

“We Created This System in the First Place”

74 percent. That’s how much fewer greenhouse gas emissions schools emit into the environment when they implement sustainable lunch menus—like Meatless Mondays! From serving culturally relevant food to buying from local farms, nutrition leaders across the U.S. are reimagining what school lunch can do for their communities. In this final episode, reporter Jessica Terrell explores how school nutrition programs are innovating and learning what it takes to make lasting, large-scale change to the National School Lunch Program.

Jessica Terrell:

In 2009, the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe opened up [a new state-of-the-art K-12 school](#) for roughly 500 children who live on the tribe’s sovereign land in Washington State. [Valerie Segrest](#), a passionate young nutritionist who at the time was the kitchen manager at the Muckleshoot school, saw the opening of the new \$40 million campus as the perfect opportunity to transform how students on the reservation ate.

Members of the tribe have [suffered from high rates of obesity](#) and other nutrition-related illnesses ever since they were [forcibly removed from their ancestral harvesting grounds](#) and their traditional foods were replaced with highly processed foods, [including Army rations provided to children at government-run boarding schools](#).

Valerie Segrest:

It was in a green building and we wanted all the programs inside to follow green standards. And so I thought, why not do that with the menus?

Terrell:

Because the Muckleshoot tribe was not participating in the National School Lunch Program, Valerie had a lot of leeway with how to transform the menu. She moved quickly to get rid of things like pizza and hot dogs. She worked with school cooks to replace those foods with salmon and fresh vegetables that were more reflective of tribal meals.

Segrest:

I went in there and changed the menus entirely and was like, on Cloud Nine thinking, “We’re just gonna be solving all the health problems in my community, and kids are gonna be so excited.” They revolted! And so did the adults. The adults and the teachers were the worst. They were really adamant that our students would be starving if we fed them a menu that didn’t have hot dogs and pizza on it.

Terrell:

Today, students at the Muckleshoot school eat [a lot of meals](#) that would be recognizable at schools across the country: barbecue chicken, meatloaf, cheese ravioli. They also eat salmon burgers and seafood gumbo and foraged berries and nettle tea—[traditional tribal foods](#) that serve as a way to both improve health and connect students with their ancestors.

Segrest:

They see a direct link in connection to their identity and who they are, where they come from.

Terrell:

Transitioning from open revolt over school lunch to a program that helps transform students' sense of self was not quick or easy. But Valerie's journey offers valuable insight into not only what it takes to create lasting change in a school lunch program, but also the impact that high quality school meals can have on an entire community.

Segrest:

I think if we fix school lunch in America, we could transform our culture collectively for all Americans.

Terrell:

You're listening to *Left Over: How Corporations and Politicians Are Milking the American School Lunch*. I'm Jessica Terrell. Over the last five episodes, we explored [how labor issues undermine efforts to truly nourish students](#), [why schools are so dependent on highly processed foods](#), and [how corporations exercise vast influence over what—and how—students eat](#).

In this episode, we're ending our investigation of the National School Lunch Program with a look at how school lunch workers and community activists are reimagining how the country feeds children. And why rethinking the basic premise of school lunch might offer the best path forward.

Valerie Segrest had some really good reasons for wanting to transform the school lunch program on the Muckleshoot reservation. Her first job as a nutritionist was taking care of tribal elders suffering from nutrition-related illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. She'd seen first-hand what a poor diet was doing to her community. The elders she worked with...

Segrest:

They all said that if they just had access to their traditional foods and medicines, that they could heal themselves and that they had really hoped that their grandchildren wouldn't suffer from these nutrition related chronic diseases.

Terrell:

She also knew that there was a really painful connection between school meals and the highly processed food that many people in the tribe eat today. A connection rooted in one of the darkest periods in U.S. history—[the Indian boarding school era, from 1860 to 1978](#).

Segrest:

At a very young age, our children were taken from us, removed from their homes and shipped to schools far away where they weren't allowed to practice their culture or have anything to do with their identity.

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Terrell:

They weren't allowed access to the food their ancestors had been eating for millennia.

Segrest:

During that period of time our children were [being fed Army rations](#), which is poor quality fats, refined sugars, processed carbohydrates, and poor quality cuts of meat. And so all of this coupled on top of each other was what literally altered the taste buds of our children. And so it's altered our preference for foods that we historically have eaten.

Terrell:

As a part of revamping of school meals, Valerie says the tribe tried to enroll in the National School Lunch Program. But after months of training on how the program works, how to build meal plans to fit all the nutrition requirements, how to fill out all the paperwork, they ditched the program after a single meal service.

Segrest:

Standards in that school lunch program around portion control and what can and can't be served, at the time there was no traditional foods that could be translated into the point system that they have around what counts as a vegetable or a protein. And so it was very challenging and also again, limits and weakens food sovereignty in our community.

Terrell:

Ditching the federal program didn't make Valerie's quest to transform student diets an easy one, though. Valerie says she was totally unprepared for the backlash she received when the school eliminated processed school lunch staples like hot dogs and pizza in favor of locally-harvested fish and game.

Segrest:

I learned very quickly how important it is to meet people where they're at.

Terrell:

People often [define food sovereignty](#) as a community's right to cultivate healthy food and have access to traditional cultural foods. But Valerie sees a connection to food sovereignty in the demand for hot dogs at school, too.

Segrest:

Having hot dogs on the menu, even though I don't agree with it, is food sovereignty. It's the inherent right to choose what you want to eat. And I didn't want to repeat, you know, the trauma of a superimposed diet on this population.

Terrell:

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Valerie also saw the demand for hot dogs as an opportunity to really engage students and double down on nutrition education. She started meeting with a group of students who were leading efforts to return to the old menu.

Segrest:

And upon meeting them, I realized pretty quickly that many of them were grandchildren of the elders that I had taken care of, whose hope for them was that they wouldn't, you know, have to suffer from chronic diseases like they were. And when I shared that information with them and started talking with them about how important traditional foods are to their identity, to their sense of belonging, to all of those other factors that our first foods bring up for us, they were so excited.

Terrell:

The students ended up starting a video project exploring salmon fishing and hunting and why it was important to them. Valerie started holding focus groups at the school, and in the community about what a healthier school lunch could look like. Today, children on the Muckleshoot reservation are served a meal that is paid for by revenues from the tribal casino. [One day a week](#) is dedicated to traditional tribal foods.

Segrest:

All of our menus follow similar guidelines of being locally sourced as much as possible, hopefully Muckleshoot sourced. Another principle is to have a seasonally inspired menu. So we know that foods available through the seasons are at their peak vitality and are offering their best nutrition. And they also help attune us to the shifts that are happening in our environment. So we want to celebrate that and make it part of our food memory.

Terrell:

Students are engaged in the food program. They learn how to harvest traditional foods. They are taught about what foods are being served and why, and what those foods meant to their ancestors.

Segrest:

Feeling that connection for the first time ever, is captivating and encouraging and inspires us to be present in this world and to feel that sense of belonging and that is so powerful.

Terrell:

And this community engagement around food has changed the minds of parents and teachers who initially complained about the changes.

Segrest:

Ten years after I had made these changes to the menus, I sat down, I was invited to a lunch at the tribal school where the kindergartners had gone out and harvested a bunch of the foods. They were harvesting wood sorrel, and doug fir tips, and all kinds of stuff. And they were putting it, like, incorporating it into these beautiful melon salads and doug fir-infused waters and beautiful sauces.

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Terrell:

Valerie was seated next to someone who, a decade prior, had sent her a number of angry emails about the menu changes she was making at the school.

Segrest:

She leaned over and said, "My grandson just came up to me, he's a kindergartner this year, and he told me about how excited he was about wood sorrel and he called it Sorrel Patch Kids. And I didn't even know you could eat those things. I thought there were like four leaf clovers on the forest floor, and it turns out they are edible and they're so good. And I just really wanted to apologize to you for the way I behaved all those years ago." And I just thought, wow, like it took 10 years and a grandchild to be born. And we often think that the adults are responsible for making this change. But time and time again I'm just so struck by how our next generation, our young ones, are really inspiring us to make those changes.

Terrell:

It might be the excitement of a grandchild that finally swayed that tribal elder, but engaging children and parents in nutrition education is one of the key missing ingredients in transforming school lunch programs. [Marion Nestle](#), an 86-year-old nutritionist, professor, and expert on food politics and policy, says she saw a similar transformation at [a private school in New York City](#).

Marion Nestle:

It was a private school in which the school meals were all fast food. Pizza, hamburgers, chicken nuggets. That's what the kids ate. And there were a group of parents in the school who wanted to do better.

Terrell:

Now granted, wealthy private schools are in a category of their own. The parents at this particular school had the funding and the clout to bring aboard a trained chef to take over the program. But what struck Marion about this school lunch program wasn't the amount of money that the chef was able to spend on food. It was how he convinced kids and parents to support a sweeping transformation of the menu.

Nestle:

The first thing he did was to start having meetings with parents. He met with the parents. He told them what he wanted to do. He listened to all of their complaints and all of their objections, and he said, how about you give me a certain amount of time to try this? Let's see how it works, and if it doesn't work, I'll change. And so they agreed to that, and then he went around to every single class and talked to every single class about what he was trying to do and what he intended to do, and asked the kids to give him a chance. And he did the same thing with the teachers.

Terrell:

Marion says she first visited the school about three months into the new program.

Nestle:

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He had totally transformed the food from something that a nutritionist would define as unhealthy for kids to something that was extremely healthy. It was largely plant based. There were lots of options. Everything was cooked from scratch. It was really pretty amazing.

Terrell:

Marion, who was researching a project at the time, asked to serve soup in the lunch line so she could observe the students' reactions without being too obvious.

Nestle:

The soup was a miso soup and it had seaweed floating in it. And I thought, the kids are never going to eat this. This is crazy. And in fact, a lot of kids weren't interested. And what he had was a stack of, you know, little pill cups that they give out in hospitals. And as the kids would come by, if they didn't take the soup, he would say, "Taste it. I made this soup especially for you. It'll hurt my feelings if you don't taste it." And because the taste was so small, the kids were willing to do it. And I would say that roughly half the kids who were willing to taste it said, "Oh boy, this is good. I want more." But look at the social effort that went into that. The one thing that he did without that seemed to me to be absolutely extraordinary was to address the cultural issues head on, and just ask them to give him a chance, which they were willing to do. And that's what has to be done. Clearly. And talking to the parents, because the biggest objections come from the parents.

Terrell:

Throughout the course of reporting for this series, better nutrition education came up time and time again as the best answer to our national school lunch dilemma. Parents and students need to be more engaged in not just what nutrients make up a good diet, but where their food comes from, why schools are serving what they serve, and why schools are trying to make changes to their meal programs.

There's also a flipside. Politicians and policymakers who have been trying for decades now to address public health issues like malnutrition and obesity through the national school lunch program need a more nuanced understanding of what food actually means to families.

Priya Fielding-Singh:

I think that there is a kind of popular discourse around lower income parents not knowing what is healthy or not caring about what is healthy.

Terrell:

That's [Priya Fielding-Singh](#), a sociologist and author of the book "How The Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food And Inequality In America."

Fielding-Singh:

I found in my research that neither of those things were true.

Terrell:

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Priya says that since about 2010 the popular understanding among researchers and policymakers about why we have nutritional disparities in this country that cut across social class and race has centered around access to healthy food. Basically, people with low incomes tend to have lower-quality diets because where they live [they lack access to good grocery stores](#), usually caused by food apartheid, or the money to buy healthier products. Current research really doesn't back that up though.

Fielding-Singh:

What I learned in my research was that, in addition to financial barriers to food among families and parents who are living in poverty, you know, the experience of living in poverty didn't just shape the access that families had, but it also fundamentally changed the meaning that food held within families. And what I mean by that is raising kids in poverty really shaped how parents thought, and felt about, and used food to be good and loving caregivers.

Terrell:

Lower-income parents that Priya talked to felt bad that their kids were eating so-called "junk food." They had a pretty solid understanding of what was healthy and what wasn't—with some subtle differences among them.

Fielding-Singh:

For lower-income parents who were raising their children in context of pretty extreme financial scarcity—paying the rent each month, putting enough gas in the car, paying the utility bill—all of these things really hinged on parents saying no to their children, saying no to their kids' requests for all kinds of things: new backpack, sneakers, a trip to the waterpark. Saying no to kids all the time was really difficult for parents. It was demoralizing. It made parents feel like they didn't have the resources to provide their kids with the things that they wanted.

Terrell:

Chips, soda, ice cream—these are all foods that are heavily marketed to kids and that kids request a lot.

Fielding-Singh:

Within this context of no, of having to say no all the time, food and really specifically junk food was one of the few things that lower-income parents could consistently say yes to their kids about. They worked hard to say yes to those requests. Not because they thought that those foods or drinks were particularly healthy. In fact, they knew that these foods and drinks were not that healthy, and they expressed that in an ideal world, they didn't want their kids consuming these things on a regular basis. But they say yes to these requests because doing so helped them to feel like good parents.

Terrell:

Priya says schools aren't living up to their potential to take on some of the work of making healthy food appealing to kids, to counter the marketing of junk food to kids, and take some of the burden off parents.

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Fielding-Singh:

But I think that part of what that requires is thinking about how to design meals kids like and that kids find delicious and that kids also think are cool. Right now, the way that school meals are designed is really as a charity program. Shifting that focus over to nutrition and the healthiness of the meals, while considering really, really, really critically how delicious and appealing those meals are and how those meals resonate with families' culinary and cultural traditions, and the foods that parents and families themselves would like kids to be eating. I think that that's the direction that school meals need to go in order to better account for these meanings that food holds. Both to parents, but also to children themselves.

AGC Students:

Just, just one more thing. Just one more piece. Oh my, okay. Fine. You were first. Yes, that's OK. Would you like some more?

Julia O'Grady:

Dos tacos?

AGC Teacher:

Thank you.

Julia O'Grady:

No, no beans ahora. Sorry.

AGC Students:

(Sound of kids groaning.)

Terrell:

[Julia O'Grady](#), a middle aged woman with dark black hair and a stern but friendly maternal air, presides over the front of the lunch line at the [Academy for Global Citizenship](#), a public charter school on the South Side of Chicago. AGC is a dual language program and students and teachers slip in and out of English and Spanish as they select between chicken and tofu tacos and cucumbers served alongside Tajín—a mixture of salt, chile and lime.

O'Grady:

Go around mami. Go around if you don't want it. Please!

Terrell:

The school lunch program at AGC is run [in partnership with Aramark](#), a multinational corporation that is contracted to manage the nutrition program for Chicago Public Schools. Yet AGC has managed to win certain concessions from the district and Aramark that allow the school to have a nutrition program unlike any other in the city.

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Aramark provides most of the ingredients and employees like Julia are hired by the district, but AGC invests additional funds into the program and serves all-organic meals that are scratch-cooked on site. Serving locally-sourced meals that align with the school's values around sustainability and reflect the culture of its predominantly-Latino student body is core to AGC's mission.

AGC Student:

All the food is healthy and they, and then, and they can even make pizza healthy.

Terrell:

The cafeteria is filled with fourth graders. Nearly every one of them opted to take the free meal, and most of the food is being eaten enthusiastically.

AGC Student:

My favorite food is the chicken noodle soup that they make here. It's healthy and it's really good. I really like it. Sometimes I ask for seconds.

AGC Student:

I love the pozole. My favorite is probably the pizza or the chicken noodle soup.

AGC Student:

My favorite, my favorite is the tacos. I don't like the pizza.

Terrell (in interview recording):

And when you guys said that you like it cuz it's healthy and it's cooked here, how do you know that it's healthy?

AGC Student:

They tell us. It has nutrients in it too.

AGC Student:

Yeah. And most of the time, like this is a very environmental school. So like we help the earth, like all that good stuff. And the food, like the fruits, we grow fresh from the garden.

AGC Student:

When I came here, I knew it was gonna be good for me. And it's gonna be healthy for me.

Terrell:

Creating kitchen space, training workers, and finding ways to work within a system that was not set up to support organic or scratch cooked meals has been a serious challenge. But Kris De La Torre, the school's director of sustainability and wellness, says the effort is essential.

Kris De La Torre:

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So our school lunch program at AGC is really centered around also some of the same things that drive the educational pieces in the classroom.

Terrell:

Kris is a soft-spoken woman in her 30s, with a thick shock of brown hair and a quiet but clear enthusiasm for her work.

De La Torre:

So we're really looking at our environmental footprint. We're also looking at sort of a nutritionally balanced diet for our students. And we're also really looking at ways where we can shift away from an animal protein emphasis and incorporate a diverse representation of plant-based menu items.

Terrell:

AGC has big ambitions. The school is in the process of [constructing a new campus](#) that will house an urban farm, a community wellness center, and a large kitchen facility that can be a resource for the broader community. Kris says AGC is constantly debating whether it needs to transition away from CPS and Aramark and become licensed as its own food authority—a step that would require a bigger financial investment, but would give the school more control over things like buying more local food. Something Kris says is important not only for reducing the school's carbon footprint, but also for helping students understand the impact of the foods they eat.

De La Torre:

If students feel connected to the people who make their food and they're excited about the food that they eat, they recognize that the food they're eating has an origin, has a place—be it the school garden or a regional farmer—all of that other really important stuff becomes much less abstract. Food also should be a pleasure. And I think that can start at absolutely any age.

Terrell:

While the school would like to purchase more food from local producers, Kris and her team already have a laser focus on helping students create connections with the food they eat. Kris runs a school garden at both of ACG's current campuses. The school usually has several live chickens on hand. And school meals are integrated into lesson plans.

Kris De La Torre:

Part of my role is to work with teachers to tease out deeper themes that they can also tie to maybe some experiential piece. Maybe it's a field trip or an expert visit who can make these things really come to life and also draw some pretty clear lines outside the school walls.

Terrell:

The difference between serving students a chicken nugget of unknown origin and a chicken taco that has been ethically sourced from a factory with good labor practices and a smaller environmental impact is

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significant, Kris says — particularly when students are engaged in knowing what they are eating and where it comes from.

De La Torre:

So there are lots of very tangible differences, but there's also some less tangible differences that will impact a student's quality of life and how they see, sort of, their citizen role. And I really believe that. How that all connects is important here.

Terrell:

AGC is part of a growing movement of progressive schools and nutrition leaders who are focused on the broader societal impacts that might come from truly transforming school nutrition programs. Profound changes are possible if [the \\$14 billion a year](#) in federal spending went to small farms or agricultural producers that were committed to more sustainable farming methods and fair labor practices. Not to mention the immense possibilities of improving student health and overall wellbeing. Here's [Angela McKee-Brown](#), a former executive director of the Edible Schoolyard Project, who spent several years working to redesign the student meal experience at San Francisco Unified.

Angela McKee-Brown:

There's a huge potential for us here in the United States if we choose to do better. If we choose to invest in our communities and choose to invest in our food system and in particular choose to invest in school lunch because school lunch is an extraordinarily powerful resource.

Terrell:

School lunch could have significant impacts on climate change and social equality by providing more resources to marginalized farmers to grow food in a regenerative way, Angela says. A study by the USDA showed that meatless Monday menus at schools [required 51% less water to produce](#) and resulted in 74% fewer greenhouse gas emissions. Oakland Unified reduced the carbon footprint of its school lunch program [by 14% in 2014](#) by having one day of vegetarian offerings and another day of meals made with locally sourced food. Universal free meals—which were [briefly a reality](#) during the height of the pandemic—could significantly reduce student food insecurity and help alleviate the stigma of poverty. If designed right, school meals could also be an opportunity to create real community and connection among students.

McKee-Brown:

So if you think about it, school lunch is the one time a day that children of all different backgrounds and abilities come together in a shared space. And that means there's a huge opportunity within our schools to build a sense of community and build a sense of belonging with the school lunch, with that school cafeteria experience. When you see kids sitting down in a cafeteria together, eating a really great meal that they enjoy and that they are eating in a dignified environment, being cared for and supported by people who are being treated well and being paid a living wage? There is a huge sense of connection in that space. And imagine here in the United States, especially in this day and age, if we felt connected to each other, if we felt like we all belonged here in this country.

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Terrell:

Creating the space for that kind of a school meal experience would require more than an influx of cash for school districts. It would necessitate a reimagining of the very goals of school lunch and widespread changes to how the National School Lunch Program is operated and overseen.

Katie Wilson:

We need to sit down with the decision makers and the stakeholders, and we need to decide how this is gonna work in America so that we can uplift our local farmers, uplift our minority processing plants and help everybody get involved in the system of feeding their community.

Terrell:

That's [Katie Wilson](#), the head of the Urban School Food Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of the nation's largest school district meal programs. Katie is an upbeat woman with a warm smile and disarmingly down-to-earth demeanor. She ran several school district nutrition programs in the Midwest, helped start a doctorate program for nutrition workers, was president of the School Nutrition Association, and served as a deputy in the USDA during the Obama Administration.

She's one of many people who I spoke to for this series who point to procurement—[the process schools go through to purchase food](#)—as but one example of how convoluted and overly complex the National School Lunch Program has become.

Wilson:

You have to buy food. So you have your federal procurement rules that you have to follow. Then you have state procurement rules, you have to follow. And then many local districts also have their own procurement rules.

Terrell:

These procurement rules often force schools to select the lowest bid.

Wilson:

So if you think about buying food at the very lowest price, that's our first problem. Good quality food, paying a worker a fair wage doesn't work that way.

Terrell:

None of these procurement rules were written with food in mind, Katie says. They were written for items like school supplies and school buses. Like the "Buy American" provision, which stipulates that schools have to fill out a form any time they make a foreign purchase.

Wilson:

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In one state, every time the school district buys bananas, they have to have documentation in every single school, every single delivery, why they didn't buy those bananas in America. We don't have bananas in America.

Terrell:

Katie points to the United Kingdom as an alternative to what she says is the overregulation of school meals and overly convoluted procurement process in the U.S.

Wilson:

They have strong nutrition standards as well, but they're encouraged to reduce their carbon footprint. They're encouraged to use local. They're encouraged to do family style dining in the elementary schools where the cooks come out and put the food on the table. They have students that actually serve the food and, and those students are trained to encourage younger students to try something.

Terrell:

Programs in the U.K. are [reviewed every year](#) by a nutritionist, but the reviewers aren't measuring ounces of food like they do with school meal audits in the U.S., where it can take school nutrition directors months to gather the paperwork for an annual review.

Wilson:

Nobody comes and stands at the end of the line and says, "do you have exactly a half a cup?" They look at your menu. They look at the training that you've given your cooks. They look at how much you've reduced your carbon footprint. And then they look at how you market your program and encourage students to come into the program. And they want to see how you're encouraging kids to try new things. We have to talk to legislators and tell them how ridiculous these policies are. We buy USDA foods, which people call commodities, a year and a half in advance of using them. That makes no sense in a food system. And so we have to continue to push back and help rewrite the policies that don't make sense when you're trying to feed children.

Terrell:

Congress is supposed to debate these issues every five years during the reauthorization of what's known as [the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act](#). The most recent version of the Act was passed in 2010 and expired in 2015. In each subsequent year, there has been little urgency on the part of lawmakers to take up the issue.

At Pacific Elementary in Davenport California, where students cook meals from scratch daily and the lunch program is the pride of the town, Principal Eric Gross says he wishes lawmakers would come partake in the family-style meal.

Eric Gross:

I think it's important to be creative, to think about what's possible and not what has always happened.

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Terrell:

When Gross first interviewed for the position at Pacific Elementary, he was surprised to learn that the school subsidized the school lunch program from its general fund. He was also worried about the liability of letting elementary school students wield knives and work with hot pots and pans. He became a convert after eating the school lunch—which he still does every day—and noticing the impact the program had on students.

Gross:

The main thing that changes is not their ability to cook. It's their confidence. It's their belief in themselves. And that's the core problem for a lot of kids who struggle with learning and struggle with academics in school, is they don't believe they can do it. I would love for the powers that be to come eat lunch here, because I think they might be convinced that it's worth a little extra investment. That actually feeding kids healthy food means that they will be healthier in general and more successful in school and life.

Terrell:

I spoke to hundreds of people in the reporting of this series. And I asked nearly every one of them what they thought the National School Lunch Program said about our nation. The answers I received were insightful, maddening, and heartbreaking.

Betti Wiggins:

What the school lunch says about America is that we'll feed some and not all. That we'll evaluate your potential for good health and nutrition by how much money your parents have.

Marion Nestle:

What it says is that we don't value children. We just don't.

Marlie Wilson:

It speaks to what we currently value in our country, which is profits over the health of students.

Valerie Segrest:

We have a system that is set up to look at our food through numbers and figures. And we can do better.

Terrell:

But some of the answers also held hope. Here's [Jose Oliva](#) of the HEAL Food Alliance.

Jose Oliva:

It shows us what our priorities are not just as a country, but as a people. And so right now, I think we are in a moment of a reckoning about that.

Terrell (in interview recording):

It kind of sounds like you're saying, "It says that America's values are changing."

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Oliva:

That's exactly what I'm saying. Yes. I'm saying that we are, as a people, changing. And we're no longer just assuming that the institution is going to do what is right. We're saying, "We wanna make sure that we're doing the right thing by our kids and by future generations."

Terrell:

The most optimistic thing I heard in my time reporting though, might have been this reminder from [Jennifer Gaddis](#), a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The National School Lunch Program didn't appear with the stroke of a pen when [the national law passed in 1946](#). It was, in many ways, the result of decades of work by activists and community members building programs at a local level. Work that led to a national law and eventually to the \$14 billion a year program we have today.

Jennifer Gaddis:

I think we have to think about the people who are behind it in the first place and the people who are in it currently. And that's really the source of power and hope for me. This huge federal program that's feeding roughly 30 million kids across the country, like, that's a huge program. And to think that actually started by the local experimental efforts of women working together in their communities to try to do something differently—to me, that's what can give us some hope that if we really build collective power, we can change systems, because we created this system in the first place.

Terrell:

Change is possible, even for a massive and unwieldy national program. Change can start small and lead to something really, truly big.

You've been listening to Left Over: How Politicians and Corporations are Milking the American School Lunch. I'm Jessica Terrell.

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Juleyka Lantigua is the editor and executive producer. Our sound designer is Erica Huang. This episode was reported, written, and produced by me, Jessica Terrell. Anne Lim is our associate producer. Kate Gallagher is our fact checker. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Kori Doran designed our cover art. Emma Forbes is our digital designer. Our theme music was composed and performed by Blue Dot Sessions. Thank you for listening.

"We Created This System in the First Place"

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