



**UNIT 3:
FOOD AND POWER**

L.25

GOVERNMENT POWER: SCHOOL LUNCH

Note to Teachers

In contrast to the big, abstract Farm Bill, Lesson 25 examines a very familiar and tangible manifestation of government policy: school lunch. The subject of much criticism and controversy, school lunch has been the subject of campaigns by many well-known figures, from Michelle Obama to Chef Jamie Oliver. Many reformers want to improve their quality by bringing in more fresh fruits and vegetables and to involve students more actively in making healthy decisions about food.

This lesson addresses a less frequently discussed aspect of school lunch: the vital role that school lunch plays in providing for food-insecure Americans and giving students a chance to surmount the poverty that makes them hungry in the first place by succeeding in school. School lunch reflects the ways in which government and the people support or impede democratic institutions.

Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- see that school lunch—at its best—is an expression of democratic ideals. Reforms to school lunch should have food quality and political equality in mind.

Objectives

- Students will use their own experiences and a reading to recognize popular conceptions of school lunch and to place the institution in a new context.
- Through the reading and discussion, students will examine how their own preconceptions about school lunch may undermine its democratic potential.

Materials

- Reading



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Part I: Introduction

1. **FOCUSED FREE WRITE** (8 minutes): What is your experience of school cafeterias and school food?

Ask students to re-read what they have just written and to underline the most meaningful phrase or sentence.

Asking students to listen very carefully to their classmates, do a read-around, in which each student reads the text s/he underlined, without explanation.

Together, identify any broader themes that come up in those snippets as a way of assessing their current conceptions and experiences associated with school food.

2. Let students know that this class meeting will focus on school food as a matter of democracy. (This approach will probably be new to students, and could alter their perspectives, so stress that this is an important lesson.)

Part II: School Lunch Recontextualized

3. Ask students to read silently or aloud, depending on your particular group. Begin with the introduction and first section, “The Plight of Food Insecurity.”

Ask students to highlight, underline or annotate as they read/listen.

At the end of section I, stop and ask the students if they can capture the main idea of this section. Then ask for their responses. What do they hear?

In the discussion that follows, make sure that students understand that only about half of food insecure households in the US get supplemental food benefits, and one quarter get no federal benefits at all. Statistics on government benefits, therefore, do not reflect the full extent of food insecurity in the U.S.

4. The next section of the text addresses the relationship between sufficient nutrition and learning. As you read (deliberately and clearly), ask students to underline the consequences of insufficient nutrition.

Stop at the end of this section, and discuss these questions:

1. What immediate consequences does inadequate food lead to?
2. What more long-term consequences does inadequate food lead to?
3. Why does the text suggest that hungry children are more likely to remain poor later in life?

Give students the opportunity to ask any questions they might have before they move on.

5. The Cost of Stigma

On top of the other challenges that disadvantaged students face, they must deal with the stigma against school food. Ask students to think about the following questions as they listen:

1. According to the handout, why do students not take advantage of school lunch?
2. How serious is the problem?



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Read aloud, or have students read, the last section of the handout. Then discuss these questions and their responses to them.

Step back and get their responses overall to the handout. Depending on the time ask students this question:

The author who inspired this handout, Janet Poppendieck, advocates for universal free lunch—that is, lunch provided free for all students as part of the school day. What do you think about this idea?

Her argument is multifaceted: money saved from all of the bureaucracy that currently determines who is and who is not eligible for free or reduced lunch; lunch as part of the school curriculum and as an opportunity to create a stronger school community; the relatively small amount of money required to fund universal school lunch at a rate that could improve lunches relative to government spending on things like military technology, etc. At the same time, universal free lunch would represent a commitment to democracy—the idea that all students truly deserve the same chance in life.

Feel free to bring in any of these issues, while encouraging students to think a bit on their feet about how and why universal free lunch might be a good idea.

Part III: Cooking Lab

For all of its perceived issues, school food in New York City must meet a quite stringent set of nutritional guidelines, and the centralized School Food office has initiated a host of reforms in the last five years. If a student takes full advantage of the foods available, it is possible for them to eat a fairly varied and healthy diet. Other school systems have worked equally hard to improve the quality and the nutrition of meals.

One easy way to enhance a diet is to incorporate a new food to a familiar dish. This cooking lab takes a student-friendly food, macaroni and cheese, and explores how we might turn familiar food a vehicle for something new—in this case, kale.



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MACARONI & CHEESE WITH GREENS

YIELD: 12 taste-sized servings

Equipment List

- 2 large pots, one with lid
- 2 induction burners
- 1 pasta strainer
- 1 wooden spoon
- 12 knives
- 12 cutting boards
- 2 x $\frac{1}{4}$ cup measures
- 1 x $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon measure
- 1 x 1 teaspoon measure
- 1 x 1 liquid cup measure
- 1 x 1 cup measure

Food Items

- 16 oz. elbow macaroni
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
- 1 dash black pepper
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. ground dry mustard
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups small dice or shredded cheddar cheese
- $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. kale
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup very finely diced onion



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MACARONI & CHEESE WITH GREENS

YIELD: 12 taste-sized servings

Ingredients

- 16 oz. elbow macaroni
- ¼ cup butter
- ¼ cup flour
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 dash black pepper
- 1 ½ tsp. ground dry mustard
- ½ tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups small dice or shredded cheddar cheese
- ¾ lb. kale, stems removed and roughly chopped into small pieces
- ½ cup very finely diced onion

Directions

1. In a pot of salted boiling water, cook macaroni until finished and drain.
2. In a medium saucepan, melt butter over medium heat, stir in flour, and cook for 3-5 minutes to form a roux (a sauce base made from the fat and flour).
3. Add salt and pepper, and then slowly add milk, stirring constantly as you drizzle it in.
4. Add Worcestershire sauce and ground mustard.
5. Cook and stir until mixture is bubbly.
6. Stir in cheese, a small amount at a time, until it is fully melted.
7. Stir chopped kale into mixture and cook for a bit longer, only about 2 or 3 minutes, so that kale does not overcook.
8. Add drained macaroni to cheese sauce, and stir to coat.



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What do a free breakfast and free or inexpensive hot lunch mean to children living in food insecure households?

Consider, for example, that cafeteria lines in U.S. schools, as Janet Poppendieck writes in her *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, are always longest on Mondays and after holidays.² According to a National Education Association survey taken in 2014, three out of five teachers regularly see hungry children in their classrooms.³

II. Meals and Learning

For decades scholars and activists have stressed the importance of sufficient food for learning. Poverty, as Robert Hunter wrote in 1904, leads to hunger. A hungry student cannot grow and learn and, thereby, surmount poverty. Poorly fed children are less able to concentrate, more vulnerable to illness, and even irritable or angry from hunger and, as a consequence, disruptive in the classroom. The relationship between meals and the ability to learn can be seen in this extended passage from Poppendieck's *Free for All*:

The more the research accumulates and the more we recognize the profound interconnectedness of body and mind, the more important access to school meals appears. A recent synthesis of studies of the impact of hunger on learning prepared by J. Larry Brown and his colleagues as part of an effort to estimate the societal costs of hunger made the point:

When faced with insufficient dietary intake, the human body engages in a form of triage by directing limited energy to be used for its most important functions. Chief among these is maintaining critical organ function. If enough dietary energy remains after allocation to key bodily organs, the second priority is body health, which in children means normal height and weight gain. The final priority, depending on the availability of energy, is the individual's interaction with the social environment—playing with peers, interacting with parents and siblings, and awareness and participation in school. Hungry children haven't the capacity for normal learning and play; while their bodies are in the classroom they lack the dietary fuel required to engage meaningfully with those around them.

And those around them respond in kind. Sharman Apt Russell has described the process in her remarkable book *Hunger: An Unnatural History*:

The development of the human mind is not just an interior process. When children who must conserve energy withdraw from the world, the world withdraws from them. Mothers become less responsive to their less responsive infants. Bonding and emotional attachment may be affected. The malnourished child sits later, crawls later, and walks later. He is less interested in exploring his environment. He doesn't play as much. He is smaller and seen by adults as younger than he is. They expect less of him. They talk to him less. In school, he is less social and active. He is less motivated. His teachers are less interested in him.

The result of this energy deprivation can be long-term: a deterioration of cognitive function or missing out on crucial lessons can have lasting impact on the child's life course and development. As Russell puts it, "Scientists

2) Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (University of California Press, 2010), 162.

3) National Education Association, nea.org.



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now think that any extended malnutrition in childhood will affect a child's mental ability in some way. It will change who he or she is in the world." Brown and his colleagues note, "Hungry children do less well on tests of mental ability and school performance, and are more likely to fail, to be held back, and drop out." Large national studies of household food insecurity, they report, have found that children from food-insecure families are more likely than others to miss school, to be suspended, and to repeat a grade. And, like Robert Hunter a century ago, these observers point out that the consequences will frustrate the ability of education to end the cycle of poverty: "In their adult years, children so affected will face greater likelihood of limited employability, lessened workforce productivity, and poorer judgment and job performance," leading to "a more limited lifetime earning potential."⁴

III. The Cost of Stigma

Although the nutritional standards of federally funded school programs are high, the options available to students near their schools, and the dietary choices made by children and adolescents do not bear out popular perceptions. The prevalent image is that school food is "just for poor kids" and inferior in quality to the food available to other school-aged children. As one cafeteria manager put it, [stigma] is not much of a problem at the elementary level, but it becomes a greater and greater concern as students grow older and more socially aware. "The older [they] get, . . . they don't want to take part in it because of that stigma."⁵

These perceptions have had two consequences for students eligible for free or reduced school lunches: First, the stigma against school lunch has segregated disadvantaged school children from their peers. Since the 1960s, school lunch programs have increasingly served only students receiving free or reduced lunches. In 2014, 71.6% of school lunches were served to students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Second, despite the clear need for school food programs, Janet Poppendieck's research shows that, in schools across the country, students would rather eat nothing than be associated with the stigma of school food. She recounts visiting schools where students are required to spend their lunch period in the cafeteria, yet "I noticed that a substantial number of them were not eating anything at all. They did not have brown bags from home. They did not have trays or snack items." According to national statistics, only 40% of U.S. students eligible for free or reduced lunch take advantage of it—the stigma is that powerful.⁶

Yet, a current school lunch advocate describes his own experience in New York City this way:

Because my father made too much money and we didn't qualify for free meals, I didn't eat, because I didn't have any money and that's how it was. . . In high school, the first two years of high school, I remember what hunger meant. And it's hard to describe the pain, it's always there. And my grades were barely passing. And then the third year, I lied on the application. My father made—I remember he was five bucks over the limit. So we lied. And I got free meals, and I went from being a C student to an A student and then graduated with honors the last two years of high school. How much of that is attributable to food versus I had grown up at that point, I don't know. But obviously having food in your stomach does help.⁷

4) Poppendieck, 164-166.
5) Poppendieck, 42.

6) Poppendieck, 42.
7) Poppendieck, 42.

