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Hard to Swallow: The Scandal in the Lunch Program Isn't About Pizza

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

At first glance, the facts seem to tell the story: Last week, the principal of Alice Deal Junior High School in Northwest Washington was placed on administrative leave with pay for the unauthorized selling of pizzas to his students. The D.C. inspector general said the principal, Reginald Moss, had used the \$ 44,000 in "profits" for staff stipends, Christmas gifts, landscaping and other school-related expenses.

But based on my research into the nation's school lunch programs, I doubt this is the whole story. Senior administrators were well aware of such pizza sales at schools throughout the District. So is this a question of abuse? Or should we be applauding the entrepreneurship of D.C. principals?

Either way, I suggest the real villain here is the \$ 5.8 billion federal school lunch program, which is increasingly burdened by rigid rules, riven by special-interest groups and almost immune to criticism. The program now delivers meals that many kids do not want to eat. Who can blame principals—who want their students to eat lunch without leaving the school grounds—for offering an alternative? And if these off-the-books food sales can generate "profits" for other school needs, so much the better.

Three years ago, I visited a D.C. high school as part of my study. A senior administrator from the lunch program accompanied me. Although I was a stranger, members of the school staff told me quite matter-of-factly that the principal's office sold pizza and other foods every day and that the "profits" were used to fund other school activities. But I am getting ahead of the story.

I arrived about noon. More than 100 students were lined up in the cafeteria waiting for lunch. The line moved slowly because only five people were working behind the counter. About 45 minutes later, the last student was served. I asked why there were not more servers to move the line faster and was told that it would be too expensive. The servers had originally been volunteers and part-time workers. But over the years, that had changed because of union and political pressure. The servers were paid between \$ 10 and \$ 14.50 an hour (more than equivalent to private-sector pay) for seven hours of work, although they were needed for about three hours a day. As one of our guides put it, "We are running an employment program, not a feeding program."

From a distance, the food had looked quite appetizing, if a bit heavy: fried chicken, chicken nuggets, meatball subs, french-fried potato curls, bright yellow corn bread, macaroni and cheese, and green beans in butter. A salad bar was also available, but the choices were limited—mostly brown lettuce, some beets and various mayonnaise-smothered salads.

I sampled some of the food, which turned out to be so greasy and salty that it was hard to eat. When I said something negative about the taste, I was told "that's how our kids like it." I don't think so. As I found out from a former school cook, the problem was careless preparation. For example, the frying oil was not kept hot enough, so the food absorbed oil the way a sponge soaks up water. Perhaps that's why some of the kids with free-lunch tickets (given to lower-income families) were selling them for 25 cents.

But many students didn't come to the cafeteria at all. They headed for the principal's office—where, I was told, pizza, hot dogs and various snacks were available. They were sold there to avoid any entanglement with federal school lunch rules. I was told—proudly, I might add—that the sales revenue was used to buy sports equipment and other school items. The senior administrator from the central office was standing next to me at the time.

D.C. students are not the only youngsters who pass up school lunches. Nationally, about 56 percent of students eat what the schools offer. The percentage of high schoolers, who have more choices than younger students, is even lower—about 40 percent. In surveys, the prime reason students give is that they "do not like the food."

New federal school nutrition regulations, although well-meaning, have made things worse. In recent years, federal officials have tried to transform the lunch program from one that makes sure poor children get a nutritious meal to a paternalistic effort to reshape the eating habits of American children. Their desire to improve the nutritional content—and lower the fat and sodium—is laudable. But such meals are much more difficult to prepare, and unless they are done with great skill, can be simply unappetizing to many young people—even those not brought up on McDonald's, Pizza Hut and other fast foods. As any parent who has tried knows, young people cannot be forced to eat foods they do not like, especially if they are allowed to leave the school grounds to find alternatives.

So, when principals sell pizza and hot dogs, they are responding to strong student preferences. If they do not, the young people in their care will leave school to buy lunch (if they are old enough and it is an open school), bring lunch from home or not eat at all.

One way around the federal nutrition rules is to add so-called "a la carte" choices. All over the country, principals are putting such items (commercially prepared pizza, for example) on their lunch menus. Why didn't Deal's principal simply add pizza to his school's a la carte menu? Probably because he thought that doing so would have required him to funnel the proceeds back into D.C.'s bloated school lunch program, thus losing an important source of money for the other pressing needs he faced.

So it is understandable that principals around the country have brought in food from the outside. But breaking or bending the rules is not a good solution. Procedures tend to be informal: no competitive bidding, no written contracts and incomplete bookkeeping. Worse, providing alternative food choices takes the pressure off the school system to improve its basic meal service.

In 1995, congressional Republicans tried to revamp the federal school lunch program. They got their ears pinned back as their opponents successfully portrayed them as willing to let poor children go hungry. The Republicans learned their lesson: The school lunch program has become a sacred cow whose problems cannot be openly discussed. That's too bad, because we need a new recipe for federal food aid.

I don't know whether Deal's principal broke the rules or the law, but I do know this: Many school lunch programs don't deliver a meal that kids will eat. I hope this larger "scandal" becomes a part of the continuing controversy.

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