



# **THE LABOR OF LUNCH**

**WHY WE NEED  
REAL FOOD  
AND REAL JOBS  
IN AMERICAN  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**JENNIFER E. GADDIS**

# **THE LABOR OF LUNCH**

## **CLASSROOM CURRICULUM GUIDE**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Pre-Reading Questions.....p.1

Introduction: Why We Need to Fix the Food and the Jobs.....pp. 2-3

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Chapter 1: The Radical Roots of School Lunch.....pp.4-5

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Chapter 2: The Fight for Food Justice.....pp. 6-7

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Chapter 3: From Big Food to Real Food Lite.....pp. 8-9

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Chapter 4: Cafeteria Workers in the “Prison of Love”.....pp. 10-11

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Chapter 5: Building a Real Food Economy.....pp. 12-13

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

Conclusion: Organizing a New Economy of Care.....pp. 14-15

Reading/Discussion Questions

Classroom Activities

A Brief Q&A with the Author.....pp. 16-21

Web-Based Resources.....pp. 22-23

# PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Before you begin reading *The Labor of Lunch*, write a short reflection paper about your own food habits. How were they shaped by your childhood?
2. What are the first things that come to mind when you think about the words “school lunch”?
3. What image comes to mind when you hear the words “lunch lady”? Do your best to create a simple sketch of this image. When you’re done take a moment to ask yourself where this image came from. Your own personal experience? The media? Cartoons?
4. Take a few minutes to reflect on your own experience eating lunch at school.
  - Did you bring lunch from home or eat lunch at school?
  - Did you participate in the US National School Lunch Program (NSLP)? You may not know the answer to this question. If you received free or reduced-price lunches you likely participated in the NSLP. If you paid full-price for your lunch you may or may not have participated. An easy way to tell is to ask yourself whether you stood in the same cafeteria line as students who got a “complete” meal (consisting of protein, grains, fruit, vegetables, and milk), or stood in an à la carte line and purchased whatever you wanted. If you purchased food from the à la carte line, you most likely weren’t participating in the NSLP. Instead, you were buying what people in the industry refer to as “competitive foods.”
  - If you are from another country did you participate in a different national or government-sponsored school lunch program?
  - What were your favorite/least favorite lunches?
  - How were you treated by the cafeteria staff?
  - What was the atmosphere of the cafeteria like?
5. How would you define “real” food? How would you define a “real” job? Why might it be important for school lunch activists to organize for real food *and* real jobs simultaneously?
6. What is your vision for the future of the NSLP? Dream big! Don’t let yourself be constrained by the pragmatics of money, resources, or political feasibility. Articulate your *\*ideal\** school lunch program. Think about dining atmosphere, nutritional quality of the food served, cuisine types, lunch cost, cafeteria staffing, etc. What might it take for us to build the collective power necessary to achieve this ideal?
7. Society cannot function without care, yet there is widespread disagreement about whether individuals or the government should be responsible for meeting the basic caring needs of the American population. There is also widespread disagreement about the quality of care that individuals/the government should provide. In your opinion, what does it mean for us to care well for ourselves? For each other? For future generations?

# INTRODUCTION: WHY WE NEED TO FIX THE FOOD AND THE JOBS

## Reading/Discussion Questions

1. Children who attend K-12 schools in the US qualify for paid, reduced-price, or free lunches based on their family's income. Most of the 30 million children who participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Another 20 million children (mostly from more affluent families) do not eat the government-subsidized school lunch. Do you think this is a good model? Why or why not? What would be the pros and cons of serving lunches to all children free of charge?
2. Gaddis presents stories of worker-led change and numerous statistics about frontline K-12 cafeteria workers. How, if at all, did this information change how you think about lunch ladies, the struggles they face, and their potential to lead the movement for real food and real jobs?
3. What does the premise that care work (also called social reproduction) should be cheap, if not free, imply about our societal or political values? What do you think is the driving force behind this mentality?
4. Doing the laundry, feeding families, helping children with their homework, managing their logistical and transportation needs, and worrying about their futures are examples of care work. List some examples of care work that frontline cafeteria workers perform and reflect on the importance of this work and why it has been undercompensated.
5. What is compromised when schools are pressured to cheapen the public care provided through the National School Lunch Program?
6. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines intersectionality as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups." How, if at all, do you see school lunch as an intersectional issue?
7. *The Labor of Lunch* discusses how Big Food companies have influenced school lunch and industrial food systems more broadly. In your own words, explain how the drive to keep food "cheap" has pushed companies to exploit both workers and the environment.
8. School lunch activists have recognized the need to organize for racial justice, environmental justice, and economic justice within the NSLP. In your own words, what are the major issues at stake within the NSLP with regard to racial justice? Environmental justice? Economic justice?
9. Do you agree with the author that labor needs to be at the forefront of the conversation surrounding school lunch reform? Why or why not? If you disagree, what issue(s) do you think should be?



# INTRODUCTION: WHY WE NEED TO FIX THE FOOD AND THE JOBS

## Classroom Activities

1. Based on the descriptions in the introduction and their own personal experiences, have students create a job description for a school cafeteria worker. Ask them to outline the physical, mental, social, and emotional duties a cafeteria worker is required to perform. Instruct them to share their job descriptions with 1-2 other students and to reflect on the similarities/differences they find.
2. Watch [Season 2, Episode 6 Privatization Problems](#) of Wyatt Cenac's Problem Areas. In small groups or as a class, have the students discuss their reactions to the show's depiction of school lunch. Do they think farm-to-school program's like the one Minneapolis created are a promising model for other communities to replicate? Why or why not?
3. Watch the "[Getting Your Hours](#)" video included in the supplementary materials for this book. In small groups or as a class, have students brainstorm a list of other jobs in the US that keep workers trapped in short-hour positions. Then, as a class, discuss the following prompts: Why are part-time jobs so prevalent in the US? Would it be a good idea to move to a shorter work week and provide everyone with some sort of baseline income as proponents of a [universal basic income](#) suggest? Why or why not?
4. Go on a field trip to visit a local school and eat lunch with the children. Talk with the cafeteria staff about their jobs. Have students document what they learn in a blog post or short podcast.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE RADICAL ROOTS OF SCHOOL LUNCH

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think caring for children has historically been viewed as a private rather than a public responsibility in the United States?
2. Material feminists believed that unpaid care work should be recognized and valued within capitalist economies. They brought the language and goals of labor organizing and trade unionism to individual women's homes. Why might they have gravitated toward this strategy? What other language/framings could they have used?
3. What obstacles did activists within the nonprofit school lunch movement encounter when trying to create and expand the nation's first public school lunch programs? How were these obstacles shaped by the gendered power dynamics of American society?
4. What historical events influenced the scientific and industrialized attitudes towards food production and eating that emerged during the Progressive Era? What were the benefits of adopting this mindset? Were there any drawbacks?
5. Caroline Hunt urged women to use their economic power to support ethical production practices and to organize together in a spirit of mutual aid. How can individuals practice this philosophy of conscious consumption today? What about communities?
6. What would your ideal school lunch program look like? How does this compare with the vision for school lunch that Emma Smedley put forward in the 1920s?
7. What hiring and management practices did Emma Smedley use to ensure that she had a group of highly skilled, professional, and purposeful leaders in the lunchroom?
8. What are the benefits of engaging children in food education at school? Consider John Dewey and Emma Smedley's perspectives when answering this question.
9. How have the goals of public school lunch programs changed since the 1890s? Think of nationalism, national security, nutrition, community building, education, etc. What do you think the goals of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) should be today?
10. Why did the federal government decide to provide free labor and commodity foods to nonprofit school lunch programs? How did this decision advance multiple interests?
11. How did communities come together to create nonprofit school lunch programs and Victory Gardens during World War II? Why were some communities able to access federal resources more easily than others?
12. In what ways is the history Gaddis tells in this chapter a "feminist" history? How does it differ from other historical accounts that you may have read?
13. What parallels do you see between the issues previous generations of school lunch activists faced and the issues that current activists face today?

# CHAPTER 1

## THE RADICAL ROOTS OF SCHOOL LUNCH

### Classroom Activities

1. Think-pair-share: What surprised you the most about the history of the NSLP as Gaddis tells it? What, if any, similarities do you see between the school lunch programs of the early 20th century and the school lunch programs of today?
2. Even before they won the right to vote, American women inserted themselves into public politics to advocate for collective solutions to social problems that were experienced at the individual level. *The Labor of Lunch* discusses the rise of “municipal housekeeping” and the broader political-economic project of material feminism. In small groups, have students discuss whether they think the ideas of municipal housekeeping and material feminism could help solve contemporary social problems. If so, what might this look like? If not, why not?
3. Ask students to compare and contrast the 1940s Victory Gardens with the backyard and community gardens of today. How do the school gardens supported by nonprofits like the [Edible Schoolyard Project](#) relate to these different models? Instruct them to develop a list of the economic, cultural, and public health motivations behind each of these models.
4. Arrange a classroom debate focused on the following position statement: Free school lunches disincentivize strong parental work ethic.
5. Have the students keep a [time-use diary](#) detailing any activities they do related to food procurement, preparation, consumption, and clean up. This can be done for a period of one day or up to a week. You may also choose to broaden the assignment to ask the students to document all forms of unpaid/paid care work, or reproductive labor, that they engage in. Ask the students to bring their time-use diaries to class and to look for similarities and differences. How does their own positionality, especially in terms of social class and gender, impact what their time-use diaries look like? What, if any, common struggles do they face when striving to care well for themselves (and potentially others) on a daily basis?



# CHAPTER 2

## THE FIGHT FOR FOOD JUSTICE

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. How did suburbanization and white flight from urban centers affect the development of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) from the 1950s through the 1970s? In what ways did this phenomenon exacerbate the structural racism and classism embedded within local implementation of the National School Lunch Act of 1946?
2. Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale explained the difference between a “reformist” program and a “revolutionary” program when defending the Free Breakfast for Children Program from critics. In your own words, what is the difference? Would you characterize the recent changes to the NSLP contained within the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 as reformist or revolutionary?
3. A national coalition of women’s organizations helped to fuel the expansion of the NSLP during the late 1960s and early 1970s during a time when many Americans worked together to push for social justice. In the years that followed, what caused the shift from outward-looking, collective care to inward-looking concern for one’s own family?
4. Do you believe it is more important for individuals to focus on outward-looking, collective care or inward-looking concern for their own families? Is it ethical to prioritize one over the other? Why or why not?
5. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz (1971-1976) was well-known for his pro-corporate policies and anti-environmental rhetoric. What, if any, parallels do you see between his directive for small family farmers to “get big” or “get out” and the transformations that occurred within the National School Lunch Program during this time?
6. Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez, Rachel Carson, Frances Moore Lappé are some of the leaders who changed the conversation about food during the 1960s and 1970s by drawing attention to labor and environmental issues. Based on the summary of their activism in this chapter and/or your own prior knowledge, come up with 2-3 ideas for how today’s food activists can utilize the values and ideas of these revolutionaries to redesign the NSLP.

# CHAPTER 2

## THE FIGHT FOR FOOD JUSTICE

### Classroom Activities

1. Reach out to one or more family members/family friends/neighbors who went to school in the US between 1950-1970. Ask them to tell you what school lunch was like when they were kids.
2. Arrange a classroom debate using the following position statement: School lunch programs should be operated as a self-sustaining “business,” separate from the educational budget of a school.
3. The 1970s ushered in a new era of commercialization and privatization to the NSLP. Big Food and Big Soda companies lobbied the federal government to pass legislation that enabled their subsequent “spatial colonization” of school cafeterias. In small groups, have students compare and contrast this historical narrative, as told in Chapter 2, with [this 2012 New York Times story](#) detailing how the lobbying efforts of Big Food companies shaped the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.
4. In small groups or pairs, create a timeline of the NSLP from 1946 through the 1970s. Identify and name several eras within this 30-year timespan, then provide a brief description of the major activities that took place in each era and identify the key actors (e.g., state, market, or civil society) who were involved. Next, discuss the relationships between these key actors, giving special attention to the social problems, power dynamics, and broader political-economic concerns that shaped each era of school lunch history.
5. School lunch activists have participated in various forms of grassroots organizing and pursued different strategies and tactics for achieving social change, ranging from direct action boycotts and lawsuits to enacting a [prefigurative politics](#) that models the school lunch future they hope to see. Ask students to briefly distinguish and explain the different strategies and tactics school lunch activists used from the mid 1960s through the mid 1970s. Next, have them identify 2-3 strategies and tactics from this list that would be helpful for today’s school lunch activists to employ. How do they envision modern-day activists using these strategies and/or tactics? Tell them to be specific about campaign objectives and to articulate a clear theory of change. Consider having them create a [power map](#) as part of this exercise.

# CHAPTER 3

## FROM BIG FOOD TO REAL FOOD LITE

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe it is ethical for families to focus on protecting their own children's health by opting out of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in search of better, "healthier" alternatives? Why or why not?
2. There are many people, nonprofit organizations, school districts, and corporations that are working to bring "real" food to American public schools. What problems do they aim to address through their efforts? In your opinion, which is the most important?
3. Define the terms "body burden," "precautionary consumption," and "ingredients of concern." How, if at all, do these terms help you conceptualize the relationship between human bodies and the environment in different ways?
4. Describe how preservatives and packaging materials allow production and consumption to be distanced in time and space. How do agricultural chemicals and synthetic food additives substitute for human labor within the food system? What are the pros and cons of this industrial system of food production and distribution?
5. Articulate at least 2-3 ways that Big Food companies benefit from the individualization of risk and responsibility within the food system. In your opinion, should the government play a stronger role in regulating the presence of "ingredients of concern" in processed foods? Why or why not?
6. Discuss what you found most surprising about either: (1) the Food and Drug Administration's approach to regulating food additives or (2) the development of clean label chemistry and real food marketing language by Big Food corporations.
7. What strategies and tactics are consumers using to "lift the veil" on industrial foods and make change? Refer back to the example of "pink slime" as a starting point.
8. What is "real food lite" as Gaddis defines it? Do you agree that real food lite provides some concessions to the real food movement, while simultaneously preserving some of the worst features of the cheap food economy? Why or why not?
9. How does the professed food industry benefit from the narrative that cooking from scratch is stressful, difficult, and potentially unsafe? Why does this narrative persist despite evidence to the contrary? What might it take to disrupt it?
10. In the conclusion of her book *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, sociologist Janet Poppendieck asks "whether school food should be a mirror of the American food system or a leverage point for transforming it in a more just and sustainable direction." What do you think?
11. Why does Gaddis argue for collective solutions over individual fixes like precautionary consumption? Do you agree with her analysis? Why or why not?

# CHAPTER 3

## FROM BIG FOOD TO REAL FOOD LITE

### Classroom Activities

1. Ask students to bring various food products (e.g., highly processed snacks, health food snacks, fresh produce) to class. Break them into groups and tell them to make careful notes related to the product ingredients, labels, advertising text, and imagery. What sort of messages does each product convey?
2. Instruct the students to think about product messaging in the context of school lunch. Do a quick poll: Should brand-name items like Domino's Pizza and "copy cat" snacks be allowed in schools? Why or why not?
3. The media has celebrated both [Brigaid](#) and [Revolution Foods](#) (two for-profit companies) for their efforts to bring real food to the nation's school cafeterias, yet they take very different approaches. For this classroom activity, divide students into three groups.
  - Group 1 will learn about Brigaid, Group 2 will learn about Revolution Foods, and Group 3 will take on the role of representatives of the local school board.
  - Groups 1 and 2 should prepare a 2-3 minute "pitch" designed to convince Group 3 to hire their company. Group 3 should decide on the criteria that they will use to decide which company to hire. Depending on the size of the class, this may take 20-25 minutes.
  - After they've had time to prepare, invite Groups 1 and 2 to give their pitch to the class. This should take about 7-8 minutes with transition times.
  - After groups 1 and 2 present, allow 10-15 minutes for Group 3 to deliberate and ask questions of group 1 and 2. After Group 3 announces their decision, allow time for students to briefly reflect on the pros and cons of the two approaches represented by Brigaid and Revolution Foods and any questions/concerns that arose during the exercise.
4. Have students visit a cafeteria (or arrange a visit to a local school lunchroom) to conduct mini-ethnographies. Tell them to observe and take notes on what they see and to make connections to the major themes of this book. Instruct them to take note of the cafeteria logistics, dining atmosphere, quality of the food, menu selections, the labor force, signage and marketing, etc. They may choose to visit a K-12 cafeteria or a college/university cafeteria for this exercise.
5. Have students participate in the policy process by writing letters and/or calling their elected officials. Here is a [simple guide](#) to help students learn how to contact their elected officials (federal, state, and local). Alternatively, identify a proposed rule related to any of the topics discussed in this chapter and instruct the class to [submit their comments](#) on the rule. This can be done individually or in small groups.

# CHAPTER 4

## CAFETERIA WORKERS IN THE “PRISON OF LOVE”

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, define the terms “lunch debt” and “lunch shaming.” How does the phenomenon of lunch debt relate to the financial structure of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?
2. Caricatures of lunch ladies abound in American media and pop culture. This chapter highlights the example of comedian Adam Sandler’s *Lunch Lady Land*. What other examples can you think of? What do these examples tell you about the status of lunch ladies in American society?
3. Discuss the witch/mother binary within the school lunch workforce. What motivates the behaviors of the “witch” and the “mother”? How is it possible for both character tropes of lunch ladies to exist at the same time? Have you encountered either one in real life?
4. What is meant by the term “emotional labor”? Identify at least 2-3 examples of how you and/or people within your social circle practice emotional labor and for what purpose.
5. How, if at all does gender play into the assumption that “good” school cafeteria workers should be willing to work for love, not money? What other jobs carry this expectation?
6. Why are individual women--mothers and lunch ladies--often blamed for children’s poor dietary habits? What types of structural constraints might they face when attempting to care well for children at home and at school? How, if at all, do these constraints relate to their positionality in terms of class, race, educational attainment, etc.?
7. What evidence does Gaddis use to demonstrate how the quality of the jobs and the quality of care within the NSLP are interlinked? What connections does she make between lunch ladies and other care workers?
8. In what ways do lunch ladies help make up for the failings of the National School Lunch Program through their own individual and collective actions? Please provide some examples as discussed throughout the chapter.
9. Gaddis uses feminist economist Nancy Folbre’s concept of the “prisoner of love” to explain the complex dynamics that prevent school cafeteria workers from engaging in organizing tactics that would harm children in the short-term. How might students and communities support cafeteria workers who are trapped in this figurative prison of love?
10. What are the major narratives related to culinary skill and programmatic constraints that keep schools tied to the cheap food economy and “heat-and-serve” food? Did it surprise you to learn about the culinary techniques that were once commonly used in American school kitchens?
11. What parallels do you see between the deskilling of home cooks and the deskilling of school cooks? What are the pros and cons of relying primarily on convenience foods to feed ourselves?

# CHAPTER 4

## CAFETERIA WORKERS IN THE “PRISON OF LOVE”

### Classroom Activities

1. Ask the class to do a quick Google Image search for the term “lunch lady.” What kind of images come up? Do they conform to the witch/mother binary that sociologist Ashley Vancil-Leap describes? If not, how might you characterize the major archetypes?
2. Show students the [cartoon](#) that Gaddis critiques during her discussion of lunch shaming. Ask them to revise this cartoon based on the knowledge they gleaned from reading chapter 4. Working individually or in small groups, students should create a more accurate picture of lunch shaming dynamics (e.g., how lunch ladies feel about the practice, who is really to blame). Have students share and discuss their cartoons.
3. As pre-work, assign each person in the class to read one of the oral histories of child nutrition professionals included in the [Child Nutrition Archive’s collection](#) (there are nearly 200 to choose from).
  - Divide the class into groups of four and have each student present a brief synopsis of the oral history to their classmates.
  - After each group member has had a chance to present, instruct the groups to look for similarities and differences between the stories. Challenge them to think about how the relative positionality of the worker (e.g., job position, age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, educational background, geographic location) may play a role in shaping their own individual experience of working in child nutrition.
  - Ask each group of four to do a brief “share out” to the whole class. Facilitate a discussion that integrates the data and analysis conducted by each group.
4. Have students collect their own oral histories of child nutrition professionals. Consider contributing these stories to the [Child Nutrition Archive](#) or to the [University of Wisconsin-Madison Oral History Program](#).
5. Show the supplementary video [Caring for Students](#) to the class. Next ask them to write either: (1) a short narrative nonfiction story based on a time when they were cared for by a lunch staff person or witnessed someone being cared for, or (2) a short speculative fiction story that envisions what a school cafeteria might look and feel like if the NSLP was redesigned in order to maximize care in all of its dimensions.



# CHAPTER 5

## BUILDING A REAL FOOD ECONOMY

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. Chapter 5 tells the story of the real food transition in Minneapolis Public Schools. What did you find inspiring about this story? How does this approach differ from what Gaddis calls “real food lite”?
2. This chapter features the voices of several frontline kitchen and cafeteria workers from Minneapolis Public Schools who describe how the district’s switch to scratch cooking and farm-to-school has impacted them. What did you find most interesting about their stories? What questions would you ask if you were able to interview them?
3. According to Gaddis, why is it important for schools to develop “community-based culinary capacity” and comprehensive farm-to-school programs? What benefits does this approach to bringing real food to schools create that real food lite does not? What, if any, drawbacks might there be?
4. How can rural and urban communities work together to build real food economies by redesigning their school lunch programs?
5. List the potential benefits/downfalls of each of the four strategies for financing kitchen infrastructure, training, and equipment that were discussed in this chapter:
  - Securing sponsorships from businesses, philanthropic organizations, or wealthy individuals.
  - Obtaining low-interest loans from banks and credit unions, matching funds from donors, or municipal bonds.
  - Renting out cafeteria space, catering school events, or using facilities to prepare meals for other sites that provide care for young children and the elderly.
  - Partnering with other schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, or prisons.
6. Why do real food advocates believe it is important for children to both eat real food *and* learn about the origins of the food they eat? Do you agree with their rationale? Why or why not?
7. How, if at all, have your food preferences changed over time? Are there any foods that you once hated that you now like to eat? What factors caused your taste to change?
8. What strategies and tactics do schools use to “retune” children’s food preferences away from highly processed industrial foods and toward minimally processed farm-to-school foods? Which strategies and/or tactics do you find to be the most promising? Why?
9. Refer to the example of the Boston-area high school with a high concentration of children of Caribbean heritage and answer the question posed in the book: Should reducing children’s sodium intake and minimizing their consumption of ingredients of concern be prioritized over cultural preferences? Why or why not?

# CHAPTER 5

## BUILDING A REAL FOOD ECONOMY

### Classroom Activities

1. Show the class the supplemental videos “[Scratch Cooking](#)” and “[Central Kitchens](#).” Next, have them discuss whether they think on-site kitchens or central kitchens are the better model for bringing real food to American public schools. What are the pros and cons of each system? Is there room for both within the National School Lunch Program?
2. Do a class screening of the [Nikiko Masumoto TedTalk](#) and ask students to relate her idealized vision of farming to the following passage from *The Labor of Lunch* about Minneapolis Public Schools:

“Farm-to-school coordinator Andrea Northup asks farmers to speak at district-wide meetings, creates promotional materials like signs and farmer trading cards (like baseball cards, but with pictures of farmers and their farm statistics), and shares videos and pictures from local farm visits in order to help K–12 staff understand what farm-to-school is and why it matters. “I had a carrot farmer come and speak about his farm, and his philosophy, and his land, and his family, and how our farm-to-school program has made a difference for his family. And we served his carrots there at the training and talked about the quality and the freshness and the sweetness of those carrots compared to conventional carrots,” Northup told me when I asked her to describe the most recent staff training event. In her view, it’s these types of personal connections that resonate with the MPS staff. “And with a lot of the staff teams,” she noted, “you’ll find someone whose parents were farmers or who comes from a farming family, or who has a garden, who will be the spokesperson” for farm-to-school and why it matters for kids and community.”

3. Have the students watch any of these [short videos](#) about farm-to-school in Minneapolis to get a behind-the-scenes look at how local food moves from farm to cafeteria tray.
4. The video “[Follow that Food: Carrot Edition](#)” features a Minneapolis student narrating the farm-to-school journey of a carrot. Ask the students whether they think this type of peer-to-peer storytelling is an effective way to teach students about the origins of their food. Why or why not?
5. Break the class into groups and have students make their own videos narrating the journey of a particular food to their school/college/university cafeteria.
6. Divide the students into groups and have them develop a short (5-10 minute) activity to teach K-12 students about the importance of local food systems. Consider partnering with your local school district to do a service learning project in which the students volunteer in the classrooms to teach these mini-lessons.

# CONCLUSION

## ORGANIZING A NEW ECONOMY OF CARE

### Reading/Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the book, author Jennifer Gaddis identifies instances of what C. Wright Mills defined as the sociological imagination or, “the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society.” List a few examples from the book and explain how she makes the connection between individual experiences and larger social problems.
2. Using the framework of the sociological imagination, how can you relate your personal school lunch experiences to the larger history of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?
3. What is the benefit of looking at school lunch through the lens of care? How might this reframing expand or restrict the possibilities for the food movement to advance positive social change?
4. Did *The Labor of Lunch* make you think differently about what kinds of activities count as care? Or how much care work is valued in patriarchal capitalist societies? Why or why not?
5. Outline the distinctions between advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing as explained in the conclusion. Think back through the history of school lunch activism and identify examples of advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing.
6. Based on what you learned in *The Labor of Lunch* do you believe it is necessary to enact a revolutionary school food politics? What opportunities/barriers exist?
7. Why does Gaddis end the book with envisioning an alternative future for the NSLP? What do you think about the proposal she outlines? Do you have any additional ideas?
8. What recommendations do you have for building labor-community coalitions to advance food justice in schools and/or other public institutions?
9. How might we deepen the national conversation and strengthen political organizing in support of real food and real jobs in American public schools?

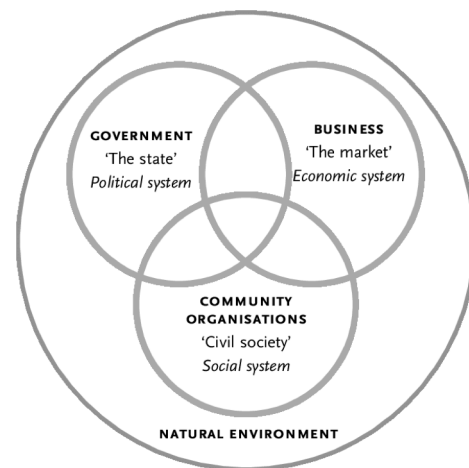
# CONCLUSION

## ORGANIZING A NEW ECONOMY OF CARE

### Classroom Activities

1. Show the supplemental video "[What a Union Does](#)." Have students divide into small groups to discuss whether they think school cafeteria workers should be unionized or not. When debriefing with the whole class, make sure to push the students to consider what cafeteria workers might gain from having strong state and national unions like K-12 teachers do.
2. Divide the class into small groups and have them create their own Youth Food Bill of Rights. Instruct them to address the three primary categories of health, environment, and labor, in addition to any other issues their group believes should be codified in their Youth Food Bill of Rights. Have each group present to the rest of the class and discuss the similarities and differences.
3. Make a simple worksheet for the students and ask them to place the following terms in the proper sector of a Venn diagram depicting the intersection of civil society, the state, and the market:

- Bite tax to fund free lunches
- Clean label products
- Farm-to-school programs
- Gofundme campaigns to pay off student's school lunch debts
- Municipal housekeeping
- Outsourcing school lunch programs to private management companies
- USDA surplus foods (commodity distribution)
- USDA commodities processing contracts



4. Show students the [four-sector model](#) (pictured above). Ask them to use this framework to explain how civil society activism and market influences compensate for lack of adequate government regulation/investment in the NSLP. Encourage them to cite examples of both civil society and market intervention that occur throughout the book. Do the instances in which these interventions occurred say anything about the political or economic culture of the time?
5. Work together as a whole class to research the state of school lunch in your community. What documents are available online? What information is available through the school district's website? Are there any nonprofits or other groups working on school lunch reform? Ask the students to brainstorm ways in which they might partner with these stakeholders to advance food justice in the NSLP at the local level?

# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR



Jennifer E. Gaddis is an assistant professor of [Civil Society and Community Studies](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She brings a feminist perspective to food politics through her research on the social, political, and economic organization of public school lunch programs. Her first book, *The Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools*, is a work of activist scholarship that centers the perspectives of school lunch activists and frontline cafeteria workers who are fighting for food justice in communities across the United States.

Her second book-length project draws on fieldwork in China, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, and Finland to examine how civil society activism, corporate interests, and national policy priorities shape the social justice and ecological goals of government-sponsored school lunch programs. By uncovering how, when, and to what extent school lunch programs operate as a site of resistance to the status quo—in terms of advancing food sovereignty, just labor practices, and ecological sustainability—this research will offer insight into just how pervasive the social expectation that school lunch, and care more broadly, should be “cheap,” and what can be done to shift the conversation to a more generative space from which to collectively reimagine the social organization of care through public institutions.

- 1. You offer a robust history of the US National School Lunch Program in *The Labor of Lunch*. How does that history illustrate a larger pattern of racial and economic discrimination?** School lunch mirrors the racial and economic discrimination pervasive throughout American society. During the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s) charitable lunch programs were set up to help poor children. Menus often promoted the cultural project of “Americanization,” which was fueled by notions of white supremacy and white saviorism. From the 1930s-1960s, federal support for nonprofit school lunch programs disproportionately flowed to white, middle class Americans, which is true of many of the federal policies that helped build the racial wealth gap we see today. During the late 1960s, anti-poverty groups, activist organizations, and a coalition of women’s clubs were instrumental in uncovering, publicizing, and politicizing structural racism and economic discrimination in the National School Lunch Program. After poor children won their right to a free lunch in the early 1970s, food quality quickly plummeted and school lunch was stigmatized as “welfare food.” School lunch then became a target of extreme cost-cutting under the Reagan administration, which seriously considered reclassifying ketchup (a condiment) as a vegetable in the 1980s as part of a broad-based campaign to slash government spending that ultimately hurt poor Americans and communities of color the most.

# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

- 2. What's the first thing you would change about our current public school-lunch programs? What would make the biggest initial difference?** I'd change the way the food is sourced and prepared. Most schools in the US purchase highly processed foods from Big Food companies that exploit workers and the environment to keep food "cheap" for consumers. This pumps low-cost fillers and "ingredients of concern" (e.g., chemical preservatives and artificial colors) into children's bodies, which exacerbates child obesity and hyperactivity. When schools prepare lunch from scratch using healthy ingredients and purchase food from local farmers, they not only improve the quality of children's diets, but also give local farm and food economies a much-needed boost. The billions of taxpayer dollars Americans spend on school lunch should be directed away from Big Food companies and toward the small-scale family farmers, organic growers, and new/beginning farmers who are vital to reinvigorating rural communities and economies. During my research for this book, I visited districts around the country that are pioneering this new model in which farmers see a greater share of public food dollars and cafeteria workers get access to longer hours, higher wages, and more meaningful work. Perhaps most importantly, this switch to serving "real" food reduces segregation in cafeterias by attracting middle-class children who used to bring packed lunches from home.
- 3. You explain the stereotypes lunch ladies face: the "witch" and the "mother." Can you explain how this contributes to the view that these workers don't deserve higher wages or more respect?** We live in a patriarchal capitalist society that depends on women's unpaid and low-paid work to function. Mothering is a job, albeit an unpaid job, and the closer an occupation is to "mothering," the less we seem to value it. School cafeteria workers, like those in other caring professions (e.g., teachers, nurses, childcare providers), earn less than workers in similar professions that do not involve face-to-face relational care work. Yet we valorize "second mothers" who are kind and attentive to children's needs, ignoring the fact that many of them work for poverty wages that require them to hold multiple jobs just to feed their own families. And we demonize women—lunch ladies and mothers alike—who don't perform care work with sufficient enthusiasm and femininity. Simply put, the "mother" stereotype reinforces the idea that caring for children does not require special skill or effort, and therefore should not be highly compensated or respected. The "witch" stereotype, on the other hand, shames women who don't conform to gendered ideals of motherhood and reinforces the unflattering caricature that lunch ladies are undesirable people serving undesirable food. This, in turn, makes it easier to justify their low pay and low social status.



# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

## **4. Why are private businesses so heavily involved in public school cafeterias?**

When the National School Lunch Program was created in 1946, Congress prevented schools from contracting the management of their non-for-profit lunch programs to private companies. This restriction was dropped in the early 1970s (thanks to aggressive lobbying from the National Restaurant Association aka “the other NRA”), at the same time Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Snack companies pushed their way into the nation’s cafeterias. Today, schools purchase scientifically nutritious pre-made foods from a wide range of companies, including industry giants like Tyson, Perdue, Kraft, General Mills, Schwan’s, Domino’s, Pizza Hut, and TGI Fridays. These corporations have done a remarkably successful job convincing people that it is too difficult, expensive, and risky to cook real food in school kitchens. They employ advertising firms, lobbyists, and food brokers to keep the status quo in place. It’s all about maximizing their current and future profit potential: accessing the multi-billion-dollar school lunch market allows Big Food companies to shape the taste expectations and brand loyalty of the next generation of consumers. It’s a lot of power, and they don’t want to give it up.

## **5. Who should be footing the bill for free public school-lunch programs?**

Taxpayers should foot the bill for a universal free school lunch program. We treat other aspects of public schools—e.g., math class, English class, gym class—as a shared investment in the future. We don’t charge children based on their family’s income. School lunch has always been different. Even in the 1890s, when the first “penny lunch” programs were started in the nation’s cities, they were expected to operate as financially self-sustaining “businesses.” This was never the ideal, however, for the founders of this new form of public care-giving. The women (and their allies) who organized together to create nonprofit school lunch programs envisioned a future in which all students (regardless of income) would get a nutritious free lunch as part of the broader educational mission of public schools. Today, there are communities in urban, rural, and suburban districts that have implemented this model through the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. It’s a good idea—shifting to the “free for all” model reduces administrative costs, builds an inclusive cafeteria culture, and ensures that middle-class and upper-middle class families have a direct stake in improving the quality of school lunch.

# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

6. **Do you remember the first time you heard the term “school lunch debt?” What does that phrase tell you about the issues associated with the current model of charging kids based on their family’s eligibility for free, reduced-price, or full-price meals?** I learned about school lunch debt and “lunch shaming” long before the terms made national headlines. While researching this book, cafeteria workers told me how awful they felt taking away lunch trays and serving cold cheese sandwiches to children who didn’t have enough money in their lunch accounts. School lunch debt affects the “near poor” who don’t qualify for free or reduced-price lunches the most. Even though school lunches are relatively cheap, paying \$2-3 instead of 40 cents for a reduced-price lunch, can add up quickly for families whose finances are stretched thin. If they get behind on payments, schools will typically send multiple warnings, but policies vary widely from district to district. There have been some really terrible headlines about districts publicly shaming children and even threatening to turn them over to social services. Children and families shouldn’t have to live in fear because of something as mundane as school lunch. The frontline kitchen and cafeteria workers who are expected to enforce these policies would be the first to agree—we need a universal free school lunch program that children and families actually *want* to participate in.
7. **Can you offer an example of a city or school district in the US--or another country--with a functional and nutritious lunch program?** There are a lot of great models of school-lunch programs that support the type of good, fair, and clean food systems that this country needs. The National Farm to School Network highlights all sorts of examples from rural, suburban, and urban communities across the US on its website. One of my favorite examples from my fieldwork is Minneapolis Public Schools, which is a national leader in the real food movement. Minneapolis has one of the most impressive farm-to-school programs of any urban school district in the US and is well on the way to transitioning to a scratch-cooking model at all of its schools. That said, even the most progressive American school districts rarely serve more than 25% locally sourced food in their school lunches. The Japanese government expects all schools to serve at least 30% locally sourced food and some of the communities I visited during my fieldwork sourced over 80% locally produced food for their school lunches. Japan is also a world leader in food education. Finland, Brazil, and South Korea are also excellent models because they provide universally free school lunches and use public food dollars to support small-scale farmers and incentivize eco-friendly agriculture.

# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

**8. Why do you think people don't value public school-lunch programs and those that work for them? How can we change this?**

As a society we in the US have been taught to judge the value of our food based on quantity, not quality. We're told that if we want to be healthy we should scrutinize ingredient lists and nutrition labels, but these tell us very little about the conditions under which our food is produced. Big Food companies prefer it that way—they don't want us to think about how animals, workers, and the environment are exploited in order to keep their food sufficiently cheap. The National School Lunch Program and other public food programs face tremendous pressure to keep food cheap because they operate with very tight budgets. As a result, much of the food that school cafeterias serve isn't particularly tasty or attractive, so kids who can afford to bring their lunches from home or purchase food outside of the government school-lunch program often do. This stigmatizes school lunch as “welfare food” and the kitchen workers who unbox-and-bake factory-produced chicken nuggets, pizza, and hamburgers as “unskilled.” The only way to change this is to invest in the labor of lunch by empowering school cafeteria workers to cook healthy, attractive, culturally appropriate lunches for the children they feed.

**9. You write about the missed opportunity of treating school lunch as an unimportant interruption in the school day. Can you elaborate on this?**

American children receive less than four hours of nutrition education per year on average. We need comprehensive food education in our schools, including garden-based education. There are tons of benefits associated with school gardening—not limited to getting kids interested in and more knowledgeable about the food system—that include sparking curiosity about science, cultivating empathy and respect for others, and providing youth with positive leadership opportunities. Kids are also more likely to eat vegetables when they have a hand in growing them and when their peers are eating the same foods. Serving school lunches made from whole foods and nutritious ingredients and teaching students about the food they are eating would help *all* parents. Low-income parents are less likely to purchase foods that are unfamiliar to their children because they can't afford to waste the food their children reject. And even when families can afford to experiment with introducing new foods into their children's diets, this work gets piled on women's shoulders since they do the majority of domestic work. We need only look to countries like Japan, France, and Finland to see the power of treating school lunch as an *educational* part of the school day.

# A BRIEF Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

10. **The Trump administration has rolled back parts of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), which was championed by Michelle Obama as part of a broader initiative to end child obesity within a generation. How much damage has been done to the program and efforts to feed those in need?** The HHFKA was the most sweeping change to child nutrition policy in at least a generation. It set new limits on the amount of sodium in school lunches, required schools to shift to whole-grain bread products, and mandated that students take either a fruit or a vegetable as part of their government-subsidized school lunch. The first roll-backs actually occurred under the Obama administration. Big Food companies and their lobbyists succeeded in weakening the restrictions on starchy foods like potatoes and pizza. The Trump administration further weakened nutrition standards, giving schools more “flexibility” to serve refined-grains and salty foods. This policy reversal makes it easier for Big Food companies to profit from selling highly processed foods to schools, while families and taxpayers are stuck picking up the tab for the long-term health costs associated with the “standard American diet.” The other concern relates to a proposed change to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance that would cause an estimated 500,000 children to lose automatic free lunch eligibility. This change hasn’t gone into effect yet and can still be prevented if enough people get mobilized to provide public comment and contact their elected officials.

# WEB-BASED RESOURCES

## **History and Current Status of School Nutrition Programs**

Child Nutrition Archive Photo Collections

<http://archives.theicn.org/child-nutrition-archives-photo-collections/>

Child Nutrition Archive Oral Histories

<http://archives.theicn.org/oral-history-project/>

Organizing for the HHFKA

[https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/How\\_a\\_Public\\_Health\\_Goal\\_Became\\_a\\_National\\_Law\\_Nutrition\\_Today.pdf](https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/How_a_Public_Health_Goal_Became_a_National_Law_Nutrition_Today.pdf)

USDA National School Lunch Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program>

USDA National School Breakfast Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/school-breakfast-program>

USDA Summer Foodservice Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program>

USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/ffvp/fresh-fruit-and-vegetable-program>

## **For-Profit Companies and Public-Private Partnerships**

Brigaid

<https://www.chefsbrigaid.com/>

Cook for America

<http://cookforamerica.com/lunch-teacher-culinary-boot-camp/>

Good Food Purchasing Program

<https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/>

Revolution Foods

<https://www.revolutionfoods.com/>

reWorking Lunch

<https://reworkinglunch.org/>

Urban School Food Alliance

<https://www.urbanschoolfoodalliance.org/>

# WEB BASED RESOURCES

## **The Real Food Movement**

Chef Ann Foundation Multimedia Resources

<http://www.chefannfoundation.org/news-media/multimedia-content/>

Center for Ecoliteracy

<https://www.ecoliteracy.org/resources>

Food Corps

<https://foodcorps.org/>

Healthy School Meals (Plant-Based Foods)

<https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/healthy-communities/healthy-school-food>

National Farm to School Network

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources>

Real Food Challenge

<https://www.realfoodchallenge.org/>

Slow Food USA School Gardens

<https://www.slowfoodusa.org/school-gardens>

The Edible Schoolyard Project

<https://edibleschoolyard.org>

USDA Farm-to-School

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/community-food-systems>

## **Food Justice and Labor Organizing**

Parent Advocacy Toolkit

<http://www.chefannfoundation.org/for-parents/parent-advocacy-toolkit/>

Food Chain Workers Alliance

<http://foodchainworkers.org/>

Youth Food Justice Network

<https://yfjn.wordpress.com/>

SONG Core Organizing Tools

<http://southernersonnewground.org/resources/organizingtools/>