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Lunchtime Lesson: Healthy Menus, Healthy Minds

by Dorothy Mullen



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It wasn't the kids complaining about no soda at the school picnic; they were happy turning the new squirt top water bottles into water pistols. It was the parents. By the mid-1990s, I had given up any ideas I'd had about improving what my children were given to eat at school. It was easier to deal with the fall out of being mean and not letting them eat cafeteria food or go to all the events.

In 2001 I started two projects that provided escape valves for my pent up food frustration. One was the garden at Riverside Elementary School; the other was research that led to designing the Suppers Programs. I figure I was serving the same audience — eaters — working on the prevention side with school children and practicing harm reduction with the adults. This many years later, school gardening is well established in Princeton, and Suppers provides more than 30 events each month to adults who are suffering the consequences of eating processed food.

I am grateful for this invitation to reflect on how attitudes around food and health have changed in the past 20 years.

Like many parents before me, I had worked on small school gardening projects over the years. When my youngest, Claire, was two years away from leaving Riverside School, I leapt into what became one of the most progressive school gardening programs in New Jersey, which was itself one of the more active states in school gardening in the country. My motivation at the time was food security and health, but I was acutely aware that a school garden had to lead with education and learning. With the support of principal Bill Cirullo and a few teachers, we started developing lessons that satisfied both needs.

Most of the published lessons I saw for wannabe school gardeners seemed dull, pencil-dependent, and incompatible with our schedule. I wanted to create something abundant, something resilient and beautiful, something that would stand up cheerfully to the trampling of 50 kindergarten feet and produce eating experiences at the same time it was teaching lessons the teachers could relate to. I wanted children to feel ownership and joy, of course, but I also wanted them to feel that it's average to grow up surrounded by edible plants.

For a decade or so, the children of Riverside School — and all the elementary schools in the district — have grown up assuming that schools have gardens and that they learn and eat there. There hasn't been an official relationship between the gardens and the cafeterias, but as school gardening became blessed by the district and funded in part by PTOs and a growing Princeton School Gardens Cooperative, the students were at least eating the food during classes and special tasting events. Much of the activity was supported by businesses,

notably the Whole Earth Center.

While all of this was going on, I was also studying nutrition on my own and getting a degree in counseling at the College of New Jersey. I didn't want a degree in nutrition. The greater problem in my mind was that people need to pay attention to what they already know but ignore. That landed me in a masters degree program in addictions counseling, and I applied a lot of what I learned about motivating change to working with students.

In the intervening years, official science has developed a compelling data base of evidence suggesting that sugar operates on the same brain pathways as cocaine. Princeton University Professor Bart Hoebel, who died three years ago, devoted much of his career to researching the addictive nature of sugar and corn syrup in rat studies. In other studies, modern wheat and dairy products are increasingly implicated for their affinity for the same receptor sites in the brain as morphine. Low blood sugar, which is something most people experience in the years prior to the diagnosis of type 2 diabetes, is now more commonly assumed to mask as learning issues. And in 2009 a former commissioner of the FDA charged manufacturers of processed foods of all stripes for their power to addict and therefore sell (David Kessler, MD, *The End of Overeating*).

As more and more people in the community embraced gardening, my self-styled mission to save the world with vegetables got easier and easier. I got a real boost when veteran kindergarten teacher Linda Bruschi stated at a school gardening conference, "I don't know the first thing about gardening, but I know good education when I see it," and went on to explain how learning in the garden supported everything from language development to math skills.

Jennifer Bazin, who still teaches at Riverside, also became an advocate and developed lessons that are now going into a database of district garden lessons. Once the kindergarten teachers grabbed the wheel, the connections between food and education unfolded like a story that had already been written and just needed uncovering. Counting, categorizing, tallying, exploring, recording, creating, and testing hypotheses, and using nature for inspiration in art and writing all ended with an opportunity to taste and eat.

Parents and teachers across the district have advanced garden-based education in more and clever ways. Karla Cook [the food writer], Diane Landis, and Fran McManus [marketing director of the Whole Earth Center] developed Garden State on Your Plate with a \$25,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. They arranged school-wide produce tastings, helping elementary school children connect what they experience and learn in the school gardens to the way that produce is used and valued in the cafeteria and the community. In the process, many of the children were trying vegetables they had never heard of before.

Community Park School had a garden resident and a food and flavor resident this year in addition to science and classroom teachers using the garden. Food and flavor resident? That's what pediatrician, mom, and school gardener Stephanie Chorney called it. We wouldn't even have had the words to describe that a few years ago. At Littlebrook School, garden parent Amy Mayer describes building community around teaching kids about good food. Littlebrook garden educator Priscilla Hayes has engaged members of the community in garden projects; Shirley Satterfield and Henry Pannell, along with representatives from Terhunes, McCaffreys, Tiger Noodles, and Princeton University, prepared and introduced students to food made from garden produce.

Elizabeth White, the garden parent at Johnson Park Elementary School, reports that her school held a mid-year search for a new Garden Educator and "was impressed by the diversity in age, interests, and experiences of the applicants. There seems to be a growing desire to work in school gardens and with their children in an outdoor classroom. Schools have also come to understand the importance of the role of a Garden Educator in the educational experience of their students."

According to Karla Cook, the middle school cooking program builds on the food and garden-based education efforts now in place at all four elementary schools. "Students use produce and equipment from local growers and merchants — and their own edible gardens on campus — to learn the basics of growing a salad, reading a label, setting a table, and cooking for themselves and each other after-school at the JW Teaching Kitchens, under the direction of Chef Jen Carson and eighth-

grade science and environment teacher Janet Gaudino. Plans are under way to expand into a second six-week session for each semester of the 2014-'15 school year."

We made several efforts to get wellness policies to take root, but none resulted in ongoing wellness committee work, until about a year ago. The Green Schools Coalition started a dialogue with the Princeton Board of Education about the district's outdated wellness policy and its food service contract, which was up for renewal.

Over the fall and winter, the two groups worked together to define what "success" would mean for these two priorities. As a result of this collaboration — and because of new superintendent Steve Cochrane's interest in these areas — not only was a district-wide Wellness Committee formed, but also a new food service company was awarded the district's food service contract. Seven years and three efforts to create meaningful wellness policy in the district later, the environment surrounding food and health has shifted.

The imperative driving change has overtaken the inertia to keep things the same. Mia Sacks, the co-chair of the Green Schools Coalition told me their activities were rooted in the belief that the health of children is one of the most important investments a community can make. It must be a priority for all of those entrusted with their welfare and the capacity to directly impact their future well-being.

When Princeton accepted the bid of Nutri-Serve, we embraced a company that provides services exclusively to schools, serving 83 school districts in south Jersey. The company's institutional mission includes engaging students and staff in what's going on in the cafeteria. I met the owner, Karen Fynan, four years ago when she asked me to speak motivationally to 120 food service workers; she wanted them to advocate for school gardens in their districts. This was a very good sign. It also means we can expect that the produce grown in our gardens will actually make it into the cafeteria.

The culture is paying heavily for taking our eye off the ball with food, for leaving eating decisions in the hands of corporations whose obligations to their investors fuel the drive to make food more addictive. It sells. Feeling safe and secure is important for learning and

wellbeing so we lock the doors and clamp down on bullying. We know assessment is important for learning and so we test.

We protect children from all kinds of threats in our schools now, but I question how much safer they are. Parents can't walk into the schools like I could 15 years ago without video cam scrutiny and buzzing in. We pound them relentlessly with testing in the name of education. But the brains that we expect to do the learning are made out of what they eat, and we've been giving them the food version of cocaine in the cafeteria.

In the ideal world, we would follow the logic that the quality of the food affects the quality of the brain, that the quality of the brain affects the quality of the learning and therefore the quality of the food affects the quality of the learning. There's progress in that direction, but practice lags years behind the science that suggests the way. How much sense does it make that counselors and teachers get no nutrition education when what children eat so thoroughly affects their ability to learn? If I had a magic wand, I would establish garden and food-based education in the counselor and teacher preparatory programs.

Whatever happened to good old-fashioned home ec? I don't have anything against teaching STEM, but let's not chuck in the name of science children's basic need to function in the world with brains that are wired by physical experience and formed with the structural materials provided by what they eat.

We made a mistake devaluing traditional female services to their families and communities. It was too easy for budget pressures to turn home economics into trifling activities when cuts needed to be made. We had no idea when we sent women into the work force en masse that we needed to create adequate substitutes for the relationship services they have provided through the millennia. These food supply-driven epidemics of diabetes and learning issues are the logical conclusion of combining an addictive food supply with a vacuum where cooking and family tables used to be.

The shift that needs to take place next is sufficiently valuing home ec and what we used to call industrial arts for girls and boys. No matter how thoroughly attached they are to life on screens, they still have to

function in a physical world. I hold high hopes that the new food service, which leads with assurances that they want collaborative relationships, may enable some of this education to happen right in the lunch line. The kids at Riverside are already used to voting on recipes in the garden; it wouldn't be that hard to engage them in food awareness in the cafeteria too.

The Riverside School garden program is moving into the capable hands of Louise Senior, a Master Gardener and advisor to Eagle Scout candidates. I couldn't have left school gardening until I felt like it was in good hands.

I'm almost 60. I have to get ferocious about cooking before it's too late. If we don't grab the remaining people — mostly women — in their 50s and 60s who still know how to cook a meal and preside comfortably over a family table, I hold little hope for the culture. I've proven to my own satisfaction that kids eat good food if we give it to them; now we need the adults to make sure they get it.

For Adults, Too

Moving from school gardens to Suppers to cook ferociously full time, Dorothy Mullen is reaching out to people who need and/or can lead meetings.

Suppers is a network of meetings where people form community around a shared desire to cook and eat according to their intentions instead of their impulses. It serves people with issues related to blood sugar, mood chemistry, recovery, Celiac and other digestive disorders, as well as people who want to learn to prepare vegan, vegetarian, paleo or any style of eating that keeps the focus on whole, fresh, delicious food.

Suppers also serves parents grappling with family eating habits. It's summed up in a three-minute video: <http://vimeo.com/96033924>.

On the Cover

The cover photo of Dorothy Mullen was taken on the set of a forthcoming television show called "Cook for the Health of It," which is

expected to begin airing in November of this year.

The half-hour show, produced by Mullen, photographer David Kelly Crow, and Sharyn Alice Murray of Princeton Community Television, will include features on how people were able to eliminate or alleviate physical ailments through changes in diet. The show will be televised at the Terra Learning Kitchen at the Princeton Y, donated by the Princeton area restaurateurs, the Momo brothers.

For listing information visit the community station's website, www.princetontv.org.