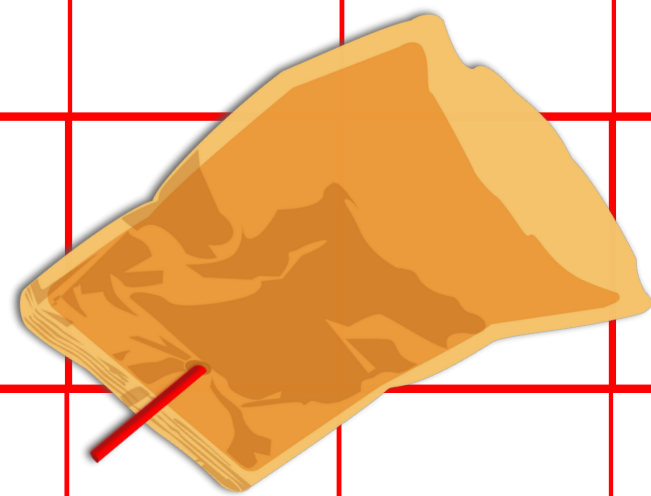


LEFT OVER



EPISODE 1

"It's Blame the Lunch Worker First and Foremost"

Less than \$2. That's how much the Santa Ana Unified school district can afford to spend on one student's lunch each day. The \$14 billion budget of the National School Lunch program stretches thin, and school nutrition workers are often the target of kids' complaints. Reporter Jessica Terrell explores the cultural figure of "the lunch lady," and how students and workers lose when bureaucrats focus on cost over care.

I challenge anyone...to walk into a grocery store or get our pricing for that matter, and produce something that is consistently high quality, well-liked, nutritious, falls within the incredibly strict guidelines, and do it for two bucks.

It's almost impossible. It really is almost impossible."

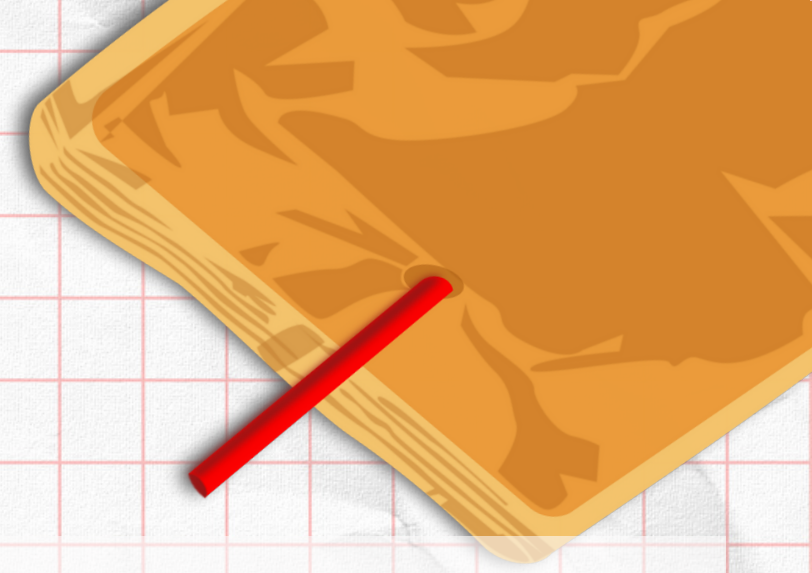
-Josh Goddard

DID YOU KNOW

Most school districts set up their child nutrition departments so that they're financially independent and self-sustaining. That means the price per meal needs to cover everything from nutritionists and cooks to kitchen equipment, plates, utensils, packaging, and the food itself.

Source: [Behind the lunch tray: A look at how school meals are funded](#)

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR A BAD SCHOOL LUNCH?



The stereotypical lunch lady—a grumpy, hair-netted woman serving up bowls of unidentifiable slop—has showed up in countless television shows, movies, and books. She is a well-known cultural figure, a symptom of the way students and parents frustrated by overly processed or bad-tasting school lunches continue to direct their frustrations towards lunch workers today. In 2020, taxpayers spent more than \$14 billion feeding students through the National School Lunch Program, but school lunch programs remain largely underfunded and understaffed. Because most school districts also structure their nutrition departments to be financially self-sustaining, any federal funding for school lunch must cover the cost of labor, facilities, and transportation in addition to the cost of the food itself. In urban school districts like Santa Ana Unified in California, the school lunch budget shakes out to less than \$2 per meal for food.

In the first episode of *Left Over*, reporter Jessica Terrell talks with SAUSD staff Josefina Mejia, Mariela Alonzo, and Josh Goddard to understand the hurdles facing nutrition workers trying to improve the nutrition and quality of school lunches in their district. Associate Professor Jennifer Gaddis provides insight into the historically gendered nature of care, and why nutrition workers are often the lowest paid staff in the school district. Jessica also introduces us to the meal programs at Pacific Elementary School in California and The Academy of Global Citizenship in Chicago, where nutrition workers are inviting students into the kitchen and expanding their job description to provide better education and care for kids at lunch.

What a Lunch Worker's Job Looks Like

THE WORK

"Workers may actually be growing with the child in a way that a teacher isn't. They're seeing them over time. They're also getting to know...siblings and other kinds of family members and really understanding the constellation of these students' lives. And oftentimes the workers are from the communities that they're serving." - Jennifer Gaddis

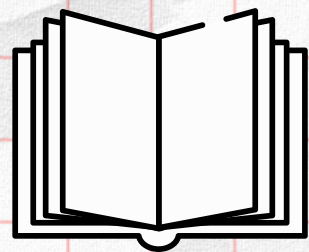
**They
aren't just
serving
food.**

**Lunch workers can be
crucial interpersonal
educators at school,
providing support and
care outside of the
classroom.**

THE COMPENSATION

Lunch workers are often the lowest paid workers in their district, with many lunch workers living below the federal poverty line. Many lunch worker roles also aren't guaranteed to be full-time, meaning that their pay isn't stable week-to-week and they might not be eligible for crucial benefits, like health insurance.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Books

The Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools by Jennifer E. Gaddis

On gendered and emotional labor:
The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling by Arlie Hochschild



Research

Find out how much your local school district pays its employees



Articles

Schools across the country are struggling to find staff. Here's why. from PBS NewsHour

Behind the lunch tray: A look at how school meals are funded from EDNc

Lunch Ladies and the Fight for School Food Justice: A Superhero Origin Story from Boom California

The Counter's 6-year archive of award-winning food journalism remains accessible to the public at thecounter.org.

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