District](#). She is responsible for planning nutritional, healthy and tasty meals for over 10,000 students— three quarters whom receive free or reduced lunch — on tight budgets in 10 elementary schools, three middle and two high schools buildings never designed to hold such numbers. How does she do it?

The lunch lady gets a bad rap. Kids criticize cafeteria food for everything from its looks to ‘that’s not how mom makes it at home...’ Parents scrutinize the nutritional content of corn dogs. Administrators weigh headaches of implementation. In addition, they all take it out on the lunch lady.



Nell Tessman, left is a Health Educator for the Multnomah County Health Department’s Healthy Active Schools Program. Jodi Taylor, center, has worked in the David Douglas nutritional services department since starting as a dishwasher 17 years ago; she has managed the department for the past six years and David Douglas School District Wellness Coordinator Stephanie Manfre.

School lunches are a good meter to measure how Americans regard their food in general. During the early years of this country, most families ate meals prepared with fresh ingredients at home, and kids would take a recess from school to do so, whether or not they had food to go home to; many went without. In small communities, people would rally to donate items for the poor and indigent, but as populations grew and industrial cities replaced agrarian towns, more organization was necessary.

The Great Depression deepened both the problem and the cries to fix it. Simultaneously, increasing

poverty left industries, including farmers, struggling to find markets for their products. In 1936, Congress approved legislation to aid farmers by purchasing surplus food, thus removing price-depressing excess from the market. School lunch programs emerged as an obvious outlet to both help feed the hungry, and likewise dispose of the surplus in such a way as not to interfere with normal sales. By 1937, 15 states had passed laws specifically authorizing local school boards to operate lunchrooms.

World War II would subsequently drain surpluses, but, by then, the federal government had witnessed the benefits of school lunch programs, and when peace and prosperity returned, they sought to build on lessons learned. The House Committee on Agriculture Report released in 1946 found that, “The educational features of a properly chosen diet served at school should not be under-emphasized. Not only is the child taught what a good diet consists of, but his parents and family likewise are indirectly instructed.” That same year, the National School Lunch Act was passed “...as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States...in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs.”

Stipulations of the program required that the food meet minimum nutritional requirements, be served reduced or free of cost to low income students, and use commodities in abundance. The program aimed to fulfill 30 percent of a child’s dietary needs, but the knowledge of what that might consist of has shifted with research.

The program’s inception coincided with the introduction of ‘convenience foods,’ the tin can and TV dinners, all heralded as miracle solutions to the age-old dilemmas of food spoilage, and a godsend to anybody seeking to feed large groups of people with limited time, staff and equipment. As the pace of life accelerated, Americans’ home diet also came to mirror what one may find in any given cafeteria, ready-made heat and serve meals, grab and go individually packaged items without expiration dates, and convenience for all. Kids raised on convenience foods had kids raised on convenience foods while heart disease, diabetes and obesity rates grew.

New studies in nutrition, ensuing federal guidelines, and attempts to meet them did not help the lunch lady’s reputation any.

The debate over how to feed our nation’s youth continues with the same players who came to bat 80 years ago. The USDA, local health authorities and child welfare interests still rally around the lunch lady, and though her kitchens may be poorly equipped and her labor costs always a consideration, she has more tools at her disposal now with research, technology, and media at her side.

Jodi Taylor, the [nutritional services manager](#) for the [David Douglas School District](#), plans meals for roughly 10,000 students in buildings never designed to hold such numbers. Three-quarters of her students receive free or reduced lunch. Taylor has

neither the influence nor the scrutiny of Portland Public Schools, and unlike some other outlying districts, they do not use a contracted food service company. What she does have is some handy spreadsheets, a central kitchen for storage, distribution, and from which to prepare scratch items, and a supporting cast of government, non-profit and commercial entities.

Just as the Great Depression underlined the need for school lunch programs then, with more people falling into poverty today, revived concerns over the effects of poverty on child health, and the use of schools to both educate the population about nutrition and help farmers move product is in vogue.

The American Recovery and Investment Act provided money to the Centers for Disease Control for the Communities Putting Prevention to Work program, which granted \$7.5 million dollars to the [Multnomah County Health Department](#) to promote healthy eating through the [Healthy Active Schools Network](#), where representatives from the health department work collaboratively with school districts and community partners to reduce the availability unhealthy foods, increase the availability of healthy foods, and promote physical activity.

Malnutrition remains the primary concern, but what that looks like has drastically changed in the past 80years. Inconceivable to our American ancestors, a major symptom of today's malnutrition is obesity. Malnutrition is defined as inadequate or unbalanced nutrition. Thanks to the efforts of the school lunch program, food banks and other outreach services, the United States has heavy defenses in place to combat the former. The latter, however, has become an epidemic.

The David Douglas School District serves breakfast, snack, lunch and dinner, ensuring food security for children who may not have a predictable pantry at home. Breakfast is served at all schools completely free of charge. The nine Schools Uniting Neighborhoods school programs in the district also serve dinner. The commitment to combat hunger continued over the summer, when the district distributed sack lunches at three parks. All programs must adhere to strict nutrition standards in order to receive federal funding, and though some children may have all their meals provided, the majority of kids still do most of their eating at home. What they are eating, where it comes from and how they eat it however, has changed.

The popularity of convenience foods led to their prevalence, their prevalence enabled producers to cut deals with suppliers, the savings of which they passed on to customers, further increasing their popularity which further cut costs to the point that McDonalds can sell a full meal for a fraction of the price it would take to assemble the same meal from even the cheapest retail ingredients. High fat and calorie convenience foods satisfy the taste buds, quench hunger, and save time and money, a one-stop solution for busy parents. Unfortunately, fast foods have a negative nutritional value and have distorted an entire generation of Americans' views of food.

At its core, [Healthy Active Schools](#) is part of a larger public awareness program to combat the advertising that drives our food choices. The Communities Putting

Prevention to Work media campaign sponsors billboards advertising the sugar content of soft drinks, for example. However, in order to compete with convenience foods, health officials must advertise alternatives that are also inexpensive and easily accessible. What is cheaper, healthier, more easily accessible and, as a bonus, more versatile than fresh produce?

Some kids are fussy eaters and others are not, but certain food aversions derive directly from our ready-made society. Kids can recognize packaging, but will be suspicious of raw ingredients. (A funny paradox because packaged foods could contain a shopping list of unfamiliar ingredients while a carrot is a carrot.) Therefore, health officials aim to introduce fresh foods using the same technique as the competition. Taylor, with the help of Healthy Active Schools and a program focused on promoting Oregon produce through the Oregon Department of Education called Oregon Harvest for Schools, are working on visually familiarizing kids with their options from Oregon farms by distributing posters and fliers featuring pictures and facts about local produce. Taylor also notifies staff members of new lunchroom items so they may incorporate them into their lessons.

Taylor believes in order for kids to actually understand the potential of a new food item, they must first meet it raw so they know what it tastes like. Last school year she introduced asparagus and rhubarb on the variety bar. (While David Douglas students may receive only one entrée, they can eat their fill at the variety bar, which Taylor stocks with fruits and veggies.) Some staff criticized the raw presentation, preferring the items dressed to make them tastier. However, some common preparation techniques mask the true taste of the food. For example, we tend to associate rhubarb with sweet desserts, when in fact it is quite sour. Such preparations may limit a child's understanding of the food's potential.

School lunch content has always fueled healthy debate, but until recently, few outsiders have analyzed how food sourcing governs their cafeteria choices. For a program founded by the cooperation of agricultural and educational interests, sourcing remains a factor; and just as research in nutrition sways cafeteria content, changes in our approach to agriculture play a role. Policy makers consider local sourcing as a way to balance the ecological and economic challenges facing today's agriculture industry, and on the pint-size scale, feeding kids local food both reunites them to the reality of how foods are produced and shows where it can be found.

To this end, Taylor, along with her Portland Public Schools counterpart and others throughout the state, participate in the National Farm to School Network, started by another collaboration of non-profits, of which Portland's Ecotrust serves as the Western Regional lead.

Officially established in 2007, [Farm to School](#) connects schools with local farms to increase the variety and availability of healthy foods served at school while spotlighting regional food producers, and educating kids where real food comes from. Oregon currently leads the region in its Farm to School efforts. Not only do programs from Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and Washington follow [Ecotrust's](#)

lead, Oregon is the only state in the nation with Farm to School positions in both departments of Education and Agriculture. This year the state legislature passed The Farm to School and School Garden Bill, which appropriates \$200,000 to the Oregon Department of Education to administer a competitive grants pilot program. The majority of the funds will reimburse certain school districts an additional 15 cents per school lunch to buy Oregon foods, while 12.5% will support school garden teaching activities.

To feed thousands of students with local food, Taylor cannot simply take a truck to a farmer's market and start loading. For years, the catalog offerings of large food distribution companies have dominated cafeteria trays. Wholesale buyers only need to place one order and everything from rubber gloves to apples arrives at their door. While convenient, this puts buyers at the mercy of who the company has decided to feature and what products they pick up, when a larger variety of fresher produce may reside nearby.

In order to increase accessibility to local foods, and help local farmers move larger blocks of product, [Ecotrust](#) established [FoodHub](#), an online marketplace called the "Craig's List" of food, that connects wholesale buyers and sellers of Pacific Northwest grown food. Everyone from buying clubs, caterers, schools, food banks, grocers, healthcare facilities, hotels, restaurants and more, can log onto their account at [food-hub.org](#) and browse through a directory of farmers, ranchers, fishermen, dairies, manufacturers, brokers and wholesale distributors, both organic and conventional, from California to Alaska to as far east as Montana.

[Ecotrust](#), founded in Portland in 1991, aims to create economic opportunity, social equity and environmental well-being by integrating public and private, for-profit and non-profit purposes and structures. [Farm to School](#) and [FoodHub](#) fit snugly within its mission. As Farm to School lead, Ecotrust organizes outreach efforts to both schools and farms, and assists school food service directors with questions about seasonality, competitive bid pricing, and negotiating with farmers.

[FoodHub](#) features an extensive list of farmers and working with schools may be new to some. FoodHub buyers can seek a case or hundreds of cases, and to this end, their suppliers run the gamut from small producers with limited product to those looking to unload their overstock. Taylor sifts through her options. "Finding someone who has 300 pounds of asparagus all at once isn't easy," she noted. "Same as apples, we want 36 cases of apples at 150 per case." Now try to unload that crop at a farmer's market. Fresh produce has a short shelf life, and farmers with something to sell want to get it out the door as quickly as possible. Once a relationship is established, farmers know whom to call if they have more than they know what to do with. Since Taylor advertises her local sources, the farmer gets plenty of free advertising out of the deal as well.

Taylor began using [FoodHub](#) two springs ago. After featuring local strawberries, rhubarb, asparagus, blueberries, apples and pears on the variety bar, she has now gained the confidence to feature the items on the menu. This September, look for local watermelon and peaches.

Taylor found FoodHub easy, almost too easy. “Once I got my name out there I had people calling me in my pajamas saying ‘Hey, I am coming over to that side (from eastern Oregon) with watermelon would you like some?’”



65 cooks on the David Douglas Nutrition Services Team (not all pictured) work in 16 schools with a total enrollment around 10,000. On an average school day, they prepare and serve 3,370 breakfasts, 7,600 lunches, 388 snacks and 384 dinners.

Right now Taylor uses [FoodHub](#) for specific produce only. Dairy and bread products, even in this mass-marketed world, have always remained local. The lack of ample refrigeration at David Douglas schools is prohibitive to the storing and handling of raw meat products, so meat and other hot entrees — with the exception of the pasta dishes which Taylor’s staff makes from scratch using enriched pasta at their central kitchen — are purchased ready-made through a competitive bid process subject to strict health standards.

With the help of computer programs, Taylor weighs the nutritional value of every manufactured item destined for the cafeteria, grading it on salt and fat content, flavor, appearance and price. “Each one has a point value,” she explained, “say I have five pizzas, which one I am going to buy is not necessarily the cheapest or tastiest because you have to take other things into account.”

She then adds the selected entrees into a larger spreadsheet that computes all the nutrients of each lunch, ensuring the students get the proper amount of calories, fiber and nutrients under the allowable amount of sugar, salt and fat, and posts these statistics on the website.

“My biggest challenge is getting parents to understand that when they see pizza on the menu what is in it,” Taylor said, “yes it says hamburger, but it is a low fat low sodium hamburger and if you look at the nutrition, it is not the same old hamburger.” At David Douglas, a ‘corn dog’ is a whole grain low-fat baked corn dog. Pizza is the most popular menu item. The way it is prepared and served at David Douglas schools, pizza is not only whole grain with low-fat mozzarella and turkey pepperoni, it also is made locally. “Whenever we have had a parent worried about what we are serving I tell them to go

online and if you have any questions call me back. I have not in four years got a call back.” Taylor said.

She knows students judge her job by different criteria. “It has to be something that a kid will eat because it is not nutrition until the kids eat it,” she said. Most liked the local raw asparagus paired with Ranch dressing, and when Taylor introduced a fruit, granola and yogurt parfait at the high school, they sold up to 200 servings per day. When they announced local blueberries were coming to the cafeteria, their Facebook page received a record amount of thumbs-up.

“[Farm to School](#), SUN and other programs have been a great step for the district in providing healthy foods to the students,” commented Nell Tessman, Multnomah County’s Healthy Active Schools team lead. “Portland Public Schools are highlighted as being on the cutting edge of Farm to School — what Jodi has been able to do she has done with the limited resources of this district — and I think that is really an impressive effort.”

Jodi’s budget is separate from David Douglas. The National School Lunch program reimburses her on a per-meal basis, and she juggles the higher cost of quality foods by managing her labor more effectively.

Healthy Active Schools, Communities Putting Prevention to Work and other programs seek to shore up Taylor’s work. One such program aims to increase access to drinking water by stationing jugs with cups for kids to take back to their seat rather than expecting them to walk over to the one water fountain if they want a drink. Initiatives are also underway to spark discussion over appropriate treats to serve at class parties and other extracurricular events. Taylor, herself has implemented easy to use checklist criteria for validating vending machine and student store content.

Moreover, if you think a birthday party is not a birthday party without cupcakes, Stephanie Manfre, David Douglas’s wellness coordinator assures you, “There is no restrictive language. It is not a ban but encouragement, so if you bring cupcakes maybe also bring some strawberries.”

David Douglas recently applied to join [Team Nutrition](#) schools, a USDA program that assists administrators, teachers and food service staff to create a health-promoting school environment. It links healthy food service and preparation with nutrition education and community support. They also look forward to participating in the Healthier US Schools Challenge, a voluntary initiative established by the USDA in 2004 to recognize National School Lunch Program schools that have created healthier school environments through promotion of nutrition and physical activity. Schools submit applications and may win monetary awards for their efforts.

Every recognition brings more attention to the Healthy Active Schools initiative, which operates on limited grant funding. Though they know, they will not have the money to

run the program indefinitely, participants hope that by incorporating healthy eating policies into school culture now, they set a baseline for future standards.

Taylor plans her menus four months ahead. So what is new for this school year? In addition to the local fruit scheduled for September, and the local apples and pears scheduled to celebrate the first ever National Farm to School month in October, Taylor's cafeterias will soon offer fresh sustainable Northwest fish in the form of fish tacos, fish sticks and a fish wedge that looks like battered fish but is baked and actually flakes apart like fish should as opposed to the over processed fish meal which just turns to mush. They also procured a new yeast strain that works better with wheat bread, so they can now incorporate more whole wheat into their house made breadsticks without weighing them down. Other returning favorites include a sweet and sour chicken teriyaki over rice, and a chili whose popularity surprised everyone. Taylor chalks much of it up to influence, "I think it has (more) to do if the popular kid liked it."

Negative influences also carry heavy sway. Children heed the opinions of not only other kids but also other adults in their life who may not practice healthy eating at home. However, kids are not as set in their ways as adults, and by introducing them to new tastes, habits and flavors at school may reinforce healthy eating habits from the youngest family member up.

Chronic diseases tend to run in families, and though genetics play a role, so do habits handed down through the generations. Combating ailments caused by inactivity and a poor diet takes cultural change, and the younger generation will decide the culture of the future. Encouraging physical activity discourages laziness and complacency; educating students about gardening builds awareness of food origins, its availability and potential. Teaching healthy eating habits is just one-step in the effort to ensure that these children's children will not suffer from the same chronic diseases as their grandparents. Score one for the lunch lady.

URL: http://midcountymemo.com/memlog/lunch_lady/