

The Free Lunch Program: A Construction of Social Welfare Attitudes of the 1940s

Historians generally recognize the 1940s as a stagnant period for social change and concern with poverty. Following World War II, America experienced a great economic boom as a result of heavy government spending during World War II. As a result post war era wages increased while the number of people in poverty declined.¹ The federal government grew dramatically during these years as its budget increased from \$ 9 billion in 1940 to \$ 64 billion in 1946.² But in this new age of a wealthy America, people became convinced that poverty was fixing itself. Public welfare leaders tried to continue New Deal momentum by lobbying for expanding Social Security, increasing public welfare, creating national health insurance, and guaranteeing employment, but they saw little success³. The National Resources Planning Board issued a blueprint for "Security, Work and Relief Policies" that would have guaranteed comprehensive social welfare for Americans and provided social and medical services to a wide swath of the population. Unfortunately, these dreams of the New Dealers would never be realized. "In the 1940s," historian Jennifer Mittelstadt noted," American liberalism was at the tail end of the New Deal, in the 1950s, it appeared more accomodationist. "Policy makers" she wrote, would

¹ Patterson's sources found that the percentage of families in poverty rose from around 40% in 1935-1936 and then fell steadily to 33% in 1940 and by 27 % 1950. As found in James Patterson, *Americas' Struggle against Poverty* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 20.

² Marion Cronan *The School Lunch* (Illinois, Chas. A. Bennett Company, Inc. 1962).

³ Margaret Weir, and Ann Shola Orloff, *The Politics of Social Reform* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1998).

not discuss poverty and solutions to it in a bold, universal manner, but rather within a narrowed context.”⁴ For many social welfare programs, the 1940s would prove to be a difficult and uphill battle.

If Congress rejected liberal policymakers’ elaborate social welfare programs, it did pass a new, expanded Free Lunch Program for low-income students in the nation’s public schools. As a whole, however, historians have left out the Free Lunch Program in their discussion of welfare reform in the 1940s. This successful program, as much as the rejected proposals provides insight into the politics of welfare in the postwar era. Why at a time when other welfare programs failed, was the Free Lunch Program, a self-reporting program, passed year after year? Why did Congress provide funds to feed poor children lunch but refuse to provide free dental or medical care? An analysis of Congressional debates in 1945 and 1946 about the program reveals that Free Lunch Program passed because it fit into the kind of aid program that federal officials could stomach. Most importantly, it is through both the successes and limitation of the program that the conservative social welfare politics of the immediate post war era are revealed.

Child hunger was not a new issue in the 1940s, but reformers had little success before then in addressing the issue. Before the 1930s, poor people generally relied on the funds from private aid and community organizations. As early as 1853, organizations such as Children’s Aid distributed free lunches to school children. However, funding for this type of aid however was limited, especially in impoverished districts where aid was needed the most. Robert Hunter’s treatise 1904 “Poverty” was one of the first books to

⁴ Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

draw attention to plight of many children living in poverty. In his book he reported that of the 12,800 children he surveyed, 987 had no breakfast and 1,963 had inadequate breakfasts.⁵ Newspaper editors they broadcast his findings to the world. *The New York Times* reported, “70,000 starving children in New York City come breakfast less to school”⁶.

Other private organizations recognized the problem of child hunger but offered little in the way of solutions. A 1931 Red Cross handbook for rural public health nurses identified child hunger as a health problem and suggested various methods for combating it. The guide book suggested that teachers have children take turns bringing in soup for the entire class. The Red Cross defined adequate nutrition as a teacher’s responsibility, advising that, “As many rural children drink almost no milk, the teacher should see that all children have milk and some vegetables or fruit each noon”⁷. Teachers were further advised to educate parents about good eating habits. This way of thinking did not focus on poverty but rather the parents’ responsibility to feed their children healthy foods. When the Red Cross addressed provisions of foods, it left that responsibility squarely on parents’ shoulders. When the nation’s foremost public health organization failed to recognize poverty’s role in producing child hunger, politicians were able to ignore poverty problems that were facing then nation.

⁵ Louis Bryant, *School Feeding: It’s History and Practice at Home and Abroad* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company)

⁶ Ibid (Author did not footnote New York Times Source.

⁷ *Rural School Nursing: An Outline for Red Cross Public Health Nurses* Washington D.C. American National Red Cross 1931).

However, during the Great Depression, the families crisis placed government food programs on the nation's agenda. Besides widespread unemployment, the Great Depression of the 1930s created economic problems for farmers. Much of the production of the farm went begging for a market, surpluses of farm products continued to mount, and prices of farm products declined to a point where farm income provided only a meager subsistence. At the same time, million of school children were unable to pay for their school lunches, and with limited family to provide meals at home, the danger of malnutrition among children became a national concern. Federal assistance became essential, and Congressional action was taken in 1935 to aid both agriculture and the school lunch program.

Not surprisingly, the bill to fund the provisional Free School Lunch program passed Congress with little objection. The program was considered part of an emergency aid plan primarily to provide farmers with an outlet for their farm goods.⁸ In 1935, Congress made available to the Secretary of Agriculture an amount of money equal to 30 percent of the gross receipts from duties collected under the customs laws during each calendar year. The Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation and the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation coordinated the government's purchase and distribution to surplus pork, dairy products, and wheat to the needy. By March 1937, nearly 2,800 schools were receiving commodities for lunch programs serving 243,031 children daily. Two years later, the number had grown to 14,000.⁹ Like the Social Security Act of 1935, the Free Lunch Program was designed to provide aid primarily to middle class families brought

⁸ Marion Cronan *The School Lunch* (Illinois, Chas. A. Bennett Company, Inc. 1962).

⁹ Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program* (New York, Nova Science Publishers 2003).

down by poor economic circumstances. Thus, needy families and school lunch programs became constructive outlet for the commodities and fit into the 1940s notion of social welfare policy.

When America entered WWII, the economic effects felt during the Great Depression seemed to all but disappear from the minds of Americans. Through the GI Bill many Americans were able to move into the middle class. From 1936 to 1946 the average household income increased from \$3,047 to \$5,769.¹⁰ In addition, Keynesian economics had revolutionized economics and the way that people thought of the world around them. American Keynesian economics according to poverty historian Alice O. Conner had shifted from an initial, New Deal emphasis on expanded redistributive public spending to a heavier reliance on market driven growth.¹¹ This great economic boom gave many the false sense of optimism that poverty was fixing itself. Poverty and social programs were no longer issues at the forefront of politics. Instead, programs such as Social Security which benefited the working class became part of a more conservative social legislation which politicians pushed for. In addition to optimistic views about poverty, the main purpose of the program no longer existed. For the last 10 years, the Free Lunch Program had been renewed every year on a provisional emergency basis. The federal government was only to intervene until the American middle class farmer was to get back on his feet again and provide for his children. In addition, the large supply of food required to support the U.S. Armed forces and allies soon drained off farm

¹⁰ Ibid, pg 55

¹¹ Alice, O'Conner *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001).

surpluses and by 1944, there were only some 34,064 schools receiving federal surplus for some 5 million children. Thus, the Free Lunch Program as a permanent program was forced into debate the following year in 1945.

The first call for a permanent Free Lunch Program surprisingly came from a conservative Democratic senator from Georgia, Richard Russell. Although he was the leader of the conservative coalition, Russell, like many lawmakers desperate to provide relief for their constituents during the Great Depression, initially supported the New Deal and its legislation. He proclaimed his faith in the "family farm" and supported rural electrification, farm loans, agricultural research, and free school lunches. "The School lunch program" he reminded his fellow members of Congress, "has proven exceptional benefit to the children, schools, and agriculture of the country as a whole." "As a result, Russell urged Congress to address the necessity for now coordinating the work throughout the Nation," to "increase the financial participation and active control by the several States," and to pass "permanent legislation".¹² In his later political career and run for the presidency, Russell identified himself as a staunch racist against most kinds of social programs.¹³ For Russell, however, the importance of stimulating the economy through agriculture was crucial for his agrarian state. As long as the Free School Lunch Program served as an outlet for farm goods and not a tax burden to the public, the program seemed to be a win-win situation.

¹² House Committee on Agriculture Report P.L. 396-79th Congress, June 4, 1946. See Chronological Legislative History of Child Nutrition Programs, F&NS, USDA.

¹³ James Thomas Gay, "Richard B. Russell and the National school Lunch Program," Vol. LXXX, No. 4, Winter 1996 Georgia Historical Quarterly: 859-872).

During Congressional hearings on the Free Lunch Program in 1945, many individuals and organizations urged Congress to expand the Free Lunch Program to combat the child poverty and malnutrition that remained despite economic recovery. Dr. Gavin testified in Congress that 43% of America's 3.1 million farm families, almost 5 million people, still lived in poverty, which was defined as an income of \$2,000 a year or less in the 1940s. He later described the situation in the schools as a result of this poverty: "Children are found arriving at school having only had a cup of coffee and a donut"¹⁴. In the Congressional hearings of 1945 physicians and medical professionals argued that the expansion of the program was necessary for the health of children. Dr. Sebrell, an expert on children and nutrition noted that in 1947 about 24% of school aged children in North Carolina were found to have moderate to very severe swollen gums accompanied by a low vitamin C level. Twenty-five of the children with the worst gums were given canned grapefruit juice. In just six days, 84 percent of them showed definite improvement.¹⁵ From his statement, it seemed obvious that malnutrition was a problem and that if fed properly, children would be healthier.

As Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Senator Flannagon also held a vested interest in the passing of the Free School Lunch Program. Flannagon recommended a \$65,000,000 annual program to be given to the distribution committee. After listening to the data presented by health officials, Flannagon stated his case for the

¹⁴ Conference report on bill to provide assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 11024 H.rp.2080, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.rp.2080, 79-2, SESSION-DATE: 1946, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

¹⁵ Consideration of bill to provide assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 11022 H.rp.1489, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.rp.1489, 79-2, SESSION-DATE: 1946, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

continuation of an official Free School Lunch program. "These surveys have shown measurable benefit to the children when an adequate lunch is provided at school not only in their physical development but also in their educational progress."¹⁶ The additional benefit to that agricultural committee was of course that they could continue to have an outlet for farm surplus goods.

Still others wanted to see a program that unlike what Russell proposed did not concentrate on federal need but rather the needs of children. Ms. Harvey W. Wiley, Chairman of the Department of Legislation representing the General Federation of Women's Clubs stated the following in her testimony before Congress in 1943. "We feel that whatever bill passes, Congress on this subject should have as its primary object, the feeding of hungry school children and not the moving of farm surpluses".¹⁷

When the National School Lunch program or the Russell-Ellender bill finally came to voting time, legislatures ran into road blocks. Forwardly thinking Representative Powell proposed adding an antidiscrimination clause to the Free School Lunch Act that would deny any of the proposed \$65million in annual Federal aid to go to States or schools that practiced discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color or national origin. In fact, on February 20th, 1946, the *New York Times* reported that some Southern senators were threatening to vote against the bill entirely if the clause was included. According to the *Times*, "Mr. Tarvier, a conservative Democrat from the South declared that "the racial

¹⁶ Assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 10933 H.r.p.684, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.r.p.684, 79-1, SESSION-DATE: 1945, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

¹⁷ Consideration of bill to provide assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 11022 H.r.p.1489, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.r.p.1489, 79-2, SESSION-DATE: 1946, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

issue had been raised by opponents of the lunch programs in an effort to alienate southern support”¹⁸ In the end, Powell’s antidiscrimination clause was taken out of the act, which the Senate passed unanimously. The Senate authorized up to \$115million of Federal aid a year \$65million more than the House approved, to establish a permanent school lunch program. Eventually, the *Times* reported, “The program seeks to reach an estimated 30,000,000 children in public and private schools.”¹⁹ The Senate also voted to match dollar for dollar from 1947 to 1950 increasing the government to state contribution rate to 3:1 by 1956. On Sept June 4th, 1946, President Harry Truman signed the bill into law.

Strong Individuals: An American Need

The end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War ushered in strong sentiments about America’s power in the rest of the world. In its opening lines, the National School Lunch Program presented its purpose: “It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children...by assisting the States,...in providing an adequate supply of foods and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of non-profit school lunch programs.”²⁰ Congress thus made it clear that nutrition and food consumption by children was directly tied to national security.

¹⁸ New York Times, February 21, 1946.

¹⁹ New York Times, February 27, 1946.

²⁰ Florence, Robin *Their Daily Bread*, (Atlanta Georgia: McNelley-Rudd Printing Services, 1966).

After WWII ended, America's struggle for national security for its democracy was not over. The return of prosperity had encouraged the notion that America was a classless, consensual and powerful democracy. Bolstered by the new air of confidence, and having defeated Fascism, politicians set their sites on fighting what they now saw as the biggest threat to American democracy: Communism. "American confidence in part," historian James Patterson noted, "was the product of deliberate efforts by groups anxious to promote national unity in the common cause against fascism."²¹

The Free School Lunch program came at an opportunistic time when Congress was still focused on World War II and yet also the new threat of Communism. In the Congressional hearings for the Free Lunch Program in 1945, 2 out of the 6 experts who testified were generals during WWII. General Mclever, who served as the Director of Selective Service during WWII reported that out of the 4 ½ million men who were rejected for service, about 2% were rejected for reasons specifically related to malnutrition or being underweight. "While there are 2 or 3 percent of those nutritional defects specified as such by examiners, he noted, there are 40 to 50% perhaps of rejections that are rejections in which at least nutrient or feeding has much to do with the rejection"²². With these statistics in mind, politicians looked beyond nutrition in WWII and applied them to the situation of the Soviet Union.

In a time when the economy boomed, it was an embarrassment to many officials to have a democracy that lacked a strong youth. In addition, other countries such as Italy

²¹ James Patterson, *Americas ' Struggle against Poverty* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²² Assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 10933 H.rp.684, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.rp.684, 79-1, SESSION-DATE: 1945, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

had already achieved a success in school feeding by 1909 when school meals were served for free to most school children. As early as 1910, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Norway Sweden, Spain, and Russia had all adopted a form of a free lunch program for school children.²³

Without a strong youth, some Congressional witnesses argued, America could not compete as a world power. Dr. Sebrell's report on the state of children and nutrition in the U.S. was particular cause for concern. Not only were these children not being fed enough, they also weren't being fed properly. Sebrell pointed to one study in Vermont in which he found teeth of school age children were be outstandingly poor. Eighty-five percent of the children showed evidence of healed rickets, and one in four had spongy gums probably due to vitamin C deficiency".²⁴ Among poorer children the numbers were even worse. A survey of low-income high-school students revealed that 21 percent had less than two-thirds of their calculated caloric requirements and there was widespread inadequacy of protein, iron and calcium.²⁵ Sebrell warned, "My whole fear, is that if we have this stall feeding from the Government that possibly when we are called upon to fight World War Number three, we may not have the kind of boys that we now have".²⁶

²³ Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program* (New York, Nova Science Publishers 2003).

²⁴ Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1946. Part 2: War Food Administration, CIS-NO: 79 H1044-0-B, SOURCE: Committee on Appropriations. House, DOC-TYPE: Published Hearing, DATE: Feb. 14, 26, 27, Mar. 2, 3, 5-8, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ap6/1:Ag8/946/pt.2, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Conference report on bill to provide assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 11024 H.rp.2080, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.rp.2080, 79-2, SESSION-DATE: 1946, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

For a country attempting to be the dominating force in the world, health of the youth was very important.

Many politicians and educators reacted strongly to the obvious lack of a strong able-bodied youth. In his statement to Congress, Frank O. Washam, Director of Lunchrooms Board of Education in Chicago, Illinois remarked on the number of men who failed physical examination in WWII. "When the physical examinations... in connection with compulsory military training under the National Selective Service Act made known the regrettable deficiencies of the state of health of our nation's youth," Washam noted, "We resolved that we would never again allow such a condition to occur in this progressive land of ours, a country to whom all other countries are looking to for leadership".

Reverend William J. Givons of Catholic Rural Life Conference echoed this concern in a *New York Times* article in 1946. He stated that funding should come from the government for the Free Lunch program and that it should be done on the theory that "the stoutest barrier we can erect against totalitarianism is sound child health"²⁷.

Such concerns emanated throughout American society, reaching to President Harry Truman, who addressed the problem in a January 22, 1946 speech. "Nothing is more important to our national life than the welfare of our children," he declared, and "proper nourishment comes first in attaining this welfare." Invoking both the Depression Era concern with farmers' welfare and the Cold War emphasis on strong and healthy citizens, Truman expressed his support for the School lunch program. In the long view no

²⁷ Harry Truman, *New York Times*, October 6, 1946

nation is any healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers,” he insisted “and the National School Lunch Program has contributed to that”.²⁸

Emphasis on Local Control

It was all well and good to ensure the nation’s future citizens were strong and healthy, but the Cold War also heightened fears of a centralized government. Cold War rhetoric denouncing federal power in domestic affairs played a powerful role in undermining support for other kinds of welfare state expansion during the Truman administration underlining national health insurance and all inclusive welfare programs. Although a minor program, the Free Lunch Program was subject to similar criticisms. Setting the terms of debate, Granger expressed his desire “to keep this Government the very best government in the world, and we can’t have it that way if we are going to have all this centralization, which is breaking down our State laws and controls.”²⁹ Representative James Wadsworth, a Republican from New York, voiced his objection more directly: “[the free lunch program] is just another step calculated slowly but surely to transfer responsibility from the States”.³⁰ While a Democrat from Texas called the bill “destructive to national morale”.³¹

In response to such fears about centralized authority, lawmakers designed the bill to leave decision making and administration almost entirely in local hands. Lawmakers

²⁸ Harry Truman, *New York Times*, June 5, 1946

²⁹ School-Lunch Program, CIS-NO: 79 H1053-1, SOURCE: Committee on Agriculture. House, DOC-TYPE: Published Hearing, DATE: Mar. 23, 26-30, Apr. 16-18, May 9-11, 22, 24, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ag8/1:Sch6, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

³⁰ *New York Times*, February 20th, 1946, pg 22

³¹ *Ibid*

stressed that decisions would be made at the local level and demanded that in order for the federal government to match funds, the school districts would have to come up with 1 dollar for every federal dollar. By 1953, districts would be required to pay 3 dollars for every 1 dollar matched by the federal government³² The money for these programs was to be raised through organizations such as the Kiwanis club or the Parent Teachers Association.

Some advocacy groups recognized significant problems with making aid provisional upon matching local funds. Caroline F. Ware of the American Association of University Women voiced her organization's opinion: "Allocation of Federal funds should be on the basis of need," and the members of the AAUW "oppose the principle of making Federal grants depend on the provision of matching funds by states."³³ AAUW argued, could only be afforded by the best-off states by 1956. Nevertheless, the AAUW were largely ignored. It would be until the 1970s when this issue would be looked at again.

Getting Right to the Children

Poverty rates during 1940s and 50s remained high despite impressive economic growth. In the 1940s, more that one-third of the people in all poor families were children

³² Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1946. Part 2: War Food Administration, CIS-NO: 79 H1044-0-B, SOURCE: Committee on 3, 5-8, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ap6/1:Ag8/946/pt.2, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

³³ School-Lunch Program, CIS-NO: 79 H1053-1, SOURCE: Committee on Agriculture. House, DOC-TYPE: Published Hearing, DATE: Mar. 23, 26-30, Apr. 16-18, May 9-11, 22, 24, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ag8/1:Sch6, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

and three-fifths where under eighteen or over sixty-five.³⁴ Early New Deal work programs such as the Works Progress Administration Civilian Conservation Corps, and a number of other Depression era programs were aimed at helping the middle class working man who had simply fallen into a rut. In the same respect, Social Security was aimed as old age insurance to those who had contributed to society. In addition, the work programs were designed as temporary relief measures with temporary government intervention.

Public assistance programs aimed at able-bodied adults had always faced an uphill political battle in the United States. Aid to Dependent Children the aid aimed at able bodied adults who many social conservatives of the 1940s believed were not pulling their weight in society and living off welfare. In addition it was even more difficult for fathers or two parent families to receive aid. Other programs such as aid to welfare mothers went so far to humiliate welfare mothers in order to determine their true need. There were even reports of midnight raids where welfare workers looked for whiskers of men in women's sinks to determine if there was a man that could be a provider.³⁵ In another instance in one of Nevada's poorest districts welfare recipients had their aid illegally terminated and did not see of a penny of retroactive money that a judge ordered the state to pay. Those who were thrown off Aid to Families with Dependent Children lost Medicaid coverage for their children and food rations.

The National Free Lunch Program did face some of the similar backlash that other programs aimed to help children faced. In the 1945 Congressional hearings, Hearing

³⁴ Hearings Before The Committee on Agriculture House of Representatives Seventy-Ninth Congress

³⁵ Annelisa Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Place* (Boston Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2005)

Summers, a Representative Democrat of Texas stated his objection. "if you pass this bill," Mr. Summers told the House, "you will be inculcating in little children at the most impressionable period of their lives the idea that they can get something for nothing from Uncle Sam".³⁶ But Mr. Summers was not in the majority of politicians, who more often, distinguished the National Free Lunch program as separate and unique from other welfare programs. Unlike ADC, applying for aid was made simple. One filled out a self reporting application reporting expected income and the number of people in the household. The ability to receive aid however once you qualified was often times more difficult.

On other social welfare programs Congressmen also tended to object because it seemed too much was being handed out. For example, one Congressman from Tennessee remarked in response to another senator who sarcastically asked if free lunch meant the government had to provide other services for children. "In the first place," the Congressman remarked, "the food situation seems to me to be basically different from the furnishing of medical and dental care. I think that is the best single approach to an answer to the agricultural problems improving dietary standards."³⁷ The greatest difference is that instead of going through the adult, the aid went straight to the child. There was only one meal allowed each day and the system could easily be regulated through a ticket system. The ticket system made sure that parents could not use the money any other way or take advantage of the system. But politicians were not willing to give money to the parent where there was a potential opportunity for abuse. In a sense, were other welfare

³⁶ *New York Times* February 22, 1946

³⁷ Conference report on bill to provide assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 11024 H.rp.2080, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: H.rp.2080, 79-2, SESSION-DATE: 1946, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

programs failed, the lunch program succeeded because it was not a direct money handout.

The program fit into what conservative attitudes of the 1940s were willing to accept.

In the 1940s there was another shift in how many saw the issue of poverty as a result of changing economics. Poverty was not a social issue but an individual issue. If children of the poor could be educated how to eat healthily, then much of the problem of child hunger would solve itself. Through directly helping the child, conservative reformers believed, the parent would learn how to better take care of their child. Dr. Thomas Paran, Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service, described the many studies that he had conducted on health of children. "The provision of the School Lunch Program serves a number of very useful purposes," he noted, "but one is of utmost importance." In the first place, it gives an opportunity for nutritional education for the teaching of proper food habits to the children. The child goes home and tells its mother what is good food and what is not, as he has learned about it at school, and so the effect of proper school-feeding programs goes beyond the school itself and back to the family".³⁸ In his statement, the doctor blames malnutrition on the fact that children simply do not know how to eat right. As a result in 1946 Congress also included a \$15,000 provision to allow for education instruction. Although the measure failed in the House, the Senate passed it as part of the Free School Lunch Act.

³⁸ School-Lunch Program, CIS-NO: 79 H1053-1, SOURCE: Committee on Agriculture.House, DOC-TYPE: Published Hearing, DATE: Mar. 23, 26-30, Apr. 16-18, May 9-11,22, 24, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ag8/1:Sch6, Congressional Indexes,1789-1969

The Effects of a Poorly Designed Program

Because of specific limitations created by the conservative design of the program, the Free Lunch Program, failed to reach those it intended to reach. The program's very sketchy coverage, and the continued local resistance brought on by an emphasis on local control, the set up of the program fit 1940s conservative political attitudes in which local funding and control were key to public education in the U.S. The idea of private organizations raising money rather than taxing local citizens also kept it a quasi-government program. A community had to work for the money they received and if they weren't able to match it, then they didn't get federal funding.

In the end, many school districts were not able to meet the federal government money requirement and thus were forced to continue supplying food at their own cost to needy children or not at all. Many of the poorest districts did not have the local financial backing to match what the government was willing to provide and thus received no aid. In a Congressional Hearing in 1966, the Committee on School Lunch Participation which included the Church Women United, National Board of Y.W.C.A, National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Negro Women discussed the continued effort by school districts that lacked aid: "Many schools where concerned so principals and generous teachers work out emergency ways of paying for lunches, often pay out of their own pockets."³⁹ Other towns had similar stories about feeding their children. A teacher described the lunch program in her district: "on a volunteer basis, parents went to the school and prepared soup or coco or if

³⁹Florence, Robin *Their Daily Bread*, (Atlanta Georgia: McNelley-Rudd Printing Services, 1966).

no hot plate was available, carried the soup to the school at lunch time. The PTA often raised funds to provide a few tables which they covered with oilcloth. In one school I visited, the janitor baked potatoes in the furnace and the parents took turns contribution a casserole dish and cookies”⁴⁰. This kind of community responsibility and reliance on volunteers and private fund raising, continued to be the type of aid many poor communities relied on well into the 1970s.

Rural school systems had perhaps the most difficult time finding the means to match federal funds. Not only were they often unable to pay for the program, they also had little ability to implement it. Many of the rural schools had neither kitchen and cafeteria facilities that could manage a cafeteria nor the funding to create them. In some of the poor school districts like Westside district in Nevada teachers continued to see problems well after the Free Lunch Program was passed. At a Westside School District community hearing in 1966 with, one teacher, Rosie Seals explained that her children were going without breakfast most of the time. “They can’t concentrate all morning”, she insisted; “then for lunch they only get a sandwich.”⁴¹ But Westside school administrations insisted that they were not trying to cheat poor children. They simply had inadequate kitchen facilities and the district could not afford to upgrade them

Lack of funds was only part of the problem; by failing to mandate the program, Congress enabled local officials to reject any public responsibility for feeding poor school children. In rural districts with the greatest the need the program also faced the highest rejection. Conservative school officials condemned the Free Lunch program as a

⁴⁰ Marion Cronan *The School Lunch* (Illinois, Chas, A. Bennett Company, Inc. 1962).

⁴¹ Annalisa Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace*, pg 35.

“welfare measure”. It had been a long time tradition that children go home for meals in rural districts. Unfortunately, reports of malnutrition in rural schools meant that children were not always being fed. Nevertheless, school officials continued to reject the program. For example, a principal of low-income elementary school told Congress in 1946, “I don’t believe in free lunches for welfare people . . . It is not a welfare or educational responsibility”.⁴² Another junior high school principal remarked, “We think this is the responsibility of parents and child. As a whole, we are doing it as a service.”⁴³ In addition, regardless of the statistics health officials presented to Congress, some school officials failed or refused to recognize the extent of hunger among their children. “We have a specific allocation of free lunches,” One official told Congress: There are always more children to feed than the funds allow. We have a policy that no child goes hungry. If they can’t get a lunch, then they get milk and crackers.”⁴⁴

Because the U.S. Department of Agriculture which administered the program put little pressure on the states or school districts to comply, many districts did not. Nevada, for example, had one of the poorest records in the country during the 1940s. Clark County, home of Las Vegas, served fewer than three hundred free hot meals in a district where eight thousand students were on public assistance and thousands more were

⁴² Assistance to States in establishing school-lunch programs, CIS-NO: 10926 S.rp.553, DOC-TYPE: Serial Set Collection, DOC-NO: S.rp.553, 79-1, SESSION-DATE:1945, Congressional Indexes, 1789-1969

⁴³ School-Lunch Program, CIS-NO: 79 H1053-1, SOURCE: Committee on Agriculture. House, DOC-TYPE: Published Hearing, DATE: Mar. 23, 26-30, Apr. 16-18, May 9-11,22, 24, 1945, SESSION-DATE: 1945, SUDOC: Y4.Ag8/1:Sch6, Congressional Indexes,1789-1969

⁴⁴ Florence, Robin *Their Daily Bread*, (Atlanta Georgia: McNelley-Rudd Printing Services, 1966).

eligible for food aid.⁴⁵ It was not until the 1970s when welfare reformers pushed the federal government to give Nevada school districts adequate funding for lunches that conditions finally began to improve.⁴⁶

Locally, school districts continued to find problems with the Free School Lunch Act even into the 1990s. In 1996, the *Oregonian* found that only 3,614 needy children received a free lunch in a state in which close to 10,000 qualified. Yvonne Franklin, a Portland area teacher, argues in her editorial that : “The original school lunch act intended that the poorest children receive free or reduced price lunches, but most of the states, as has Oregon have ignored the language of the law...only those schools get into the program that have enough children enrolled who can pay for lunches.”⁴⁷ Although the program attempted to help those children in need, it still failed to help those who needed it the most.

Throughout the 1940s social welfare programs faced a difficult faced sn uphill battle contending with unceasingly powerful opposition.. Unlike other comprehensive social welfare programs, the Free Lunch Program passed unanimously in the Senate, providing for self reporting Free Lunch program to those who qualified. However, the successes and limitations of the programs also help to reveal the attitude of social welfare politics in the immediate postwar era.

⁴⁵ Annelisa Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Place* (Boston Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2005)

⁴⁶ Annelisa Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Place* (Boston Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2005)

⁴⁷ Yvonne Franklin, “State Funds Required for School Lunches”, *The Oregonian* (March 3, 1962).