



# Parent activists versus the corporation: a fight for school food sovereignty

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## Abstract

This paper empirically supports school food as a site of contested values, where corporate interests can come into direct conflict with those of communities. This is a story about the experience of a small group of activist parents going up against a major food service corporation contracted by their school district. The analysis considers their experiences as dedicated and knowledgeable parent activists who, after years of trying to work with employees of the global food service corporation, grow weary, aim to overthrow it, and finally, after a decade, succeed. In response to the parents' struggles, I apply a food sovereignty lens to school food, introducing the concept of *school food sovereignty*. I propose that school food sovereignty requires community participation and consideration of the health and welfare of students, environmental sustainability, local economic benefits, cultural congruence, and attention to food-related justice.

**Keywords** School food · Food sovereignty · Parent activism · Neoliberalism · Sustainability

*There needs to be one place in society where children feel that their needs come first—not their future as consumers. In American society today, schools are the only option. That's why every aspect of school food matters so much and is worth every minute spent to promote and protect its integrity.*

(Nestle 2011, p. 146)

## Introduction

Reforming school food is not as straightforward as it may seem. Sandler (2011) admonishes that, “just as school teaching has never been an apolitical act of educators providing knowledge to...children, school feeding has never simply been an apolitical act of educators providing food for hungry

children” (p. 33). Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) caution that, “School food is political. And school food involves politics” (p. 202). A number of researchers (e.g. Weaver-Hightower and Robert 2011; Nestle 2011; Sandler 2011) have emphasized the importance of examining the politics behind school food policy and decision making. As Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) argue,

A deep, critical look at school food policy tells us much about the education schools provide. It shows how little we genuinely want children to focus and learn when we do not feed them nutritious food to fortify them throughout the school day. It shows how much a society cares about children's long-term growth beyond the school day, across years. (p. 206)

Nestle (2011) recognizes that school food is typically a delicate balancing act between corporate interests and those concerned with children's well-being. Ultimately, as Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) note,

Decisions about what is served to whom are influenced somewhat by local communities. They are also influenced by those wielding control of the funding, and that control is shaped by politics that have for generations been characterized by inequality...analyses must acknowledge any school feeding as an *ideological project*. (p. 204)

All names used in this publication are real, at the request of the participants.

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This paper empirically supports school food as a site of contested values, where corporate interests can come into direct conflict with those of communities. This is a story about the experience of a small group of activist parents going up against a major food service corporation contracted by their school district. The analysis considers the experiences of these dedicated and knowledgeable parent activists who, after nearly a decade of trying to work with a global food service corporation in their district, see their efforts largely fail to make substantive changes in the district's food. Their experiences over years of attempting to work with the corporation provide community-level, empirical support for the need for local control over school food decisions. Their group asserts that school food systems can and should provide healthy, high-quality, minimally processed food, while benefiting local communities by supporting local agriculture and business, and, in doing so, serve as models of environmental sustainability. I argue that this case provides evidence for the need for a food sovereignty approach within school food systems. Research questions guiding this study include:

- What challenges do parent activists face when attempting to make changes in school food within a district that outsources its food service operations?
- How do these struggles provide empirical support for the need for sovereign school food systems?

Ultimately, this paper tells a story of how corporations thwart local activism and autonomy, and serves as an argument for local and autonomous, rather than outsourced, school food decision-making.

## Neoliberalism and school food

School food is about more than “just” feeding children: school food is big business (Nestle 2011). As a result, school food is a major site of neoliberal enactment. Sandler points out that, “Many people are profiting from school reform in every area, and feeding is no exception” (2011, p. 43). Sandler (2011) also notes, “Privatization of urban public schooling has changed the circumstances of urban school feeding just as it has changed the circumstances of urban school learning. These changes are no less real for having gone largely unacknowledged in the public sphere” (p. 27). The ubiquitous and much-maligned vending machines, junk food, and fast-food chains in cafeterias are all signs of market-based influences heavily penetrating the realm of school feeding.

Gaddis and Coplen (2017) explain that “School lunch programs can become co-opted in ways that undermine their public value” (p. 3). For example, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was originally designed

to provide a market for agricultural surpluses just as much as it was to provide social assistance to children (Levine 2008; Poppendieck 2010; Ruis 2017). In the late 1960s–early 1970s, in response to political and activist pressure to increase provisions for low-income kids in the form of free lunches, school food administrators increasingly turned to the food service industry to help them meet the need for lower costs. In 1969, food service management corporations were originally (and controversially) permitted by the USDA to do contract work supplying food for schools in hard-to-reach service areas (Levine 2008). It took years for contracting out to private companies to become common, with only 6% of US school districts doing so in 1995, over 25 years later (Poppendieck 2010). However, in the 2000s this situation rapidly changed; by 2005, 13% of districts contracted out to private companies (Poppendieck 2010), by 2011, 25% of US schools had outsourced school meals (Komisar 2011). Sandler (2011) likens this massive increase in outsourcing to a wider trend in privatization across many school services. Poppendieck (2010) notes that, interestingly, the districts most likely to contract out to food service corporations were not those in hard-to-reach service areas or serving the lowest-income populations.

Three major multinational food service management corporations dominate the school food market at the K-16 levels: Aramark, Sodexo, and Chartwell's. Today, rather than providing supplemental support, these global corporations have created strongholds in many school districts by promising a low price, a necessity given the limited federal reimbursement for free and reduced-price lunches. However, the low price has come at a heavy cost to students, as the food has generally been of exceedingly poor quality: highly processed, nutrient poor, and even unpalatable (Poppendieck 2010; Stapleton and Cole 2018). What's more, an “increasingly cozy alliance” between food service corporations and giant food processors like ConAgra allows corporations to strike deals to mutually increase their profits (Komisar 2011). These deals often involve heavy processing of once-healthy raw products—like chicken and sweet potatoes—into less-healthy, highly processed products (Komisar 2011). As a result, these corporations maximize their profit by feeding nutritionally-void food to low-income children (Sandler 2011).

Neoliberal values permeate all aspects of school food, even within districts that self-operate their nutrition services. In an effort to sell more products, most of the food choices offered in schools are non-healthy foods like French fries, fried chicken fingers, pizza, and chips. This push to offer options of junk food that appeal to students as customers (Weaver-Hightower 2011) is a neoliberal framing of children's position in relation to school food. The assumption that students require a myriad of food choices is also

a neoliberal interpretation of school meals. And, though school feeding programs seemingly give students control and choice in what they are selecting, the actual choices offered are dictated by politics and money rather than children's well-being (e.g. Nestle 2002; Ruis 2017). Historian Levine (2008) explains,

What emerged in many school districts by the end of the 1970s was a public/private partnership shaped fundamentally by business concerns such as profitability and efficiency. Nutrition, health, and education all became subsumed into a model of consumer choice and market share. While public resources continued to underwrite the National School Lunch Program, few lunchrooms could stay in business without bowing in some way or other to the brand names, fast food, and corporate models of efficiency, productivity, and profit (p. 152).

As part of this, in 1972 Congress amended the Child Nutrition Act to permit unrestricted "competitive" foods to be sold alongside reimbursable meals (Nestle 2002). Among my own high school memories, I recall my principal standing in front of our school community at an assembly and proclaiming that our school, "PLD" [named for Paul Laurence Dunbar, a famous and ground-breaking African-American writer] really stood for "Pepsi Loves Dunbar" thanks to all the sponsorships, deals, and collaborations the school had received from the Pepsi Corporation. As a high school student, this statement troubled me on many levels, which is probably why I still remember it 25 years later. Even promising school food reform measures like farm-to-school programs have fallen into the neoliberal paradigm (Allen and Guthman 2006).

## School food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is essentially the right for people to determine their own food systems. Now a global movement, food sovereignty surfaced in 1996 by the International Peasant's Movement, *Via Campesina*, to promote local autonomy for food sourcing, distribution, and consumption. A major aim of the food sovereignty movement is to combat the damage inflicted on small farmers by global agribusiness (Alkon and Mares 2012). At a 2007 Forum on Food Security, a definition was signed by delegates from over 80 countries which included the following:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to

define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation...Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets...and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social, and economic sustainability. (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007)

Alkon and Mares (2012) explain that, "Food sovereignty moves beyond a focus on food security—access to sufficient food—to advocate for communities' rights to produce for themselves rather than remain dependent on international commodities markets" (p. 347). Alkon and Mares (2012) point to many connections and overlaps between the US food justice movement and the global South's food sovereignty movement including support of local control, production, and consumption of food systems. However, Alkon and Mares (2012) note that only food sovereignty includes direct resistance to the corporate food regime.

Despite recognition of food sovereignty within countless disciplines, too few connections have been made between food sovereignty and school food. Powell and Wittman (2018) have explored the extent to which farm-to-school initiatives can help support broader food sovereignty in Canada. Lupinacci and Happel-Parkins (2018) have argued that food sovereignty is a stronger and more sustainable approach than food security and suggest that the food sovereignty approach used in community food movements such as in Detroit could guide the way we think about school food. I agree and suggest that a food sovereignty lens can bring a guiding political and ethical stance to school food operations.

In this paper, I directly apply a food sovereignty lens to school food, introducing the concept of *school food sovereignty*. I envision *school food sovereignty* as a community's autonomy and self-determination concerning school food decisions, including what food is served, how it is prepared, and from where it is sourced. Outcomes of a sovereign school food system could include having school food that is healthy, delicious, and reflective of community culture, food that is locally and/or sustainably sourced and/or humanely raised, and where the sourcing, cooking, and preparing of the food benefits the local economy. Following the lead of the larger food sovereignty movement, I argue that a school food sovereignty approach can be a powerful framework through which to combat the ever-increasing outsourcing of school food to global corporations. A food sovereignty approach also provides a guiding framework to schools that self-operate yet source food from large corporations rather than local communities, or those who do not attend to environmental concerns or cultural food preferences of their school communities.

## The study

Weaver-Hightower (2011, p. 68) recommends

Because of the complexities they face every day, food reform organizations' survival and success are always in question. There is much that we can learn from them about food reform, including the practices they have implemented, the solutions they've proposed, and even the barriers and failures they've encountered along the way.

In the spirit of learning from barriers and failures met in school food reform efforts, this study is based on an ethnographic case study of a small group of activist parents as they struggled to improve school food in their local school district. Despite nearly a decade of tedious and knowledge-driven work toward higher quality school food in their district, the group felt largely unsuccessful in achieving their aims. This analysis primarily focuses on recollections from the founding mom, Carrie Frazier, who began the group 10 years ago and has persisted in the struggle while other parents in the group have come and gone over time. Her observations are complemented by those of three other mothers who were part of the initial group, Ann, Stacey, and Toña. The group is open to all parents, but has been comprised almost entirely of mothers over the years.

The school district in question is one of two districts serving a small city in the Pacific Northwest. The district serves over 16,000 students and is socioeconomically mixed but not affluent, with free and reduced lunch rates ranging across schools from approximately 25 to 75%. In the midst of a budget crisis, the school board decided to outsource school meals to food service management corporation, Sodexo, several years before the parent group formed. The poor-quality, highly processed food in district school cafeterias prompted the parents to act.

## Methodology and researcher positionality

I met Carrie through a local school garden education series I co-organized. She asked for my help in telling their story, hoping that others could learn from their struggles. In addition to that of a researcher, my positionality is as a member of the community, university instructor on food and schools, fellow mother, and future parent in the school district. Moreover, my connections with Carrie and several other parents who have been involved in this group are complex and multiple. Independent of my connections to the parent activists as a researcher, students in my university classes have volunteered in field placements with Toña and Stacey,

who created and run an exemplary school food service at a local charter school. My class has also toured and eaten in their cafeteria on several field trips. Carrie has spoken for several of my classes. I recruited a student intern to assist the organization's work. I have also attended other food events in the community with some of the other parent members.

Methods for this critical ethnographic case study include narrative interviews, participant observation in relevant events, and textual artifacts including documents and emails. Narrative interviews were conducted with the founding mom of the group, three other key participants, and one former steering committee member. Events for participant observation included a workshop for the group led by "Renegade Lunch Lady" chef Ann Cooper, two school board meetings where parents and elementary-aged students spoke publicly to the school board urging school food reform, and a school board community bond measure hearing. I have also attended an advocacy lunch with selected school board members and parent activists, and have joined parents from the group as they met with our town's mayor. I have had numerous informal conversations with the founder and key members of the group during our work together over the last 2 years. Other sources of data have been emails of events, documents, historical artifacts of the organization shared with me by Carrie, as well as the organization's website and recruitment materials. I have taken field notes and analytic field notes throughout data collection and analysis and constructed a timeline from Carrie's recollections. Narrative interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes reflecting key moments, insights, and struggles faced by the parents.

## The journey to overthrow a corporation

### Desire for local autonomy and benefits

A key goal for the parent activists is a school food program that benefits and reflects the values of the local community. Though they do not use the term food sovereignty, their stated guiding values are strongly consistent with a food sovereignty approach. The group's mission statement explains: "We are working to provide every [district] student fresh, minimally-processed and nutrient-dense food that optimizes learning and health, supports our local economy, and protects our planet" (marketing pamphlet, spring 2017).

The desire for school food that "supports our local economy" reflects an approach consistent with a food sovereignty lens that urges local community economic benefits. Stacey, a mother involved in the original group, responded, "There are a lot of people in this community that care about this issue. And it seems like a no brainer for [our town] where we are a

foodie capital...[with many] farmers and conscious people that care about local jobs.” Emphasis on environmental benefits is also consistent with a locally sourced food system. Carrie explained that,

We would like to see something self-operated, so local. Not a food service management corporation based in France—380,000 workers, the 20<sup>th</sup> largest employer in 80 countries. This is [our town]. We value local. Let’s put this money back into the community and not for shareholders in this giant corporation.

The financial concern was not insignificant. As they began their activism, the parents learned that the school board was paying Sodexo out of the district’s general fund to cover losses Sodexo was experiencing. This move felt unconscionable to the parents for several reasons. First, the school board publicly opposed spending general fund money on school food. Second, the parents argued that Sodexo was losing money because of the poor quality of the food they served, which decreased student participation in both paid and reimbursable meals. Third, Carrie shared that Sodexo won the contract as the only company that agreed to operate within a financial deficit. Finally, Carrie noted that “We are having this budget crisis. That [money] could be going to teachers. And instead we’re giving it to a huge corporation.”

Frustrated that Sodexo, a giant, global corporation, obfuscated its identity as such, Carrie shared,

It always angered me when they would refer to themselves as [the district] nutrition services.... They would speak at different [community] events... [such as] a gathering of folks interested in local [food].... They just spoke as though they were [district] nutrition services and they were all about local.... They did not indicate that they were a huge mega-corporation.... They are very good at not advertising the fact that they are Sodexo.

Similarly, Stacey confided that, “The major problem I had with the work for those six years [I was involved] was that Sodexo would send people to meetings and they would pose like they were representing [the district].... They were employed by Sodexo, but wouldn’t tell people that. They would just act like the district.... It was weird.”

Acknowledging their community’s high valuing of local food, Stacey conjectured, “I think if more people in [town] knew that [the school district] food was served by a multinational corporation... they might say we’d rather have it be locally run. Keep those jobs, keep them here.”

Having a locally run and operated food service was not the only local aspect that the parent activists desired. They also wanted to increase the amount of local food served in cafeterias. A farm-to-school non-profit organization expended tremendous labor getting local foods into district

cafeterias, which felt, in one way, like a major win. However, Carrie pointed out that the local foods were

Always the stuff on the side... not the entrees.... So the numbers are inflated when you look at local.... They will give you dollar amounts and it sounds impressive. But when you look at the percentage compared to the entire budget they have to work with, it’s pretty small.... The entrees were just continuing to come from Sysco and other corporations.

Additionally, though the corporation employees would present the total amount spent on “local” foods, Carrie reflected that their definitions of local were not always consistent with the parents’ conceptions of local. For example, Carrie shared that the food service would celebrate some vendors as local that were actually “huge companies” serving the entire Pacific Northwest. The parent group advocated sourcing from a smaller geographic region, using fewer corporate producers. Another group member, Toña, noted that sourcing food locally “would benefit our whole economy so much.”

Moreover, with the farm-to-school non-profit helping to increase the amount of local food in cafeterias by facilitating relationships and tracking amounts, the district began touting their use of local food—and Sodexo was happy to take the credit. As Carrie reflected, “How much do we want to make Sodexo look good? We are making all of these changes, but then we are kind of shooting ourselves in the foot.”

A similar situation occurred with the fight to get school garden produce served in cafeterias. Carrie discovered that serving school garden produce depended on the kitchen coordinator’s willingness to serve it on the salad bar and therefore varied widely across district schools. Nonetheless, Carrie saw Sodexo eager to post online and announce in public settings that they served school garden produce on salad bars. Carrie recalls,

They [Sodexo] were touting that and advertising it on the website, like this was this a common everyday thing. And I think it was only happening at [two elementary schools]. Their whole website... the stuff they say... would make it look so good. So that was always confusing to me... But yeah, I was there washing lettuce [from one elementary school garden] in the [school] kitchen as a parent. And serving it.

In other words, though the school garden lettuce was served in her children’s school because of her labor as a parent volunteer, the corporation was taking the credit. Similarly, when the parents spent tremendous labor working to pilot healthier and (sometimes) more local menu options, Carrie wondered again,

‘Do we help Sodexo?’... This could be an opportunity to prove that the kids will eat better food if we

pilot these different items on the menu. But at the same time, I am doing Sodexo's job and making them look better in the long run... I went through that dilemma again. But I was like, 'Nope. I am going to do this.' And we came up with a spreadsheet and who was going to do what and how we were going to help with this pilot.

Likewise, in a conversation together, Stacey and Toña reflected,

Toña: [The corporation] is really good at highlighting the things that they do.

Stacey: Brainwashing.

Toña: And making it look and sound great.

Stacey: Yes, and they are good at saying oh yeah, yeah, yeah. We agree. We agree. And then nothing changes.

### Parent activist distrust of and frustration with the corporation

The corporation's concern about its bottom line over kids' access to food was repeatedly evident to the parents. For example, corporate employees often engaged in "pilot testing" of healthier dishes to placate the parents, but set up conditions to yield the outcome most beneficial to the company. For example, Carrie recounted that the food service did not "want to give up pizza and hamburger day because those are their biggest money maker days. So they [would] put a chicken salad on a pizza day and say, 'Look we offer chicken salad.'" The parents recognized that placing a healthier option next to a popular less-healthy option meant that students were far less likely to choose the healthy food. Carrie reported that the company would often make this move when piloting healthier options, so that they could show that students did not prefer them. In another example, with little advance notice, the corporation decided to stop serving charter schools in the district, not because students there did not need food, but because the company was losing money on these smaller schools. One positive from this move was that it created space for one school to form an innovative, from-scratch food service (co-created by Stacey and Toña). On the flip side, other district charter schools were left with no food service at all, despite having students eligible for the NSLP.

Over their 8 years of advocacy, Carrie and other parents in the group grew extremely frustrated by the revolving door of Sodexo employees serving as food service directors. Carrie recalled, "We get a new guard in there and it's like we are starting from scratch again... We were making headway with this group and then these new folks come in and you don't know what to expect. We are on our third [nutrition services director]. And all the people under them have changed. Three different iterations." While the employees working in

the school cafeterias were district-based, the food service directors were brought in and employed primarily by the corporation. Moreover, these directors tended to be from outside the community and many commuted in from other parts of the state. This meant that they were not typically familiar with the community, population, local producers, and other local resources. Interestingly, the first director left for a position with the state in farm-to-school work and credited Carrie for getting him involved in local food. Carrie reflected that the second director "didn't last long because... Sodexo didn't like him... I think he was trying to make real change..." Perhaps not surprisingly, that food service director moved to a school district that self-operated its school food service.

The underhandedness Carrie felt from the food service corporation was particularly apparent in community meetings. The community meetings were included in the district food service call for proposals at the insistence of the parent activists so that they could ensure community voice and participation. Ironically, though these meetings were intended to be pathways for democratic work around school food, they became a site of great frustration by the parents.

So we would have these community meetings... and when [Sodexo representatives were] present at these community meetings, it was easy for them to spin this and make it look really good. They would always give their presentation... it was a lot of patting themselves on the back. When the third school food director came in after the second mysteriously left, she would invite these speakers... great programs that of course we would be supportive of, but it would take the entire meeting. They started just giving us cards. 'Here write down your questions on these cards.' Like at one meeting... I was so mad.... I was watching the clock.... The meetings went from an hour and a half... to an hour.... 'First we are going to do our dog and pony show and then the speaker is going to speak and then oops, times up'... But this was not the intent of these meetings.

Carrie grew so frustrated with the "dog and pony show" stifling parent voice that she eventually quit attending the community meetings she and the other parents had worked so hard to create. In the middle of her last meeting, Carrie approached a school board member and said, 'We have all of these questions, but I am thinking that I am done. I am done with this and I don't even want to ask my questions. It's just BS. We are just going to leave and we are not coming back to do these meetings anymore.' As Carrie shared with me, "It did not feel like a community [meeting] when all of a sudden it was stacked." Interestingly, the word "stacked" was used by another group member, Stacey, in a separate conversation. Stacey reflected that, "I think they stacked the room because they knew that people like us who cared about

school food and had certain expectations would come to those meetings.” Stacey went on to explain that by “stacking” she was referring to Sodexo specifically asking people to meetings who were supportive of maintaining the school food status quo. Ann explained that “They created a [community] advisory committee... [and] maybe 50 percent of the people on it were Sodexo staff or union [nutrition services] employees... It was not a true community advisory group.”

Interestingly, once the parent group stopped attending the community meetings, they never heard about future meetings and believe that the meetings ceased altogether. Though the district’s request for proposals (RFPs) included a desire for community participation, the meetings were not mandated by the actual contract, so when the parents gave up, Sodexo quietly stopped reaching out.

The parents expressed deep concern about the underlying motivations by Sodexo employees. Carrie shared that, “This is so soul sapping... [it] is just so hard to do for eight years. Just to know that they have different motives and... need to make a profit. It is not just about getting healthy food to the kids... Do [they] care? Really care?” Likewise, Stacey expressed that, “Part of my concern is that the person running the meal program for [the district] was a Sodexo employee. He kept saying ‘My bottom line is the kids.’ But really, his bottom line is with his corporation.”

### Slow and steady does not win this race

The parents did not aim to immediately oust the corporation, primarily because they were warned by advisors that incremental changes would be most palatable for the school board. In response, the parents initially worked slowly and carefully. Carrie describes that, “My approach was to earn the respect of the [school] board. The board was going to make the decision on whether or not to renew this contract. The approach I wanted to take was that we gain a good reputation with them so when the time came... we had... set the stage.” Another member, Ann, reflected that,

We wanted [Sodexo] out, but while they were there... [we aimed for] change... while finding alternative solutions to replace them. So... when I say ‘work within the system,’ it wasn’t because we thought we could keep Sodexo, it’s because they got a 5-year contract [and we thought]... let’s get some change happening, let’s get some movement happening while they are feeding our kids, instead of waiting to replace them.

In retrospect, the parents have questioned their approach. Toña and Stacey explained that:

Toña: [Our steering committee] advised us to work with [the school board]

Stacey: ...as opposed to demonstrating or campaigning in any sort of way. They said work with the district. So we took their advice and I think... I don’t know if we lost people that way.

Toña: I think we did.

Similarly, Ann reflected that “We had a strong committee of active people who wanted to work within the system... Which now I am wondering... who knows if we had made a different decision [taking a more aggressive stance], where we would be right now.”

The initial years of the parents’ activism involved steady, constant, and excruciatingly slow negotiations with Sodexo employees. Carrie explained, “We would meet with [the Sodexo food service directors] and work out an annual plan.” An example plan was to transition from ten entrées with high-fructose corn syrup and twelve entrées with artificial flavor to five of each. This was hardly the kind of systemic change the parents hoped to see in the district school food. Carrie admitted, “This sounds really pathetic, but that’s where we were.” Ann shared that her role in the group was to attend to their relationship with Sodexo. She explained,

I am an alliance manager... most of my career has been around business-to-business partnerships and how to make them work. So I have a skill set and I felt like I could add a lot of value in this area... We did quite a bit in the beginning in working within the system. Not anything big like we wanted, but we came up with our goals and we had power point presentations... We sent goals to Sodexo... and then we met with them and they’d actually take our goals and then present back to us... ‘Here is what we are going to do.’ So let’s say we want to lower sodium by x percent or we want to have only whole grains... They would report back to us on the steps they were taking and we would try to hold them accountable. And though we knew we weren’t making big changes, we knew we were making changes. And we thought maybe there is something here. Fast forward... it ended up not changing.

The feeling of constantly working for tiny, minuscule changes the corporation then heralded as major ones grew exhausting and off-putting to the parents. As Carrie explained, “They would dangle little things in front of us... they sort of strung us along for a while... We were so tired of this kind of slow progress.” Eventually, the parents had enough. Carrie described the corporation’s undermining of community meetings as “the last straw” for many of the parents in the group. She described, “Some people were just burned out. They were like, ‘We are done with Sodexo... We are not being heard and they’re just taking [community]

meetings over.’ ” Carrie admitted that she could understand why many of the other parents gave up and confessed that, “I am still hanging on. Barely hanging on.” Ann explained that she left the group “because I felt like we weren’t getting the change we wanted. We were going backwards instead of forwards. And I felt like it was probably time to... not work within the system the way we had before... I was just discouraged.” Similarly, Stacey reflected that, “Those are just tiny little baby steps and [Carrie] is pretty amazing for sticking with it for so long. A year or two ago, I was just like I can’t do this anymore... We have tried and tried and tried. And I think... until we are ready [for]... the alternative for Sodexo. Call me when we are ready to do that, but I can’t keep just asking for baby steps from Sodexo anymore.”

What did emerge from the failed community meetings was realization by the parents that they would never get their stated goals of “fresh, minimally-processed and nutrient-dense food that optimizes learning and health, supports our local economy, and protects our planet” as long as the district outsourced to a food service corporation. At this time, new parents came aboard, giving Carrie a renewed boost, and she redirected the group toward how they could convince the school board to self-operate rather than contracting out their food service.

### Where do we go from here?

At a workshop with local food advocates and chef Ann Cooper, Carrie shared:

We realized, we could push so far with Sodexo and make improvements, but we found that we were kind of hitting a wall because they’re a multinational corporation and their shareholders have certain expectations. And we felt like there’s some money leaving our community that if we kept that in the community, it could actually be going into better food. And so we as an organization decided that we wanted to focus on creating a self-operated food service model as opposed to a food service management corporation. So that has been our current focus as we’ve tried to make incremental changes within the current system.

As Carrie redirected the group to work toward ousting the corporation, she recalled advice from another school food reform activist, “Forget Sodexo. You are never going to get what you want from Sodexo. What you gotta do is get rid of Sodexo.’ ” Even though Carrie could not heed this advice for years, she conceded, “In the long run she was totally right.”

A first step in trying to overthrow the corporation was to review the district’s food service contract to see if they were in obvious violation. The district grants 5-year contracts for food service, with annual renewal (or termination) options. A lawyer from a local non-profit who was also a

member of the parent group’s advisory board volunteered to review the district school food contract for contract violations. However, Carrie reported that, “The contract is so vague in terms of any kind of quality. It is all numbers, like you will serve this many students, this many meals, at this many schools, not a lot about how it is served or what is served.” As a result, catching the corporation in violation of contract on the basis of poor food quality was not an option. After learning this, the parents realized they needed to start at the beginning by altering the language in future contracts, so they lobbied for changes to the initial RFPs sent out by the district. One challenge they faced was that most of the RFP was a template set by the state (and requiring state approval if altered) leaving only a small write-in area for local districts.

Even with sweeping changes to the RFP, Carrie recognized that the most complicated step was having something ready to replace an outsourced food service. This was particularly challenging if the new proposal required a change in staffing hours or kitchen equipment, the latter of which could require significant investment in infrastructure. Moreover, she noted that, “There is sort of this... chicken and egg [problem]... where you have to have contracts to be able to see what... RFPs come up, so you kind of have to be one of these big corporations to be in the loop about these things. How do you get your foot in the door [as a local, smaller operation]?”

The parents learned that conducting a feasibility study could help assess district food service needs, costs, and options for radical change. Carrie pointed out that Ann Cooper’s foundation conducted these for school districts who want to make deep improvements in school food quality. When Carrie contacted Ann Cooper about the possibility, at the time, Ann had conducted very few feasibility studies for districts that outsourced with Sodexo. Carrie learned that it was possible but harder, “because you are asking [the corporation] for the information that you need to... overthrow them, basically.” Toña and Stacey reflected that,

Toña: We need a lot of information from them. About their facilities—

Stacey: which should all be public information... but I have asked them for things before that they just ignore. And then it takes a lot of energy to follow up... But we have learned a lot of things that we could share.

Despite this complication, the parent group volunteered to raise money for a feasibility study, but the school board refused saying that by paying for the study, the parent activists would bias any results.



## Influence of other places on local parent activism

The parents' focus may have been local, but they were not operating in a vacuum. From the inception of her activism, Carrie was inspired by a broader national movement and the group has continued to look to other school districts throughout the state and nationally for examples, guidance, and support. Carrie recalls being inspired by “what was happening nationally with Slow Food as well as Alice Waters’s movement. And then Michelle Obama came on the scene with her ‘Let’s Move’ and gardens for schools. So all that kind of came together and I thought, ‘We can do this in [our town].’ ”

After deciding to take action, Carrie began reaching out nationally:

I started contacting people around the nation that I heard about making changes [in school food]. There was a movement in DC called Better School Food. [The founder] was part of [the documentary] *Two Angry Moms*... and she was trying to make it an umbrella organization. So I thought... let’s not reinvent the wheel... here is someone already doing this who is willing to mentor us... we can share some resources even though she is across the country.

When thinking about ways they might leverage changing the contract, Carrie decided to hold a public meeting to assess broader community concerns, needs, and desires for school food. She recalled her inspiration was a school district in New York that had done something similar: “And we decided that’s what we needed to do.”

## Finding other districts who ousted corporations

In her work to try to find examples of school districts with quality school food, Carrie discovered that most districts that had brought in the “Ann Coopers and Alice Waters of the world to totally transform everything” were typically already self-operating and not contracting out with food service management corporations. Carrie observed that examples of districts that had managed to get rid of a food service corporation and start from scratch were few and far between. Moreover, the renowned school district food services such as Berkeley, CA and Boulder, CO that had worked with celebrity chefs were typically “liberal and with a fair amount of money.” Carrie recognized that in their community, “We’ve got the liberal bent, but don’t have the money.”

In her research, Carrie did learn of one other district in the state whose school board had terminated their contract with Sodexo in response to public pressure. She reflected that, “We were keeping an eye on that and looking towards

[them]... because there weren’t a lot of those examples around.”

Carrie found another example of a small district in a nearby state that had ousted a food service corporation. She pointed out that,

They were a different example. Not the Berkeleys and Boulders of the world where it was an overnight, big sensation... [featuring a] great new program. It was this slow and steady approach... They got rid of [their food service corporation] and started making incremental changes... They put together a little video of it... They would find ways to save money and then put that into healthier food... [when saving money] it was all about putting it back in. And not going it into the pockets of the shareholders... it was going back into the system... back into their food program.

## The union complication

An interesting twist in this story is that, as Carrie explained, “The kitchen workers are all unionized which ends up complicating things a bit for us.” Ann reflected that “[The union] will always be a huge challenge for [the district]” in making changes to food service. While the parents are not opposed to unionized food service workers, the union makes changing school food logistics more difficult, particularly because labor is the most expensive aspect of school food. School board members often used the union as an excuse for inaction on school food. The parents explained that volunteers (such as parents) were not permitted to do work normally done by an employee. The union also prevented the district from firing kitchen staff with a change in school food service vendor. Several of the potential alternatives the parents found involved high-quality, more-local, from-scratch food cooked by a local distributor. Though this model requires a slightly higher price for food, the costs could, in theory, be offset by less required on-site labor. Yet, because district labor costs are fixed regardless of the model, there would be no savings in labor—only an increase on what is spent on food. Gaddis (2014) has noted,

School food service employees who qualify for public-sector benefits are a particularly costly form of labor, which tends to make unionized school districts hyperaware of their MPLH (meals per labor hour). The two most commonly used strategies for increasing MPLH are redesigning production systems and increasing the use of convenience foods—the frozen meal pack is a classic example of both processes working in tandem. (p. 17)

The union piece of the puzzle complicates the simple dichotomy of neoliberal, large corporation versus local economy.

Paying workers more feeds into the local economy, but can also mean that districts are even more incentivized to use highly processed, non-labor-intensive foods.

## Implications

### Defeating Goliath

This study is essentially a David versus Goliath scenario: how can a powerful global conglomerate be ousted through the work of a few dedicated parent activist volunteers? Indeed, Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) have warned, “As deceptively simple as school food may appear, reforming school food ecologies involves complex politics” (p. 207). As an education researcher, I was struck by the reach of corporate food interests when publishing a chapter in which a teacher made observations that the food served to her highly food-insecure students by Aramark was of reprehensible quality (Stapleton and Cole 2018). The publishing company refused to publish the chapter unless we removed all mentions of the corporation’s name. When a teacher and education researcher are censored from speaking candidly about their direct experiences and observations of school food quality, we have a serious problem in accountability for services provided to students.

The frustrations felt by the parents through years of attempting to work with Sodexo employees illustrates how food service corporations can avoid accountability to the communities and institutions in which they work. Sandler (2011) has noted that, “Flexibility in contracts and lack of regulation and oversight implies both the ability to listen more to parents and the ability to listen less” (p. 41). The parents’ exasperation with the slow and minuscule improvements made by the corporation while the food remained largely unchanged is consistent with literature on school food. Gaddis (2014) has advised,

The processed food industry is responding to the desire for real foods by marketing their ‘clean label’ products (i.e. high-quality processed foods made without artificial or other unwanted ingredients) and value-added locally grown foods (that largely travel through conventional supply chains) as a simple and cost-effective solution. This strategy, which I term ‘real food-lite,’ relies on the substitution of inputs rather than deeper reforms to the food system. School food authorities are predisposed to accepting industry-based solutions like clean label products since they fit within the existing heat-and-serve paradigm. In other words, the constraints of technological and institutional ‘lock-in’ hinder transitions away from heat-and-serve meals and

ultimately prevent more sustainable food systems from developing (p. 16).

The parents’ realization that the only way forward was to convince the school board to remove the corporate entity entirely is an important point for those wishing to improve school food. By definition, corporations serve their bottom line, often at the expense of the communities in which they operate. As Carrie noted, their goals are different, their values are different, and we can never assume that they truly want what is best for communities. Arguably, they cannot, since they would be working themselves out of their positions of control.

It is important to keep in mind that “Goliath” does only not represent food service corporations. Weaver-Hightower (2011) has noted with regard to school food, “Money is almost always the issue” (p. 65). As Ann pointed out, “[The district] just wants to be profitable... to sell the most lunches... They have got to keep as much money in the [district’s] general fund... and that’s a tough place to be.” Every counter-argument the parents encountered in their struggle was about money. We must keep in mind, as Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) urge, “Nutritious food ‘should’ be considered a human right of all children connected to the right to an education... Moving away from economic rationales for school feeding decisions should continue with a re-centering on the rights of children and their communities” (p. 205).

### School food: the local and the global

Robert and Weaver-Hightower (2011) have pointed out, “Fixing any school food ecology is both a global and local project. This... is a call to researchers and activists alike to learn about various places and spaces, often to step outside of one’s comfort zone to piece together a school food ecology that embraces and respects these interconnections” (p. 204). School food is fundamentally connected to place: from who gets to make decisions about the food, to where that food is sourced, to how that food will be received by the local community. Significant school food decisions are made at the local level by school boards. The decisions they make about school food start with choosing either to self-operate or to contract out with a food management corporation. These seemingly simple decisions by school board members have far-reaching impacts on public school children and local places.

Though this paper argues for a more autonomous local approach to school food, it is important to recognize that districts are not entirely independent in their design and procurement of school food. School food activism can also be heavily influenced by outside places; Carrie started her

activist work after being inspired by others doing similar activism around the country. In fact, her group began as an affiliation of an umbrella organization on the opposite side of the country. The parent group has continually looked to other districts for examples of what can be done in terms of making from-scratch, high-quality school food that meets federal nutrition and budget allotments. These examples are important particularly when other districts mirror the conditions of their district, in size, budget, location, and/or political orientation. Moreover, looking to other examples has shown the parents just how difficult it is for districts to move past outsourcing to return to a self-operating model. Likewise, the reason Carrie asked me to work with her was the hope that I could share their story more broadly, so that others might learn from them. Ann reflected,

I have always wanted... just like [Carrie]... to take what we have learned and share it with other community groups, for them to learn from us, whether they want to do things differently or the same.... Since Sodexo supports such a large percentage of our school districts nationwide... to understand where we have had successes, where we have had challenges, and so forth, so they can be more conscious in their own decisions in how they want to approach it.

### Toward school food sovereignty

Poppendieck asserts that, “The time has come for a new paradigm in school food. What is required is a thorough reconsideration, not just incremental tinkering” (p. 257). This group of parents, in their quest for school food that is “fresh, minimally-processed and nutrient-dense..., that optimizes learning and health, supports our local economy, and protects our planet”, are calling for a fundamental shift. I argue that their ideals are in line with those of food sovereignty and call us to reimagine school food through this lens. A *school food sovereignty* approach centers the rights of communities and their children rather than the rights of corporate interests by moving the locus of control away from money toward the health and rights of communities—physically, economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. A sovereignty approach requires examination of who is the sovereign, in other words, what is the scale. For school food, the unit of analysis is the point at which local school food decisions are made. For public schools in the US, for example, school districts are typically the unit of analysis rather than individual schools.

### In short, school food sovereignty

- (1) Involves continual participatory decision-making with stakeholders,
- (2) Prioritizes the health of students,
- (3) Strives for cultural congruence with the populations being served,
- (4) Responds to the needs and preferences of school communities,
- (5) Reflects the capacities of local producers,
- (6) Prioritizes environmental sustainability and stewardship,
- (7) Prioritizes economic health of local communities,
- (8) Values food workers along the whole food chain, from producers to food service staff.

Figure 1 shows the centrality of participatory processes across potential components of a sovereign school food system. The components are outlined in greater detail below.

### Participatory

School food sovereignty looks like a system where community meetings are held to discuss school food concerns, approaches, suggestions, and ideas, where such meetings are valued as democratic processes. School food sovereignty means that decisions about what foods to serve are local decisions, made in conversation with communities, students, parents, educators, food service staff, local producers, etc. This means that school food decisions are *participatory and collaborative*, inclusive of all stakeholders from producers, to workers, to consumers. Participatory decision-making is

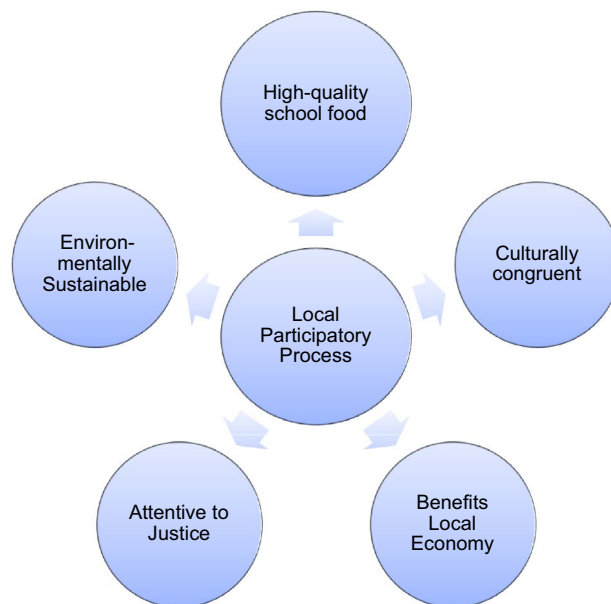


Fig. 1 Diagram of school food sovereignty

an ongoing process, with continual checks to ensure that school food is reflective of changing circumstances, both on the producer side and on the consumer side.

### High-quality food

High-quality school food is perhaps the cornerstone of a sovereign school food system since it is the most impactful dimension for students. High-quality school food is nutrient-dense, healthy, delicious, minimally processed or unprocessed, and from scratch whenever possible.

### Cultural congruence with communities

Aiming for cultural congruence with communities in school meals may sound obvious. However, the original intentions around school food nutrition for American public schools set out by famed anthropologist Margaret Mead were the opposite of culturally reflective (Salvio 2018). In fact, Mead recommended bland school meals that were “fairly innocuous” with “low emotional value” (Levine 2008, p. 68). In contemporary times, educational thought has recognized the importance of culturally relevant (e.g. Ladson-Billings 1995) educational experiences. Targets for cultural congruence within schools should include school food (Salvio 2018; Stapleton and Cole 2018), particularly given the importance of food to identity (e.g. Stapleton 2015). Public schools in the US are culturally pluralistic, so achieving cultural congruence with students is not simple and will require complex participation to ensure that all cultural communities represented in schools feel included. This will necessarily look different in different communities.

### Ethical, local economics

School food sovereignty means that economic benefits serve the local area. This means valuing local producers, distributors, and district-hired food service employees. School food sovereignty means that food is sourced as locally as possible, both to support local producers and to mitigate environmental impacts. School food sovereignty means that global corporations, shareholders, profits, and deals between corporations are avoided and thought to belong to a less enlightened era. School food sovereignty means that education decision makers—school board officials, administrators, school food nutrition directors—prioritize school food as an essential aspect of schools and schooling, and in doing so, value the needs of their local constituents and communities.

### Environmentally sustainable

Given the substantive ecological footprint of food, the impending global climate crisis, and the large number of school meals served each day across the US and world, a school food sovereignty approach should also include considerations of environmental sustainability. This means that foods are locally sourced whenever feasible and priority is given to serving foods that reduce carbon emissions, e.g. less meat and more local and seasonal produce. This also means attempting to minimize school food waste, particularly through reducing food waste, composting, and discontinuing the use of disposal dishes and utensils.

### Attentive to justice (labor, humane)

A sovereign school food system should also attend to justice concerns related to every step of the process, from labor justice of farmworkers, to the humane treatment of animals, to livable wages for food service employees.

### Epilogue

Perhaps sovereign school food sounds implausible, even impossible. Two of the parent activists from the original group, Toña and Stacey, set out to show just how possible it is by starting a noteworthy from-scratch, locally sourced, sustainable, vegetarian food service at one of the small charter schools in the district. Students eat delicious food from reusable trays with real silverware, and use cloth napkins that parent volunteers wash at home and return. Students compost all food wastes, which are then picked up by a local farmer. A neighboring, lower-income school district recently created a district-owned farm to connect both student learning and school meals to local agriculture. Oakland Public Schools, a large, low-income urban district, has made sweeping changes around school food, including starting a farm and central kitchen, lowering costs and reducing environmental impact by serving more vegetarian meals, less meat and cheese, more fresh produce, and more sustainably-sourced meat (Hamerschlag and Kraus-Polk 2017).

School food sovereignty is possible, within our reach, and is increasingly occurring in schools around the US. In fact, though this study began as an exploration into understanding the struggles (even failure) of parent school food activism, while this manuscript was in revision a few incredible things happened. First, after tirelessly yet respectfully lobbying the district and attending all community hearings about an upcoming bond measure, the parent group convinced the school board to earmark several

million dollars for nutrition services in a proposed school bond measure. In November 2018, the voters passed the bond measure, paving the way for the district to spend money on food-service infrastructure. At the parents' consistent requests, the district also agreed to a feasibility study on nutrition services. In the spring of 2019, the board was presented with an optimistic report on moving to a self-operated system, and voted unanimously and emphatically to discontinue their contract with Sodexo and self-operate after 16 years of outsourcing. This stunning turn of events, after a full decade of work by this small but dedicated group of parents, demonstrates that movement towards better school food systems is possible, even if it takes monumental effort.

I urge building resilient school food systems that align with school food sovereignty principles. Because sovereign school food systems are necessarily responsive to local needs and capacities, a one-size-fits-all approach is neither possible nor desirable. We will need research to document successes and challenges in school food systems taking a sovereignty approach so that we can continue to build models and strategies across different contexts. As more school districts opt for a school food sovereignty model, coalitions of school districts can form to leverage the social and purchasing power of a larger movement. To quote a March 2019 food service presentation for the school board, advocating for self-operation and from-scratch, sustainable school food: "We are ready!"

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