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school-lunch-2-v2.mp3

DATE

December 23, 2025

DURATION

40m 56s

6 SPEAKERS

Hannah McCarthy
Nick Capodice
Archival
Ross Wilson
Jessica Terrell
Crystal Fitzsimons

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:02] Hannah McCarthy
Nick Capodice.

[00:00:03] Nick Capodice
Hannah McCarthy.

[00:00:04] Hannah McCarthy
Civics 101. Everybody. We recently released an episode about school lunch in America, the social and legislative history, and a promise that there is a whole lot more to that story. So in this episode, we're continuing the story and spoiler alert, this is America. So I'm not going to tell you the ending because there isn't one. I'm just going to tell you where the story stands right now.

[00:00:31] Nick Capodice
Wait, wait. Speaking of where the story stands right now, Hannah, did you hear the milk news?

[00:00:37] Hannah McCarthy
Oh, yeah. Uh, okay, everybody, one thing to keep in mind is that a lot of the issues with lunch in school, as in so much of the legislation and so much of the money involved in the project of feeding kids has to do with the power of lobbies and Congress. And right now, at the end of 2023, when we're taping this episode, Congress made time amidst an absolute slew of unresolved major concerns, including aid to Ukraine and migration at the Mexican border, to debate whether or not to bring whole milk back into schools.

[00:01:08] Archival
Reflecting on Christmas traditions this year begs the question if whole milk is a good option to fuel Santa's extraordinary Christmas Eve journey, then why isn't it an option for American schoolchildren in their lunchrooms?

[00:01:27] Hannah McCarthy
Just in case you were wondering. Yeah, Big Milk, aka the dairy lobby is powerful, and one day I would like to do an episode on it. But I digress onto the stuff that Congress May 1st day address. In addition to whether or not banning whole milk is akin to ruining Christmas. I kid you not, that was an argument basically made on the floor. Uh, let's keep this story rolling with someone who has worked closely on school meal problems in his city.

[00:01:54] Ross Wilson
So I'm Ross Wilson, I'm the executive director of the Shah Family Foundation. We're a foundation in Boston, and we do most of our work in and around Boston, Massachusetts, and some work nationally.

[00:02:05] Hannah McCarthy
Okay, so the Shah Foundation was established by the people behind the mail order furniture company Wayfair. It's a charitable foundation that works a lot in Massachusetts and a little bit elsewhere. Now, why did the people behind Wayfair start a charitable nonprofit? Maybe we will do an episode on the world of philanthropy one day. I spoke to Ross specifically because of the foundation's work with meals in Schools. So Ross here has been up close and personal with school meals, specifically in Boston.

[00:02:34] Ross Wilson
Uh, I started off as a kindergarten teacher in Boston and then moved on. I was also a special education teacher, moved on to be a school principal for a number of years. And then I had the privilege of going to central office in Boston, where I led human resources for a number of years, was also the chief of staff and deputy superintendent for the school system, overseeing most of the operations and and schools.

[00:02:58] Hannah McCarthy
It was while Ross was working at Central Office, which is what they called the place in Boston where the superintendent and other administrative offices are, that the Shah Foundation got in touch with the city and said essentially that school meals in Boston weren't looking so hot.

[00:03:15] Ross Wilson
My experience with school food was different. I was a teacher and a principal, and I just thought that if you were going to Boston Public Schools, you just eat plastic wrap food. And it was my job as like the principal and the the teacher to sit alongside the kids, and I would rip open the plastic with my spork, and I would choke down the terrible food with the kids. And I kind of like, with a smile, say, oh, isn't this wonderful? And, um, and I got to say, I never really questioned it. I was just like, oh, this is how we feed kids, uh, who go to Boston and who may be getting free lunch. We just give them this plastic wrap food. It really wasn't until Jill and Nurse came and said, started questioning it that I started questioning myself. And I'm saying, geez, why? Why? Yeah. I don't know why we have why we serve kids plastic wrap food. I could we do better? I have no idea.

[00:04:03] Nick Capodice
Plastic wrapped meals. How did that work? Were they like TV dinners?

[00:04:09] Ross Wilson
And we'd have all variations of them. Sometimes we would have plastic wrapped meals that would be heated to a relatively high temperature and then delivered to the schools like three hours early. And so by the time the kids were eating them, the temperature was just right. So you can imagine broccoli in that scenario, rather mushy. Um, we would also have scenarios where, uh, we would have frozen meals delivered to schools, and schools would heat them on site and in the plastic, you know, everything would be cooked in the plastic and then you would you would eat them. And they're all unit that what we called unitized meals ready to go. Uh, and they were often shipped in from, you know, multinational companies who would create them in a regional warehouse and ship them out. And they would, you know, they would abide by the USDA standards like so they meet minimum standards.

[00:04:55] Nick Capodice
Now, I know we talked about this a tiny bit in the first episode about school meals, but these multinational companies providing meals and these USDA standards, can you just talk a little more about that?

[00:05:07] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah. So we talked about the fact that prior to the amendments to the National School Lunch Act, private companies were forbidden from playing around in the school meal world. The basic idea there was to prevent swindlers and corner cutters from selling subpar or unhealthy meals to kids. But in the 1970s, things changed.

[00:05:27] Nick Capodice
Things changed. As in private, for profit companies were allowed to play around in the school meal world.

[00:05:33] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah, and especially when the Reagan administration cut the federal school lunch budget by a quarter, schools were in a tough spot. Most of them did not have kitchens. They, for the most part, were not getting money for food from the school's general budget. And so big corporations were like, all right, we got a solution for you. We will provide cheapish meals, and all you got to do is heat them up. Now, these food service management companies are not known for being, you know, what some of us might call the most ethical.

[00:06:03] Nick Capodice
How so?

[00:06:04] Hannah McCarthy
Well, it ranges from edging out local food producers by cornering the market to scoring contracts that provide more revenue in kickbacks than any one of these private food companies makes in the operation of its actual business.

[00:06:16] Nick Capodice
I have no idea what that means.

[00:06:18] Hannah McCarthy
That means that when a food service management company like Aramark or Compass buys food from Pepsi or Tyson or even Sysco, they get a huge rebate.

[00:06:28] Nick Capodice
Okay, so they get a bunch of money back.

[00:06:30] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah, for signing massive purchasing contracts with huge food manufacturers and distributors. And then there have been some shady deals with school employees themselves getting money and striking deals with these big companies. Also, you know, on top of that, the anecdotal opinions of a lot of the students and teachers who are eating these meals is that they aren't always super appetizing.

[00:06:52] Nick Capodice
Even though they meet the USDA standards.

[00:06:55] Hannah McCarthy
And sometimes in part because they meet USDA standards. Now, we talked about the low sodium thing on our earlier episode. Remember, we heard that cafeteria workers sometimes suggest that students actually bring salt packets to school to make lunch more palatable. New guidelines under the Obama administration certainly did make meals healthier, at least in terms of their guidelines. But then schools must meet those guidelines.

[00:07:21] Jessica Terrell
These efforts to to put all these nutrition guidelines in place and to really have, you know, it so that if you're half an ounce off in a serving, you can get dinged for that. If if the inspector comes on that day, um, has made it so that a lot of schools have become increasingly reluctant to try and do their own scratch cooking to try and make their own meals.

[00:07:45] Hannah McCarthy
This is Jessica Terrell, journalist and host of Left Overs, a great podcast about the state of school lunch politics and private industry in America. Today we heard from her in our first school meal episode, and she says it's not just the cost or the administrative ease that compels schools to contract with massive companies. It's also the USDA standards.

[00:08:08] Jessica Terrell
And so the schools, especially also having all of these labor shortages that have happened during the pandemic. They've just become increasingly and increasingly reliant on these food companies that sell them, you know, these kind of prepackaged meals which are lower in sugar and lower in salt and lower in fat and whole grains compared with what you get on like a shelf. But at the end of the day, it's it's not what a lot of people want their kids eating.

[00:08:34] Nick Capodice
And it's also literally not what a lot of kids want to eat either. Right? Like if the food's gross, they're just going to throw it out.

[00:08:41] Archival
The school lunchroom, a place for many students to, well, eat right so they can focus on class for the rest of the day.

[00:08:47] Archival
But some local students say their cafeteria is a different place, a place where they don't even want to taste what's put on their plate.

[00:08:53] Archival
It just looks so unappetizing. I could not even bring myself to even try it at all.

[00:08:58] Archival
Do you want the children here eating food that looked like that? Or being served food that looked like that?

[00:09:04] Archival
Parents with students in the Clarksville-montgomery County school system are upset. Frustrated that the food on their student's lunch trays, or lack thereof. Enough is enough.

[00:09:14] Archival
This is what my kids are eating at school.

[00:09:16] Archival
Concerned parents say the problem here, it's not enough, it's not.

[00:09:20] Archival
Falling, and it's definitely not appetizing.

[00:09:22] Archival
Social media on fire over school lunches. One mom telling us on Facebook her son came home hungry because he says there wasn't anything good at school.

[00:09:31] Archival
I felt like I want to throw up. It was horrible.

[00:09:39] Hannah McCarthy
Here's Ross again.

[00:09:41] Ross Wilson
People would just say, well, that, you know, they meet the minimum standards, like what's wrong with that? But when, you know, very few adults would be eating those meals and actually very few kids did, you know they would take the meal, they would throw it in the garbage and then they would go hungry. It's hard, you know, as a as a school leader, there's no it's hard to mix causal statements to say that, you know, this caused this. But but of course, if kids are coming to school hungry, if they're hungry during the day, like all of us, if we're hungry, if we're, um, malnutrition, we have a harder time staying focused. We have a harder time communicating. We have a harder time engaging in important work in the school day. So that's why I would sit next to the kids in the cafeteria as a teacher and a principal is I would say, we've got to get these calories down. We got to we got to choke this stuff down, uh, so that we can focus and, and be productive in our, in our school community.

[00:10:27] Hannah McCarthy
So the bottom line here is money. Should the bottom line be nutrition or school performance or child comfort? I am not here to answer that. And either way it isn't. It's money. And because of the way school meals are funded or not, funded schools have to make certain decisions about how to get something technically edible in front of their students. That comes in the form of what they buy, who they buy from, and who they're paying to actually hand those meals to kids and how much they're paying those workers.

[00:10:58] Jessica Terrell
Yeah. So they're not very desirable jobs. I mean, they're not very well respected jobs. They're not very well paid jobs. I want to.

[00:11:06] Archival
Be part of what changes that perception of what today's lunch lady is. And there's a lot of people taking that same charge. So I say lunch lady with pride Bryce Gretna Public Schools Sharon Schaffer says there's a lot more to being a lunch lady than wearing a hairnet.

[00:11:21] Jessica Terrell
They are incredibly understaffed right now because you can make more in most places going and working at McDonald's than you can in schools, and a lot of times you'll have benefits at McDonald's and you won't, because a lot of these school positions are structured specifically so that they're right under the line for how many hours you need to qualify to qualify for benefits or something else from the district.

[00:11:46] Nick Capodice
You know, I do feel like the school lunch worker really gets the shortest shrift here. Hannah. Like, I can hardly think of a pop cultural lunch lady who is portrayed with any respect or deference. It's like a trope. They are pretty much always made fun of.

[00:12:04] Archival
Her sweat and blood went into this cake, and you will not leave this platform until you have consumed the entire confection. Entire confection. See you at lunch. Thank you cookie. Rotten kids.

[00:12:21] Hannah McCarthy
Also, the first line of people to blame when the food is, you know, considered gross. That's the lunch worker. Most often the lunch lady.

[00:12:30] Jessica Terrell
They're considered historically to be mom jobs. Nutrition directors are better paid and they have to have a lot more training. And so that is like a more desired position.

[00:12:44] Hannah McCarthy
A nutrition director, by the way, is the person in charge of overseeing a school district's child nutrition program. So they plan and implement the whole food program and help with training other people in the business of feeding kids.

[00:12:57] Jessica Terrell
But we saw during the pandemic enormous amounts of turnover and people just retiring because the stress of it was too much.

[00:13:09] Hannah McCarthy
For more on that mom job thing, please listen to Jessica's podcast because she gets into that. A lot more than I can, but basically feeding children during school hours that is by and large considered women's work. And just like providing child care, we as a nation don't think it's worth a whole lot of money.

[00:13:26] Nick Capodice
All right, so if I can oversimplify this. Schools don't have enough money to feed kids, but they have to meet certain standards. So they contract with occasionally unethical companies who provide something that a food inspector will deem acceptable. And then they pay their cafeteria workers the bare minimum. Wait, by the way, did she say they don't give them benefits?

[00:13:49] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah, that benefits thing. Many cafeteria workers log just under the required amount of hours to qualify for benefits like health insurance or paid vacation or a pension, the kinds of things that other school district employees might typically get. This is not something that they want to be doing. To clarify, it's another way that districts save money. So okay, what can be done here? Anything.

[00:14:16] Jessica Terrell
When I started reporting this project, I really thought that the school, like school food, had undergone this massive transformation ten years ago to serving whole grain foods and all of these fresh fruits and vegetables. And there'd been all this pushback, but it had been this major transformation. And in some ways it was. But it was like a transformation from like one kind of processed food to like a kind of processed food that had more whole grain in it, or, you know, whole milk fat to like 2% whole milk fat. The system itself had not changed. The system had accommodated these new regulations. And I think anything that's going to be really significant for school lunch is going to require a much more systems wide kind of change, and that is what I don't see happening at a national level. Any time in the near future. It's going to be individual school districts and individual states.

[00:15:16] Hannah McCarthy
Now I'm going to talk more about this federal level aspect, because I spoke to someone with just a little bit more hope about it. But let's look at the individual district and school level first. One small scale example, Jessica found a school that decided to do it differently.

[00:15:31] Jessica Terrell
The school district in California Pacific Elementary School District. And there are a couple of things that are kind of amazing about that. First of all, the kids cook the meals. I think sixth and seventh grade students who do this and kids sit and eat family style. It's these kind of pretty simple meals. They're not like very fancy, but they're fresh cooked. The kids are into them. I had one, I thought it could use a little more salt, but that's not their fault. You know, great great bean and cheese tostada. Wished I'd had that little salt pack in my pocket. But yeah, the community, it's become like a source of community pride how good this school meal program is. And it's helped keep that little school alive, because kids come from it's like a draw for kids to come from other schools.

[00:16:12] Nick Capodice
Kids cooking the meals.

[00:16:14] Hannah McCarthy
Not only are kids cooking the meals supervised, of course, parents are specifically enrolling their students in this school. Because of this program, the kids also cultivate a school garden specifically for lunch ingredients and rely a lot on food from local farms. And the food itself is both tastier and more culturally reflective of the student body. The kids make traditional Mexican and Brazilian dishes. They have a Kwanzaa meal and a Hanukkah meal.

[00:16:41] Nick Capodice
All right, but how is this all paid for? I mean, clearly, if the actual labor is being partially done by kids, that's one cost factor. But the ingredients, you know, especially if they're from scratch, they've got to cost money. Okay.

[00:16:55] Hannah McCarthy
So you've landed on one major factor that Pacific Elementary opted for, that other schools simply do or can not, subsidizing federal funds and caretaker lunch payments with money from the general budget.

[00:17:09] Nick Capodice
Most schools don't do that.

[00:17:10] Hannah McCarthy
Absolutely not. It takes money away from other programs. But this school wagered that 20 to 30 grand from the general budget would be the right thing for its community in the lunchroom. And if you measure school success by school enrollment, for example, they were totally right.

[00:17:27] Nick Capodice
I feel like I'm a little bit in Jessica's camp in terms of seeing change in the system. Hannah, if most schools aren't going to rejigger their budget process and the federal government isn't going to give them more money, like most schools aren't going to act like Pacific Elementary.

[00:17:44] Hannah McCarthy
All right. So let's look at a school system that scaled systemic change way up. That's after the break.

[00:17:54] Nick Capodice
But before that break, you're listening to a pair of people who are most certainly running on a tight budget. This is public radio and we love what we do. And we do it about as cheap as we can. But it really wouldn't work at all without contributions from, you know, the community. And that's you. If you got the pockets to throw some cake our way, please consider. Are making a contribution at Civics101podcast.org, and Hannah and I will keep providing nutritious information for your ears and mind. Thank you. That's it.

[00:18:36] Hannah McCarthy
We're back. And in this episode of Civics 101 we are looking at some wide scale, let's say, issues in the world of feeding kids at school in America. But we love solutions here at Civics 101, so we're looking at that too. And remember, I called up Ross Wilson at the Shah Foundation, not just because he knows how school meals tend to look. He was also part of a project to change the way that they could look at a scale way larger than, you know, one school trying something new. The target here was the whole city of Boston.

[00:19:08] Ross Wilson
Now, we didn't come with a solution. Hannah. Right. We just came. Uh, Jill came with. I'm wondering, and let's collect some data. And the mayor, of course, was like, sure, let's collect some data here. Let's go try to figure out a better, a better way.

[00:19:19] Hannah McCarthy
Jill, that's Jill Shah. It's her foundation. And the mayor. That's former Boston mayor Marty Walsh.

[00:19:26] Archival
I'm mayor Marty walsh. I like hot dogs. The Red Sox, the Bruins being the mayor of Boston and answering your questions.

[00:19:33] Nick Capodice
Like Marty Walsh, wasn't he the labor secretary under Biden for a bit?

[00:19:36] Hannah McCarthy
He was. He isn't anymore. He left that for a job as the executive director of the NHL's player union. But for our purposes, we're talking about Mayor Marty Walsh.

[00:19:46] Ross Wilson
We then went to the mayor and said, like, what if we could put mini kitchens in every school? Because in Boston, like many school districts around the country, large urban districts around the country, um, they weren't designed to feed kids. They were designed, uh, well before that, they were built, you know, hundreds of years ago. Uh, so basically we had we in Boston, we had, you know, the majority of our schools didn't have kitchens. They had like a heater this massive, like old convection oven and maybe a refrigerator. That's it. And we said to the mayor, what if what if we put in, like a combination oven? What if we put in real cooking? And what if we put in sinks? And what if we put in hot and cold serving lines so that students could walk through, like a full salad bar every day and a full hot bar every day, and they get to choose whatever they would like to eat. What if we could do that?

[00:20:31] Nick Capodice
Hannah, that is a lot.

[00:20:33] Ross Wilson
I think we can do a pilot. Like, what do you what do you think? And he said, yes, let's do a pilot. And so we tried it out in three schools. The foundation put forward the funding.

[00:20:43] Nick Capodice
Okay. Funding that makes a lot more sense.

[00:20:46] Ross Wilson
So the foundation said, look, we'll I think on the early stage of all of this, the way we could use philanthropic dollars best is to help government take risks, do pilots, and protect those risks. And that's often the first step in all of this. The government actually wants to do better. They would like to innovate, but they need that beginning stage of like protecting them from the risk. And they need some capital to help get them, get them through that. And so we provided that, we provided the sort of the expertise we provided the capital. We got past the initial pilot, which was shown to be greatly successful. And then we came into agreement with the city of Boston, where we're going to split the costs essentially on these infrastructure arrangements. And then Boston was going to completely cover the cost of the food service going forward, um, which is really supplemented by the USDA. And so that was the agreement. It was that we were going to come in with helping get the procure, the equipment. Um, the city of Boston helped do all the installation work, and that now it's run completely by the city of Boston. Every school in the city of Boston has beautiful food every day.

[00:21:46] Nick Capodice
Is Ross saying that after this pilot, the city of Boston just went great. We'll take it from here.

[00:21:51] Hannah McCarthy
No, this is bureaucracy and money.

[00:21:54] Ross Wilson
There's a little bit of nervousness right, on a number of issues. Let me just like give you a couple of those issues. First was just like doing construction in really old schools. There was a lot of nervousness around that. And like what would happen and how much would that cost? And we had to be really careful and strategic around making sure that we were doing the minimum construction to make sure all of this wasn't, you know, we're not overhauling every school. We're building these finishing kitchens. So we're very clear on the spec for what those kitchens should be. And we knew how much they should cost. And we helped the city through that process.

[00:22:27] Hannah McCarthy
I mean, it cost millions of dollars. Boston has some of the oldest schools in the country, and they definitely were not outfitted with the right kinds of kitchens. And then there were concerns about whether you can get away with cooking at schools, like instead of heating up these hermetically sealed, USDA compliant meals, can.

[00:22:45] Ross Wilson
We actually have salad bars and hot bars in schools? Like, will they be safe? Like, will we have an outbreak of E coli, you know, and and the reality was no, we can and schools do have salad bars and hot bars in schools every day and it will be okay. There was also a staffing issue of saying, you know, we we're relying upon this third party vendor to make these decisions for us on nutritional value. Um, it was really easy. We they just did all the work. So now we have to we actually have to increase capacity to make these decisions locally in Boston. And again, like people stepped up and they and we hired great people and they're able to make these these decisions on the menu. And then will we be able to procure the right ingredients, especially locally. And the answer is absolutely like there are amazing vendors around us. We have one of the largest vegetable. Distribution centers in the city of Chelsea that we went to, and they helped a lot with procurement of of really great fresh food. And so it works.

[00:23:40] Nick Capodice
So what are kids in Boston eating now? I mean, are they happier? Are they eating more?

[00:23:47] Ross Wilson
When we stopped feeding kids plastic wrap food and we started asking them what they would like to eat every day, and we provided that. And you could smell food throughout the kitchens and the and the schools in Boston, kids felt like they were cared for and adults really liked to care for kids. Like, that's why we're in the business of education. Um, and kids feel loved. They feel like these people care about me. They ate delicious food.

[00:24:09] Hannah McCarthy
The kicker for me here was this and I nearly did not believe it.

[00:24:14] Ross Wilson
When you're paying private companies for profit companies for plastic wrap food, it actually is more expensive than buying the ingredients and paying great staff to cook that food on site.

[00:24:23] Nick Capodice
No, Hannah isn't the whole problem that those food corporations provide compliant meals on the cheap.

[00:24:30] Hannah McCarthy
Apparently, if you plan well, you can pretty much cook within the federal reimbursement rate if you first have things like ovens and refrigerators. But there is one other really important piece of this puzzle. And Massachusetts is a good example because as we talked about in our other episode, there's usually a gap. There's a gap between the money that schools have and the money that food costs, and there are kids for whom the food is reimbursed. And then there's everyone else who has to pay for their meals. It's hard for schools to make up the difference, except Massachusetts does not ask anybody to pay for their meals.

[00:25:10] Nick Capodice
What's that?

[00:25:10] Hannah McCarthy
Now here's Jessica Terrell again.

[00:25:13] Jessica Terrell
A number of states are starting to pass. Um, universal meal plans. Um, and that's kind of heartening to a lot of people. Definitely far away from where we were, um, you know, a decade ago, in terms of the support for that.

[00:25:26] Nick Capodice
Universal school meals, as in everybody applies for the reimbursement program or something like that.

[00:25:33] Hannah McCarthy
As in, nobody applies for the reimbursement program.

[00:25:36] Jessica Terrell
The amount of work that it alleviated for nutrition directors who suddenly had extra leeway for things, who didn't have to count, the number of kids who fall into the free category and the reduced price category, and collect all this paperwork and you just serve kids meals. You didn't have to chase debt. You didn't have to hire debt collectors.

[00:25:53] Nick Capodice
Wait, how is this possible? Isn't the whole issue that you have to qualify for free lunch at school?

[00:26:00] Hannah McCarthy
Well, in Massachusetts, voters approved a 4% tax on its wealthiest residents. That will mean an additional billion dollars in tax revenue, some of which will go to simply making sure that no kid has to pay for food at school.

[00:26:14] Nick Capodice
If I may, Hannah, a tax on the wealthy is not America's favorite idea.

[00:26:20] Hannah McCarthy
Nope. And the seven other states who have passed legislation to make free meals available, a lot of them do it differently. So New Mexico and Michigan, for example, simply set aside money in the budget.

[00:26:31] Nick Capodice
Okay, so some states simply make it happen because they decide it's actually a priority, I guess. But I do want to go back to one thing that Jessica said, because debt collectors for student meals.

[00:26:44] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah. So, uh, free school meals for all. There is an idea that could seem to be about simply supplementing food provided in school cafeterias. A straightforward right, but it takes care of a really big issue. At the same time.

[00:27:00] Jessica Terrell
There's been this national pushback against that kind of idea, right? It's called lunch shaming. And the idea that you have kids in one line, kids in another line, or kids who are deprived of being able to go to prom or have their food taken away from them in front of their fellow classmates, or have their hands stamped because they owe school debt. Um, but even though there's this pushback against it, there's all sorts of other ways that families are, um, singled out and pursued for school debt that are that are really problematic lunch shaming.

[00:27:32] Nick Capodice
Making kids feel shame for not paying for their lunch and like, literally stamping their bodies.

[00:27:38] Hannah McCarthy
Because otherwise the trials of adolescence are totally shame free. And by the way, the lunch shaming part is just an element of this issue.

[00:27:47] Jessica Terrell
The story that I'm working on right now is that while there was this whole outrage right about this one school district, it was West Wyoming Valley, I think, in Pennsylvania was a Pennsylvania school district that sent a letter to parents that owed school debt, threatening to call CPS about the school debt. And everyone was outraged. Right. This became like a national backlash. Major news organizations covered. It might have even made international news, but it's actually very common policy to have it written in a school district policy that calling CPS is one possible repercussion of having unpaid meal debt and not paying meal debt for your children. Apparently, something like half of school districts in North Carolina almost mentioned CPS in this. Louisiana has a law on the books that says, um, if you are an elementary school district that provides elementary school and you have any you have a policy of denying kids a meal for any reason. On the third denial, your district is supposed to call CPS. That is like like an like a supposed to be like a trigger point. Only one school district last year reported denying meals to kids. They denied some 421 meals in Ascension Parish. Um, they would not respond to our questions about this. I found at least ten states where there are districts with policies written that reference child services in the school meal policy as one of the possible repercussions, that it could be a sign of abuse and you could be reported.

[00:29:13] Nick Capodice
But not having money is not child abuse. Hannah.

[00:29:16] Hannah McCarthy
Correct.

[00:29:17] Nick Capodice
So how is that even possible?

[00:29:19] Jessica Terrell
So it's not supposed to be. Being poor is not child abuse. However, there's a long history of many people that argue a long history of criminalizing poverty in the United States. And so many people are concerned, and rightly so. I think that signing up for any, you know, getting snap, um, what was formerly called food stamps, there are lots of things that can put you on the radar of social services and make you much more likely to get a CPS case. So they will say, you know, in North Carolina, the organization that crafted the policy this is modeled after says, you know, we'd be horrified to think that any district was threatening to take away families because their kids owed meal debt. However, it's fair warning to parents that if you are choosing not to provide meals for your children or give them school lunch money, it could be a sign that you're neglecting them. That's how they put it.

[00:30:10] Nick Capodice
A Child Protective Services shot across the bow, if you will.

[00:30:15] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah, and lots of states will. I want to bring in one more voice here. This is Crystal Fitzsimons, the director of school and out of school time programs at the Food Research and Action Center. We met her in our other episode on school meals. And yes, she and her organization do have a strong point of view on this issue. I asked her about this lunch shaming thing and how kids, even kids who qualify for free or reduced price lunch end up being lunch shamed.

[00:30:46] Crystal Fitzsimons
Within the school cafeteria. Kids are not supposed to be overtly identified if they're receiving free or reduced price school meals, but there are different things that happen in cafeterias that kind of send that message. Yes, if there's a la carte food and it's a different line, and then you have the reimbursable school lunch program and some kids are getting one line and other kids are getting in the other, that does send a message that kids really do understand. And one of the things that we see about the stigma related to participating in free or reduced price school meals is that kids actually start opting out of it as they get older and become more aware of it. So, you know, participation in school lunch is lower in middle schools and lower in high schools compared to elementary schools.

[00:31:36] Nick Capodice
Okay, I can totally understand this. I have a deep personal relationship to it. You're treated differently in front of your peers in the lunchroom, of all places, where there's nowhere to hide from a huge chunk of the student body. And so you decide. You know what? No, no, I'm not going to participate in a program that singles me or my family out as not being able to afford something.

[00:31:59] Crystal Fitzsimons
And, you know, that is one of the many reasons why we really think free school meals for all is the solution. Because at Frac, we do really focus on the needs of kids whose households are struggling to put food on the table. But by making the school lunch program available to all and increasing participation by all students, you help eliminate some of that stigma around participation and increase participation. So healthy school meals for all. It's an important way to reduce paperwork, but it's a really important way to reduce stigma and shame and to really make sure that the kids who need access to school breakfast and school lunch feel comfortable and excited about participating in the program.

[00:32:49] Nick Capodice
Now, when Crystal says free school meals for all, does she mean on like a state by state thing? Or are we talking federal level?

[00:32:57] Hannah McCarthy
Crystal is talking federal. So again, I've mentioned the Obama administration era school meal changes. That was part of something called the healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. That act included a provision, the community eligibility provision, to be exact, that allows high need schools to provide free meals for all.

[00:33:16] Crystal Fitzsimons
And so fast forward 6 to 7 years, just before the pandemic hit, about 1 in 3 schools that participate in the National School Lunch program were actually offering free breakfast and lunch to all their students through this program. So that's huge. And that was a huge shift in how the programs operate. And 1 in 3 schools.

[00:33:37] Hannah McCarthy
And a bunch of schools, 40,000 of them kept that going after the pandemic as well. But as for the rest of the schools, especially in states that do not have universal free meals for all.

[00:33:49] Crystal Fitzsimons
So we really see two opportunities to move forward for Congress. One is they should make school meals available to all kids across the country at no charge, like they could easily do it. They did it during the pandemic. We have kids sitting in a classroom who are hungry. It's disruptive to that child's learning and it's disruptive to the entire class. So it's money well spent to make sure that all kids are in the classroom, well nourished and ready to learn. They could do kind of a fallback option, which would be supporting that community eligibility option that I mentioned. Because the way that program works, it's kind of a complicated reimbursement structure, but it still designed to reimburse schools based on the poverty level in the school. And what they could do is they could increase those reimbursement levels so that all schools that are considered eligible for community eligibility would be able to offer free meals to all of their students because they were getting more federal reimbursement. And there are bills that would do that that have been introduced in Congress. So and we also have a universal school school meal bill that was introduced as well. You know, we do see a lot of energy and a lot of momentum behind healthy school meals for all. And I am hopeful that that is going to turn into action.

[00:35:15] Hannah McCarthy
So Crystal's thing is, in part, look what the pandemic showed us during the pandemic. Congress made free meals available to all and people loved it. They wanted it. It made life easier for everybody. And the voting public reinforces that in states where universal free meals are already a thing. I asked Jessica whether she had hoped that the federal government would take massive overhaul action, and she was a little more skeptical, at least in the short terme.

[00:35:45] Jessica Terrell
I do have hope because there are so many people out there who really do care about it. You know, so many people who like the Oregon mom who spent 15 years trying to get improvement to her school lunches and was one of those moms who packed food from home until she realized that, like, she had to be a part of trying to change the system. So I do have hope for school meals. Yet at the same time, clearly not so much hope that it's going to change immediately that I'm banking on not having to think about lunch for my kid in two years. So that's the, I think, caveat for it. Um, yeah, I don't know. There are a lot of people who are doing a lot of, a lot of really hard work out there, and there's a lot of momentum and a lot of places, and I think we're starting to, you know, caring about our food and what we put into our bodies and understanding that there are some serious flaws with our industrialized food system is starting to become more and more of like a mainstream idea, like the ideas that would have been dismissed as like, you know. Peppier environmentalists like are becoming more and more accepted. So I, I do think that there is hope. I just don't know how long it's going to take for us to get there. And that's the worrying part, because six years to me is not that long. But that's elementary school for my generation of kids.

[00:37:15] Nick Capodice
I keep coming back to this, thought Hannah. Uh, and it might be a little naive, but that thought is, well, kids have to be in school. We make public school education free to them, so why can't we feed them, too? Like, isn't that part of the whole process of creating the best kind of learning environment, giving them something to eat. And it's not even like a massively complicated one. Um, it isn't new learning standards or rolling out a new national curriculum or a national test. It's food, ideally good food for kids to eat.

[00:37:56] Hannah McCarthy
Yeah, well, I got to confess, I had the same thought basically along the lines of why does feeding children exist in a different category than educating them or providing them with extra curricular options? We require that they move their bodies in a school environment, for example, if they are able. But we argue about how to feed those bodies so that they are capable of that movement. And I'm just going to leave us with how Ross Wilson responded to this one.

[00:38:27] Ross Wilson
Sometimes we do things that are easier for adults, and we slowly gravitate to what's easy for adults. And that's one thing we did in the city of Boston. There were some there were some things that led up to it where there was a big decision to close a central commissary in the city of Boston at one point that was cooking centrally and sort of delivering food hot or cold. And at that point the city just said, well, we're not going to invest in that facility, and we'll just move to completely unitized meals. So I think one ease for adults and two priorities, we often lose focus of what our priorities are, and we shift and then we forget why we did something. And we've seen this over and over again. When a district makes a decision, say, hey, we're going to go do this. And then a new superintendent comes in and that is completely off the table and we lose focus. So we we often have a short attention span. So I think adult focus and a short attention span are the two reasons why we're giving kids plastic wrap food. And then I can't over look, the fact that we have sometimes have low expectations for ourselves and for our city. And we got to always question that and push forward and say we we should accept only the best and we should push for only the best.

[00:39:38] Nick Capodice
So basically, Hannah, this is something I feel like I never get to say because we're rarely talking about how grown ups are supposed to show up for kids. But in this case, maybe, just maybe, the grown ups could stand to grow up a little themselves.

[00:39:58] Hannah McCarthy
Or maybe. Act more like kids who want good food. That does it for this episode. It was produced by me. Hannah McCarthy with Nick Capodice. Christina Phillips is our senior producer. Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer. Music. In this episode by Otte, Daniel Friedel, Catherine Appleton, and Sven Lindvall. By the way, if you want a quieter version of American democracy, the kind that is always around, even when your battery runs out. Nick and I wrote a book. It's called A User's Guide to Democracy. We love it very much, and we hope you will too. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.

END OF TRANSCRIPT