

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Changing school food for the better**

by Gordon Clark  
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Most people would agree we should be feeding our school kids the best food we can--the freshest, healthiest, most nutritious food available.

Regrettably, most school lunch rooms--even here in Montgomery County--look far more like a fast food restaurant than anyone's kitchen. But some of our county's parents have started organizing to change this.

"What really motivated me to stop complaining and do something was seeing the cafeteria at my daughter's middle school," said Karen Devitt, co-founder of Real Food for Kids--Montgomery (RFKM). "The end of the checkout line by the cash register looks like a 7-11: Doritos, Cheetos, Tostitos, Rice Krispie Treats, cookies, Welch's Fruit Snacks--which are mostly sugar--a poster advertising 6 types of ice cream, and mountains of French fries. Most parents are unaware of all the junk food being sold to their kids every school day."

RFKM has a number of currently available "food products" in its sights: another major source of concern is "strawberry milk." Upon closer inspection, the neon-colored 8 oz plastic jug sold to kids of all ages has a whopping 25 grams of sugar, not to mention artificial flavors, and ingredients like Red dye #40.

"A kid can have one at breakfast and one at lunch--12 teaspoons of sugar in the space of a few hours!" added Karen. "The added sugar in that alone exceeds the amount recommended by the American Heart Association for an elementary school child for the entire day."

While transparency around such offerings (particularly the a la carte items) and removal of some of them are high priorities for RFKM, there is an equally strong desire to move from processed, pre-cooked and pre-plated foods toward more fresh, whole foods and more food cooked from scratch and delivered in large containers, as opposed to individual plastic wrappings. In addition to giving more fresh food to kids, such a change in food sourcing could ultimately only be good for the farmers and economy of the county and the state. It's an unnerving fact that Montgomery County has the nation's second largest Agricultural Reserve, yet virtually nothing grown in it ends up in our county's school lunches.

To be fair, there are significant economic obstacles toward achieving this vision of more local, fresh food in school lunches, starting with the scandalously tiny amount of money our very wealthy society allocates to feed kids at school--something you would assume would be among our highest budgetary priorities, not the lowest. The Food and Nutrition Services is the only department of the \$2.23 billion Montgomery County Public School system which is forced to raise its own budget.

At other times, though, there is clearly resistance from within. Such as when previous MCPS Superintendent, Jerry Weast, maintained an unofficial prohibition against school vegetable gardens--even though they are the single best tool for teaching healthy eating habits and getting kids to enjoy vegetables. (Quick update: a public campaign helped prompt the new MCPS policy permitting edible gardens in 2011, but less than one-fifth of our schools have them, and MCPS allocates no money for them. Compare this to neighboring Washington, DC, which funds its school garden program to the tune of \$200,000 a year.)

And yet another strange anomaly: given that the presence of a salad bar demonstrably increases a child's average daily intake of vegetables, one might wonder why only about 20 of Montgomery County's 202 schools have one.

The good news, though, is that what many are calling the "new school food movement" continues to grow in leaps and bounds. From salad bars to school gardens, from healthy vending machines to the removal of junk food, from more fresh local food to some school systems that actually own their own farms, examples of positive changes are popping up in schools across the nation.

This coming month, Real Food For Kids Montgomery is joining together with another local advocacy group, Montgomery Victory Gardens, to host our county's first-ever conference on school food. The "School Food Forum: Creating a Vision of Fresh Real Food in Montgomery County Public Schools" will be held on Saturday, November 2, from 9:30 am to 2 pm at the Lutheran Church of St. Andrew, 15300 New Hampshire Avenue in Silver Spring.

The Forum features keynote speaker Tony Geraci--a nationally recognized school food reformer who is the former Food Director for Baltimore City Public Schools, the current Director of Nutrition Services in the Shelby County Schools in Memphis, and subject of the movie "Cafeteria Man." He will be joined by a stellar cast of local and national experts such as Lisa Lefferts, a Senior Scientist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest and Kathy Lawrence, Director of Strategic Development for School Food FOCUS, a national group which helps large school districts more toward healthier, more local food options.

According to RFKM's other co-founder, Lindsey Parsons, "We have been meeting with members of the Board of Education and all of them seem open to the idea of serving healthier food to our children--provided there is a way to do it without substantially increasing costs, and that the public is behind them. We believe this forum will show them that both of those things are true."

Added Karen Devitt, "We're hoping the Forum will open people's minds to the wealth of positive changes we can make in school foods. It is going to take time--but we're in it for the long haul."

Tickets for the November 2 School Food Forum are \$25, \$15 for students, and include a delicious, locally sourced lunch from La Prima Catering. (Scholarships are available.) For more information and to register for this great event, go to [www.realfoodforkidsmontgomery.org](http://www.realfoodforkidsmontgomery.org)

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the [montgomerycivic@yahoo.com](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*