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School food moves up the political agenda

Book review by
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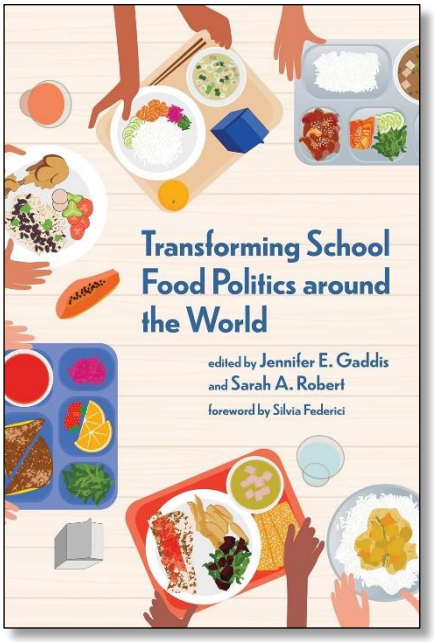

Review of *Transforming School Food Politics around the World*, edited by Jennifer E. Gaddis and Sarah A. Robert. (2024). Published by MIT Press. Available as paperback and Kindle, and open access; 364 pages. Free discussion and activity guide also available. Publisher's website: https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262548113/transforming-school-food-politics-around-the-world/
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The school food reform agenda is moving from the margins to the mainstream of the political agenda in the countries of both the Global North and the Global South. Jennifer Gaddis and Sarah Robert, the joint editors, are well-equipped to curate the transnational contributions to this excellent book because their previous publications in this field are highly regarded. Being a global survey, the book covers an enormous amount of ground, both thematic and territorial, all of which is organized around four themes: national programs, youth and worker voices, just school food economies, and tools and campaigns for systems change.

The editors argue that school food programs around the world are being reimagined and rebuilt to mitigate the catastrophic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on one of their earlier arguments, they say that "debates about school lunch are fundamentally about care … and whether caring for public goods like children and the environment should be the private responsibility of individuals in the home or a public responsibility that is collectivized and shared" (p. xxviii). The book aims to tap the collective wisdom of a diverse group of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to promote a more radical school food reform

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agenda throughout the world.

Since it is impossible to do justice to such a wide-ranging book in a short review, let me highlight three key agents of change that are featured in various chapters, namely, children, governments, and coalitions.

In a chapter on Canadian school food programs, Jennifer Black and her colleagues make a compelling case for treating *children* as genuine stakeholders because they have their own knowledge, they attach their own meanings to food, and they can exert their own agency by opting out. Rather than being fashioned *for* children, school food programs need to be "conceived, designed, and run with meaningful input from children" if they are to be acceptable and sustainable (p. 33). School food reformers would do well to act accordingly.

Many chapters in the book underline the systemic significance of *governments* in regulating and resourcing the school food service. Although Brazil and India have two of the largest government-sponsored school food systems in the world, both of which are featured in the book, it is one of the smallest countries that pioneered the greatest social innovation in school food reform. Finland was the first country in the world to provide a universal free school meal service when it introduced its tax-funded system in 1948. In a fascinating chapter on the Finnish experience, Kristiina Janhonen and colleagues argue that the new challenge is to promote food-related learning where students are treated "as an active, collaborative change agent" (p. 85). They argue that food-related learning requires a new compact between teachers and catering (food service) staff, two professions that are crucial to the goal of the pedagogical school meal.

Of all the agents of change in the school food domain, perhaps the most consequential is the school food *coalition* because, at its best, it enables a host of different interest groups to subsume their particular issues in the interest of a larger common purpose. Anne Moertel provides a compelling analysis of such a coalition in a chapter that recounts the history of the Center for Ecoliteracy's approach to school food systems change in California. Although early efforts to forge a grand coalition failed—not least because it sought to achieve too many goals—later efforts focused unequivocally on Senate Bill 364: the Free School Meals for All Act introduced by California State Senator Nancy Skinner.

To support this legislative initiative, the center led an advocacy campaign that decided to use the slogan "School Meals for All" as the official campaign name instead of the more ambiguous "Universal Meals." The campaign launched in February 2021 with 15 organizations supporting the policy, including influential national bodies such as the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) and Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). At its peak, the coalition embraced organizations spanning health, education, labor, agriculture, and food banks. Paradoxically, the cause of free school meals for all was aided and abetted by the COVID-19 pandemic because, thanks to a series of waivers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) starting in March 2020, school meals were made available for free nationwide during the pandemic. The bill eventually passed with unanimous bipartisan support in the Senate Education Committee, and on July 9, 2021, California officially adopted School Meals for All. "History was made," Moertel says. "As the first state in the nation to provide free school meals to all public school students regardless of eligibility, California provided a model for the country to make healthy school meals a part of every child's educational day" (p. 265). Moertel rightly argues that the strategies used in the School Meals for All campaign can be leveraged by school food coalitions in local and national campaigns in and beyond the U.S.

Distilling the insights of the many contributors to this book, the editors conclude by saying,

> When we care about school meals, we must care for and about not only the children who eat them but also the cooks and cafeteria workers, teachers, agricultural workers, and others whose labor they depend on. And through our school food systems, we must care for the natural environment on which all life depends. This core belief is threaded through the many chapters of this book and their multifaceted engagements with the concept of sustainability, which is

> foundational for enacting a feminist politics of food and education that centers care. (p. 299)

At a time when the public food system in the U.S. is under siege, as the Trump regime lays waste to the little victories of the progressive movement, this book provides a powerful case as to why school food campaigns can be part of a democratic countermovement by making social justice, public health, and ecological integrity resonate across a wide political spectrum.