It starts with Student Lunch Nutrition

There has been a lot of discussion, both formal and informal, about the health of American citizens. Most serious are those discussions focused around the health of the young and up-coming generations. Ensuring that our children get adequate nutrition is essential to their survival and the survival of our nation. John Fitzgerald Kennedy once said, "Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future." Our thirty-fifth president knew that the future of the world lies with the success of its youngest citizens. Therefore, this paper aims to understand why adolescents today are having a difficult time maintaining healthy lifestyles.

I will begin to explore some of the causes of attention of school lunch nutrition, such as image-focused media and overwhelming societal pressures surrounding body image. I propose that a major contributing factor to the lack of healthy children is the meals they are being presented with at school; the primary focus being elementary schools. Simply put, schools are missing the mark when it comes to educating their students about the importance of proper nutrition. School lunch nutrition (SLN) is being poorly communicated to children by school administrations. However, the administrations are not the only ones to blame. In the following pages, I will outline how better communication of the content and importance of SLN to elementary age children can improve the health of adolescents across America. I believe that my perspective will aid in shifting the discussion from a retroactive health discussion to a proactive prevention discussion and help build a bridge between proper student lunch nutrition and what students are facing

presently. Furthermore, I will identify key programs and areas where communication efforts are directly having a positive affect on student lives.

Understanding School Lunch Nutrition through History

Nothing should be more important to a nation than ensuring the health of its youth. When the time comes for children to grow into adults, if they have a healthy foundation, they are capable, both mentally and physically, to assume the role of leaders, inventors, visionaries, humanitarians, professionals, etc in society. In America, kids spend the majority of their adolescent years in school. From pre-school to college, kids spend countless hours on an educational campus learning, exercising, growing, and eating.

Americans have evolved to be a more polychronic society. Polychornic societies are marked by the level and rate of activities their citizens engage in, i.e. the ability to process multiple complex situations simultaneously, be flexible with changes, and concern themselves with the highest possible achievements . Put plainly, a polychromic mindset is the ability to successfully multi-task. In the past, American society has been primarily governed by monochromic principles i.e. more singular focuses, dependency on momentary gratification than long term results, and a higher regard for personal relationships (Hall 17-18). As America trends towards a two-paycheck household system, or polychromic system, with latch key kids, babysitters, nannies, and afterschool programs, family time is becoming less prominent in an adolescent's daily routine. We value and monitor time more closely

because we have chosen to assign a monetary value to it. Engaging in a polychronic attitude is done with the best intentions of making the most of every moment, not because we desire to be detached from families or alienate the importance of the family structure. Nevertheless, this shift away from home life creates a culture in which parents are increasingly reliant on structured school programs. These substitutions grow to be more influential in young lives each day. Quality family time is down, and productivity and convenience are preferred. The adult American can do more now than ever before in the same amount of time. Technology has contributed towards the ability of moms to "bring home the bacon" and cook it up too.

Deborah Tannen once theorized that men and women communicate differently ("The Official Website of Deborah Tannen."). However, it is my belief that with an increasing amount of women in the work place and an increased demand for productivity from both adult men and women, the communication gap between the two sexes is shrinking. The communication styles of men, women, and children are converging and becoming increasingly technology centered. For example, text messaging has become a wide spread communication tool. The same abbreviations and styles are used, regardless of age or gender. While Tannen's research about what a specific gender seeks to gain from communication interaction still holds true, the methods of achieving these same communication outcomes are changing. The adolescent's use of communication methods far exceeds that of adults. They are becoming skillful, polychronic citizens. With the juggernaut that is our society, as we barrel forward, have we lost sight of the important fundamentals? Can we be

content with the direction our country's youth is headed, and do we feel confident in their ability to assume adult roles in society?

Stereotypically, Americans picture themselves as a successful group. We are a population of "go-getters." We are healthy and happy, well off, and largely immune from plague-like outbreaks of disease or disaster. Because of this, many are surprised to discover that there is a deadly epidemic creeping up on the unsuspecting American, which is obesity. Obesity, in fact, has reached epidemic proportions, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 2010, the CDC released this public service radio message entitled, "The Obesity Epidemic:"

> 72 million adults in the U.S. are obese. Obesity is excess body fat. A person becomes obese by eating too much food and not getting enough physical activity. In 2009, more than 1 in 4 adults were obese. It's an epidemic that's affected the entire country. In *every* state, more than 15 percent of adults are obese, and, in nine states, adult obesity rates are now 30 percent or more. The medical care costs of obesity are staggering. In 2008, they totaled 147 *billion* dollars (. . .) (1).

This quote shows that the government of the United States acknowledges a problem amongst its citizens and is concerned about obesity's specific role in the health of our nation's delicate economy, and, more importantly, the health of its people. Since so much money is spent due to the obesity epidemic, our nation's economy and health are now, more than ever, inextricably linked. One might even go so far as to say that obesity is disrupting an American's basic right to life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness. Like any true epidemic, obesity is not only affecting a single demographic. Obesity is affecting every race, age, and gender. 17% of adolescents ages 6-11 are obese, and 17.6% of adolescent's ages 12-19 are obese (United States Federal Government: USDA). In other words, the physiology of America's youth is changing for the worse.

Many voices have been raised in an effort to pinpoint possible causes of the increase in overweight and obese children. Agents of this obesity epidemic, such as reductions of physical activity in schools, television, video games, failing family structures and supports, and lack of a balanced diet have been put in the hot seat by awareness groups and health campaigns. Nonetheless, the statistics still remain startling; there are more obese children than ever before (Wentz 2).

Furthermore, obesity is a serious health problem and should not be casually dismissed. According to the CDC, the number one cause of death in adults is related to cardiovascular diseases (i.e., heart diseases). Obesity has been linked to significant weight increase beyond what is normal for individuals of a particular cross-referenced height and age. If the next generation of adults is already considered obese or headed for that diagnosis, the death toll will surely continue to increase:

> Obese children and adolescents are at risk for health problems during their youth and as adults. For example, during their youth, obese children and adolescents are more likely to have risk factors associated with cardio vascular disease […] than other children and adolescents. Obese children and adolescence are more likely to become obese as adults. For example, one

> study found that approximately 80% of children who were overweight at age 10-15 years were obese as adults age 25 years. Another study found that 25% of obese adults were overweight as children. The latter study also found that if overweight begins before age 8 years of age, obesity in adulthood is likely to be more severe. ("Childhood Overweight and Obesity" 1)

Basically, children are not outgrowing their fat. Obesity in children is thus a true medical condition and should not be dismissed as "baby fat" that they will out grow. Our children are not growing out of the rolls and pudginess that is goggled upon at infancy. The strong correlation between an obese child and that same child being an obese adult is irrefutable evidence that obesity is a dangerous epidemic. The United States is fostering a generation predisposed to fatal diseases, thus making the next generation weaker. The principles behind Charles Darwin's theory of ***survival of the fittest*** would say that this next generation has no chance of surviving or thriving if they are innately weaker. This then does not leave one confident in the coming generation's ability to succeed.

Consequences of this disease are dangerous and may have a lasting impact on the individual. Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of Americans. Various diseases that fall under the umbrella of heart disease include diseases of the blood vessels, such as coronary artery disease; heart rhythm problems (arrhythmias); heart infections; and heart defects one is born with (congenital heart defects) (Staff, Mayo Clinic). While cardiovascular complications are most commonly associated with obese individuals, additional health concerns have been linked to obesity as well. These concerns include diagnoses such as asthma, a

disease of the lungs where airways become obstructed or narrowed causing breathing difficulty; hepatic steatosis, the fatty degeneration of the liver caused by a high concentration of enzymes; sleep apnea, a sleep associated breathing disorder in which breathing will stop for ten seconds at a time causing oxygen levels to plummet and laborious breathing in between the apnea spells; and, finally, Type 2 Diabetes, a lack in insulin production and the bodies inability to process ingested sugars ("Consequences").

In addition to the physical health concerns, there are psychological risks to obesity as well. The CDC identifies that, "obese children and adolescents are targets of early symptomatic social discrimination" ("Consequences"). Overweight or obese children are more at risk of being the victim of school bullying, teasing, and/or discrimination. The "social stigmatization cause[s] low self-esteem" in children and negatively affects their well-being ("Consequences"). The problem with young adolescents being exposed to bullying and teasing can be understood when looking at it using the lens of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's Agenda Setting Theory. The Agenda Setting Theory is defined as "mass media [having] the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda" (McCombs, Shaw 18-22). In other words, one opinion, when heard over and over, has the potential to influence outcomes. The application is that media affects public opinion much like an adolescents self-image can be affected by the opinion of those around them.

Children that are continually bullied or exposed to false information from their schools with regards to proper nutrition will yield to a lesser opinion of themselves. If we change the communication about nutrition in schools and

surround kids with positive messages about food and weight, their reality may become far different. As children eat their school approved "nutritious" meal for lunch, they are transferring similar meaning to foods outside of school as acceptable to eat. As it is now, students are unknowingly reinforcing bad habits in school cafeterias, and in turn, the schools reinforce the student's choices by keeping their options on the menu. These bad habits can lead to being overweight as a child, which in turn affects many other aspects of a child's development. Low self-esteem is a leading factor in a child's academic and social performance and may carry over into adulthood. If a child who suffers from constant bullying in his or her adolescent years because of weight develops low self-worth, he or she has already begun to lessen his or her chances of reaching full potential in school and in life.

Success in the fragile adolescent years is key to having a child develop healthy communication patterns and lifestyle choices. A child's mind can be been compared to putty or clay. It is a malleable substance that is very impressionable until it is grown, at which time it becomes cemented in its opinions and practices. McCombs and Shaw understand that the influence the media has is immense, and if it is not controlled or guided appropriately, the consequences can be severe. Those most venerable are those who do not fully understand all aspects of the subject, and/or those who do not already hold an opinion on the subject (McCombs and Shaw 18-22). These parameters describe the nation's youth. Adolescents are blank slates. They are learning and absorbing everything around them, wading waist deep in a world that is full of contradictions and opinions. Without many alternative

choices, adolescents are forced to turn to their school for guidance, but often find unhealthy options and incorrect nutrition practices.

Additionally, McCombs and Shaw discuss a "gatekeepers" role in setting agendas (18-22). Gatekeepers are those people or organizations that filter what and audience gets access to. Kurt Lewin was the first to coin the term "gatekeeping" and his original concept was used to describe moms who controlled what their family ate at their dinner tables (145). Ironically, Lewin's first notion of a gatekeeper involved food, and, unfortunately, today's schools are failing at this task. Since schools can now be considered gatekeepers, taking on the responsibility of feeding their students, they should be educated in nutrition and, in turn, share with the students what foods they should be eating.

The adult population is increasingly obese and unhealthy. They are dying from preventable diseases, and if we turn away from this problem, the leaders of tomorrow will be swept away in the same unhealthy and obese epidemic. Gallup conducted a poll to investigate the obesity trend in America. Their survey focused primarily on adults; however, their findings are applicable to the general concern of health. The bottom line, as presented by Gallup, is that, "The implication of increasing obesity and the associated health outcomes of being obese are extensive for national, state, and local leaders" (Witters 4). Furthermore, evidence suggests that if areas reduced their obesity levels by 15% the U.S. could save $32.6 billion in healthcare costs per year (Witters 4). This epidemic is affecting more the just than population's health. It is burdening our country with unnecessary and very preventable financial hardship.

Understanding Student Lunch Nutrition Through Science

Why is focusing on school lunches an important public concern? The first concern for school nutrition came about in 1946. Congress originated the National School Lunch Program after an "investigation into the health of young men [who were] rejected in the World War II draft [later their rejection] showed a connection between physical deficiencies and childhood nutrition" (*Food Research and Action Center*). In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the draft was initiated to supply military units with numbers and strength. Disappointingly, many of the young men selected to serve their country were unable to meet the physical requirements and were therefore deemed unfit to serve. It was a result that was thought to be improbable. A young eighteen to twenty year old male was assumed to be in the prime of his life, both physically and mentally perfect soldier material. Unfortunately, this generation was following the Great Depression, a time when it was rough for families with single offspring let alone multiple, which was more common, to survive. When a loaf of bread became too expensive for a mom to purchase for her family, you can bet that fresh fruit and vegetables were nowhere to be found on most Americans' dinner tables. The lack of nutritious foods for children affected their future and caused them to develop into weaker individuals. The government found out about this the hard way – a shortage of fit men to serve. Therefore, in 1946 Congress passed the National School Lunch Act to ensure this type of oversight would not

happen again. They called it a "measure of national security, to safe-guard the health and well being of the Nation's children" (*Food Research and Action Center 2010*).

Today's children are not suffering from as much under consumption as the children in the 1940's were, but rather from un-nutritious options and over consumption. Lunch meals were originally created to ensure students were receiving the minimum number of calories for basic growth and development. Known as Type A, this lunch provided one-third to half of adolescences' daily caloric intake. However, as more scientific evidence came out and better health information was revealed, the caloric suggestions were modified. In the 1980's, the Type A lunch was phased out, favoring diets lower in fat and cholesterol.

Better economic times led to a gradual shift from meeting calorie intake by any means necessary, to eating the correct food for a healthy body. Dietary guidelines always aim to reflect current science based on a scientific consensus of proper nutrition. In 1989, requirements were made to have school meals meet the Recommended Daily Allowance's (RDAs). These are the nutrient levels established by the US National Academy of Science, later renamed The Food and Nutrition Board in 1941(Nestle 306). Then, in May of 2000, some of the biggest overhauls to date were made to the National School Lunch Program. Meals now satisfy the Recommended Dietary Intake (RDI's) of proteins, calcium, iron, vitamin A, and vitamin C. RDI recommendation replaced RDA recommendations at the requesting of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy in 1997 (Nestle 306). In addition, now meals must exercise a decreased amount of sodium, increase the

amounts of fiber, have no more than 30% of total calories achieved through fat, and less than 10% of total calories must be from saturated fats.

These changes were among the first specific mentions of nutrition health and significantly outline the new goals for the National School Lunch programs (*Food Research and Action Center*). These changes are meaningful, because they indicate that the government programs that are already in place to improve student meals are capable of being amended. The Food Research and Action Center is just one of the many organizations that working towards a healthier youth population through mass communication tactics.

The change in adolescent health communication is becoming ever more noticeable. However, the changes, while appropriate and dire, always seem to be two steps behind actually making a difference. The latest changes to be enacted on the National School Lunch Program were in 2005. They were made in response to a national survey conducted over a three-year period (2003-2006). The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) revealed that there is an alarming rate of obesity appearing in adolescents ages six to nineteen. To combat this bad news, Congress approved additional regulations on the National School Lunch Program which included offering an increase amounts of fruits and vegetables, incorporating more whole grains and less processed white flour, offering only fat free milk products, and again reducing saturated fats, trans fats, and sodium levels. The most noticeable change made is the increased levels of fresh fruits and vegetables. Lunches are set to offer four and a half more cups than previously provided.

Let it be recognized that the steps our government is taking to modify the National School Lunch program are moving in a positive direction. The program is still aiming to fulfill its original mission statement which is, "to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's Children" (Unites States of America Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services, USDA). However, it cannot be ignored that even with the proposed and implemented changes, obesity rates continue to rise and the health of adolescents everywhere continues to fall.

I would like to now discuss the cultural aspects of food and meals. It is important to understand that food is highly linked to the emotional status of an individual and is deeply woven in the culture of an adolescent. In addition, food has the ability to communicate great cultural truths that may shed answers on the questions as to why obesity rates have not been able to be brought under control.

Understanding Student Lunch Nutrition Through International Similarities

School meals around the world are coming under fire. Health is a global issue now and is no longer being taken for granted. The British Broadcasting Company released a report in 2005 that school nutrition has declined in many developed countries, including Britain, France, Norway and the United States. Many of these countries offer significant or complete funding for their school lunch programs ("School Dinners around the World" 1-3). From this, it can be determined that a lack in nutrition is not due to a lack of funding, and still further inferred, that obesity is not correctable by throwing more money towards schools. The system is broken; all

the money in the world cannot fix what is beyond repair. Therefore, the task ahead is to put a new nutrition communication system in the schools that accomplishes what should be its only purpose: furthering the healthy development of students.

Edward Hall says, "Cultures are unified entities in which everything interrelates" (xix). Therefore, it is important to examine all potential aspects of society to truly understand it. According to the International Obesity Task Force, which is part of the World Health Organization, "36% of Italian children are overweight, compared with 22% in Britain and a larger than expected 19% in France—a hefty increase for a country that has prided itself on healthy eating habits" ("School Dinners around the World" (1). As Raymonde Carroll states in her book, Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience "cultural analysis is necessary only because my culture is not the only one in the world" (3). The obesity rates are rising in too many countries. It is important to know that The United States is not alone in this problem. There is an international community rallying around the need for better health communication.

Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver is one who has taken this adolescents health crisis to heart and has started a food revolution. Starting a revolution first in his home country of Great Britain, he then brought the revolution to the United States. Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution was made into a reality television series based off the principles of his *Ministry of Food,* which he began in the United Kingdom. As Oliver states, "Ministry of Food is all about getting people cooking again." He wants to show us that anyone can learn to cook, and that "it is fun, cool, can save you money and help you, your family, and friends to live a healthier life" (*Jamie Oliver*). Now, on

American television, the Food Revolution is the most important kind of reality TV we need to be watching. Jamie Oliver says it best in his note to viewers:

> This Food Revolution is about saving America's health by changing the way people eat. It's not just a TV show; it's a movement for you, your family and your community. If you care about your kids and their future, take this revolution and make it your own. Educate yourself about food and cooking, and find out what your child is eating at school. Make only a few small changes and magical things will happen. Switching from processed to fresh food will not only make you feel better, it will also add years to your life. (*Jamie Oliver*)

Jamie Oliver's show *Food Revolution* is an example of the mass health communication that this country needs to effectively battle the obesity epidemic. We can no longer deal with obesity on a case-by-case basis. We, as a society and a culture, must determine how to combat this epidemic as a whole. If we truly are a polychromic society than our best hope for success is embracing the media influence we allow in our daily lives and using that influence to make a difference in the obesity rates for adolescents.

Understanding Student Lunch Nutrition though the Media

Through programs like *Food Ministries* and visionaries like Jamie Oliver the problem is being revealed to the public. "Shock-and-awe" tactics are helpful tools to draw attention, especially in a media numb American society where people need to

be jolted to pay attention. Jamie Oliver started his American food revolution in Huntington, West Virginia, which is the unhealthiest city in America, according to an MSNBC report ("W. Virginia Town Shruggs…" 2008).

Jamie Oliver's television show is not the first of its kind, but it is one of the most potentially helpful "reality" TV shows on air to-date. Like many popular television shows on the American Broadcast Network (ABC), Food Revolution is about real people in real life situations finding a way to overcome their difficult situations. Food Revolution can be categorized alongside shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *The Bachelor* by their attempts to change the participant's lives. Season two of Food Revolution's drama focuses on the students in the Los Angeles school district. However, unlike season one of Food Revolution, which was based on the unhealthy practices of the small West Virginia community, season two attempts to take a look at one of the largest school districts in the country. Starting in the school with students is a last chance effort to make a lasting impact on future generations. Adult obesity and weight related health problems have exceeded manageable proportions, but adolescents still have a chance.

Season two had a rocky start for Jamie Oliver. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) denied Oliver any access to their schools and their school lunch programs. LAUSD claims that they have their student meals and health under control and are satisfying all the proper protocol required by federal and local government authorities. The superintendents office believes, because they are meeting multiple governmental agencies requirements, Oliver's "investigation" is unjustified. At this time, they would not allow Oliver and his film crew access to

cafeterias, students, or anything that could closely resemble part of the lunch programs on campus across Los Angeles. However, there is some hope amongst all the red tape and it is the reason this show has not been booted off the air for its lack of content; the general public loves Jamie Oliver. Parents love his passion about their passions, their kids. Students love the respect Jamie fights for on their behalf. There is obviously something not right in the LAUSD if there are parents and students supporting Oliver and his food revolution. The LAUSD is hiding something, and with Jamie Oliver shining a spotlight on the district, its secrets will not be hidden forever.

Food Revolution is holding its ratings and popularity, because it is embracing major media communication principles. Oliver has embraced the use of signs in his communication strategies with his audience. We come to understand the meaning implied behind what is observed through signs. Signs also allow us to translate meaning to others with minimal lack of confusion in translation. Signs come to hold their meaning based on the strength of the signified and the signifier *(Berger 2005)*. One of the most predominant signs surrounding Oliver is his use of the word "revolution." Revolution is a powerful word that has held great power over the course of history. Most commonly, revolution is associated with some sort of battle or war between two or more groups because of a difference of opinions or desire. This is the sign's signifier, its meaning from the definition of this word. Revolution, then, is defined in three distinct but related ways:

1. An overthrow or repudiation and the thorough replacement of an established government or political system by the people governed.

> 2. A radical and pervasive change in society and the social structure, especially one made suddenly and often accompanied by violence.
> 3. A sudden, complete or marked change in something (*Merriam-Webster Online*).

Understanding the signified creates a seamless ability for the individual to then move on to understanding what the signifier is signifying in the signified aspects of the sign. The example of *revolution* includes the concepts of freedom and a better life. Many historical revolutions were fought with the blood and sweat of those who believed in a cause bigger than themselves and a future better than the grim one they were currently facing. Now, by understanding the origins of the connotations associated with the word, we better understand their relationship, and this brings meaning into the sign. We can effortlessly and instantaneously draw conclusions about the themes and purposes behind Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution. The human brain can quickly relate "revolution" as a sign without being forced to break it down into its parts. However, by breaking a sign down, we can better understand why value is assigned to certain things over others and how powerful those suggestions can be at influencing an audience. In the case of revolution, there is an extremely long historical connotation, an emotional element, and an overall optimism that is tied to Oliver's show and thus launches the Food Revolution into importance.

Similar is the use of the "raised fist" image Jamie Oliver uses as part of his logo for Food Revolution. Also referred to as a "clenched fist," this symbol is widely known to be associated with the mindsets of left wing activists, the Communism movement in the United States, and Black Nationalists. It holds symbolic reference

to resistance and unity (Cushing 2006). Oliver takes this sign and twists its signifier to represent his own cause. The sign itself translates similar meaning, now grasping a celery stalk and a carrot root with the same strength and determination as its creators first intended it. It is an emotional and powerful image. Seeing it, one automatically understands that there is a fight happening with regards to food at a basic level. Meaning is clear with the use of this sign; the food revolution is about change and uniting those revolutionaries to resist the status quo as an unacceptable standard. Lastly, this symbol speaks about a fight. That change will be a challenge and will not be met with open arms. There will be those who will resist the movement, but that the strength of the revolution can overcome.

For Jamie Oliver to succeed he must be regarded as important and perceived as an authority on the subject of nutrition in adolescence. Many times, a self-proclaimed "revolutionary" is nothing more than a person publicly making a fool of himself, spouting nonsense about a subject that is close to their own heart, but which few others share that same affection for. Much like Aristotle was condemned to death for challenging the way young minds of a society thought, Oliver is being shunned for his beliefs as well. Aristotle did not claim to be an influencer or teacher, but merely a man on his own quest for knowledge. Oliver seeks to put that same desire for knowledge in the adolescents of America. It could be theorized that a true revolutionary is one that speaks about change in a manner in which he or she convinces others to join him and/or he strikes a communal code of concern. This person would also be able to convince others to join the cause and contribute to aiding and furthering their cause. It is Oliver's position that if people could only

know and have access to the truth, then they would be better off. Oliver started making a lot of "noise "about school nutrition in Great Britain, and the citizens responded with overwhelming support—so much so, that Oliver has discovered that there is support and power poised for the ready in other countries on other continents. On the Food Revolution website, 682,518 people in the United States have signed a petition in support of Oliver's cause, agreeing that there needs to be change in the schools (*Jamie Oliver*). If this is not proof that the Food Revolution is powerfully important, than I dare to ask, what is?

Understanding Student Lunch Nutrition through Meta-communication

Jamie Oliver is not the only one "stirring the pot" when it comes to the health of our nation's children. In order to make a difference, organizations like Food Revolution, the *Food Research and Action Center,* and the *Let's Move!* campaigns are embracing new ways to communicate more effectively. It is not enough to just blab in a child's ear about eating vegetables and not drinking soda. To really make a difference, we need to examine how we are to talk to the students most effectively.

Student lunch nutrition is beginning to tap into meta-communication principles. Meta-Communication is the discussion of the communication tactics involved in communicating. Meta-communication is not only concerned with what is being said but how it is said. People are talking about how we are talking to our kids about the food they eat and the health they should have. First lady Michelle Obama is one making a difference and understands meta-communication ideas. Past

practices have failed, and the evidence of that is in the obesity rate. Early in 2010, Michelle Obama launched a campaign against childhood obesity called *Let's Move!* . This program embraces new ideas about communication, empowering the students themselves to make a conscious choice and understand the consequences of unhealthy choices. Obama says, "The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake" (Let's Move! Website). Obama recognizes that in today's society "Children experience a very different kind of lifestyle" than in previous generations (Let's Move! Website). Now, it is imperative that we assess the communication involved. *Let's Move!'s* new strategies include:

> Combining comprehensive strategies with common sense, *Let's Move!* is about putting children on the path to a healthy future during their earliest months and years. Giving parents helpful information and fostering environments that support healthy choices. Providing healthier foods in our schools… (Let's Move! Website)

Communication, in other words, must get personal. By separating connotation from denotation, we have discovered that past failures were not so much due to what was being said, but how it was related to students. *Let's Move!* makes healthy information accessible, kid-friendly, and fun. Being healthy and managing weight is no longer about what you are depriving yourself of, but what you can actively gain. *Let's Move*! and Food Revolution support the students thorough understanding of the entire picture behind the food they eat. Students are discovering about food and

the choices available to them. Learning because of hands-on exposure to green houses and organic processes deepens the resolve to make the healthier choices.

Children issues are never a strange topic for the First Lady's office to get involved with. The *Let's Move!* campaign "aims to do for healthy eating and exercise what the government's anti-smoking campaign did in the 1960s, change how people think about their health" (Hall, Hellmich 3). Additionally important are the reasons Obama cites as the direct contributors to a generation of unhealthy adolescents. *Let's Move is "*a multifaceted campaign that will include more healthful food in schools, more accurate food labeling, better grocery stores in communities that [do not] have them, public service announcements and efforts to get children to be more active" (Hall, Hellmich 2). Obama and Oliver share the same sentiment about getting people involved in their health at all ages. Be it through the food they are cooking or the time they are letting their children stay stationary, the revolution is indeed upon us.

Obama's involvement in SLN is critical, because it demonstrates the significance of the problem with the health with our youngest citizens. Outside criticism of our American culture has never been widely accepted or well received. Often foreign critique about our obesity epidemic in America is dismissed as a misinterpretation of cultures and then ignored. However, because the First Lady, an arguably more influential figure and recognizable face than Oliver, is talking about the disastrous health of students, we find comfort in one of our own, the "mother" of our country, having the same concerns. Her voice carries the full weight of the President of The United States behind it; when she speaks people listen. While

critics say that Obama has lofty, unreachable goals most applaud her efforts and see this campaign as having "no down sides" (Hall, Hellmich 3). Oliver and Obama recognize the problem is directly linked to schools. Correspondingly, as reported by the Institute of Medicine, about "31 million kids eat lunch at school every day, and 11 million eat breakfast," and they also "recommend booting junk foods out of schools and making dramatic changes in school meals" (Hall, Hellmich 5). The mass communication tactics initiation by both Obama and Oliver are setting prime examples of how to better approach health communication in this country. Hindsight allows people to review what has passed and assess its strengths and weaknesses. Meta-communication functions in the same way; by talking about how we are communicating, we are able to assess its pitfalls and affirm its strengths.

Understanding Student Lunch Nutrition across Cultures

Any discussion about food must also contain an element of demographic and situational discussion. After all, not everyone is the same. Especially when dealing with the topic of food, which holds very emotional but different connections with a person. We cannot have an accurate conversation about the rise in *all* student obesity rates and the general lack of good health without accounting for the environment the adolescents find themselves in at each moment of their day. School lunches are a major problem source, but it may also be suggested that they are a reflection of a larger problem. Kids are kids; oftentimes they are picky eaters and can count on one hand the foods they like to eat. Not to mention "food phases" a

child may go through, i.e. only eating cheese sandwiches for days on end. This suggests that the food being provided at meal times at schools is a reflection of the food the students are given in their homes and in other places away from school campuses. Life off campus is reinforcing poor choices on campus and vice versa.

For the purpose of this project I have chosen to generalize the many race and nationality combinations found in a cross section of adolescent populations in the United States.[1] There are five primary categories: White (Caucasian), Latino (including as Hispanic and Mexican subsets), Asian, Black, and Middle Eastern. Each of these groups, while sharing similar characteristics as Americans or having American decent, have unique culinary traditions that are distinctive from the others. For example, Caucasian food can be thought of as the traditional American food. However, this group is probably the most difficult to cut sharp defining lines. Much like everything in America, we are a product of a melting pot of culture and people. Yet some would say, that at its purest form, American/white food stems from the "bread basket" of the Midwest. Theoretically, it is the least influenced by early trade like the costal cities were; the center of America can be seen as more inherently their own culture—Caucasian.

Latino food can be summarized with the use of meat, usually pork or beef, spicy sauces (salsas), and the uses of hot chili peppers. Often, Latinos cook with fresh, dried, and ground chilies. Corn, beans, rice, and root vegetables are staples of the Latino diet. Most Latino desserts (like flan, a type of custard) are made from

[1] The following discussion will take shape from with the use of a series of cultural stereotypes and therefore will allow for an anthropological attempt to understand where we are failing the students. In other words, while I am aware of the problems with stereotypes as over-generalizations, I use them as a way to proceed effectively in making the points I wish to make.

dairy products. In Asian cuisines, the primary food group is rice, or commonly known as white rice. Even within Asian cultures, there are varying preferences. For example, Vietnamese prefer long-grain white rice, as opposed to the short-grain rice more common in Chinese cooking. Furthermore, rice is also transformed into other common ingredients such as rice wine, rice vinegar, rice noodles, and rice paper wrappers for spring rolls, all of which are prevalent in Asian cooking. African Americans or Blacks have their culinary influence coming from a rich history and also decades of oppression and mistreatment. African slaves brought okra, sesame seeds, peanuts, black-eyed peas, and rice. Using these foods, they introduced new recipes to the existing American dishes. They learned to make dishes with the foods they had, such as pork, cornmeal, and vegetables. Commonly, molasses is used as a sweetener. Often referred to as "soul food," this cuisine is comprised of spicy barbecued meats and poultry, tasty greens, and cornbreads. Where once a Middle Eastern sub-group would not be considered relevant to include in discussion, the United States continues to grow and fold into it more peoples of distinct cultures. The Middle East can be described as having a heavy influence from the Mediterranean and Persian foods. Staples in their diet include: lamb, brown/wild rice, yogurt, leeks, and stuffed vegetables (“Food in Every Country”).

Students come to school from these different backgrounds, where traditional food ranges from heavy influence and prominence to light influence only seen in “watered down” versions of the tradition style. The cultural food holds importance to which an individual is and how they view themselves. In many of the cultures

described, the dishes may be different but the meals are shared with families. Often, more traditional foods are brought out or made to mark celebratory times.

Food can be linked to emotional healing. Individuals eat "comfort food" when they are sad or other particular foods on particular days for celebratory or commemorative purposes. I, myself, am of Dutch decent. Traditionally, my family enjoys Olibolin (similar to an apple dumpling) to celebrate New Years. It does not feel right to begin a new year without it, almost as if without it, the next year cannot begin unless that particular dish is made. Strong emotional ties such as these are what complicate generalized school lunch programs.

Food can also be used as a right of passage. Fathers share a beer with their sons, or mothers pass on secret recipes to daughters in the kitchen. Everyone has a favorite food, and most commonly, we link that food to a fond story or memory. Students are no different. More importantly, their emotional connections are still forming at their young age. They are susceptible to influence and opinions. When a school provides only mediocre products and constantly adds sugar to food, a child will develop to think that all foods should taste sweet and those foods that do not are not edible or at the least undesirable. This is just an example of the unavoidable cycle that ensues if we continually indulge adolescent's naive interpretation of nutritious food.

Understanding how to move forward with good Student Lunch Nutrition

It is important to realize that talking about the problem is only an initial step to solving the obesity problem. We must form better ways to communicate proper nutrition and the dangers of childhood obesity. Obama and Oliver are on the right track for change. Their dedication is a starting point for lasting impact in future generations.

There is no shortage of information, opinions, or resources out there. All of these have the same goal: improving the health of students. However, if all that material available is falling on deaf ears, nothing will change. Adolescent obesity and student lunch nutrition is not going to be quickly corrected with more information or well-intentioned campaigns. But, it will begin to reverse itself when and if we harness those resources and utilize them in effective health communication. Compiling the resources to enact change in a step-by-step manner will be key as we move forward with newfound awareness and determination.

Highlighted in this presentation are programs like Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution and its assault on the LAUSD. The LAUSD is not a victim wrongly subjected to public humiliation and ridicule. On the contrary, they are part of the problem. Large, organized, primarily government structures are associations stubbornly standing in the way of reform and progress. School districts and town governments should be opening their doors to healthy ideas. There is no downside to Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Campaign, because it is an issue that every one can rally behind. Healthier adolescents grow into healthier adults who have the knowledge and experience to then turn around and train the generation following them; the ripple effect can be exponential. It is rare to find such great access to

young minds in one place at one time, because of America's vast cultural differences and polychronic ways. Schools and school lunches are a doorway to a healthier generation.

Provided in the Appendix to this senior project is an example of an effort to combine resources and tap into mass health communication possibilities. Obesity is a massive epidemic with informational website on top of website, on top of resource centers, on top of implementation templates. In other words, there is a plethora of information out there. The pamphlet provided is an example of a resource that can help students become empowered and take their health into their own hands.

If the next generation is truly the future, then we must exhaust every possibility to save them from themselves and give them every opportunity to grow into healthy, capable adults. Only then, will they be able to continue in their discovery, accomplish what has yet to be accomplished, and live out long and happy lives.

Appendix A

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