

KIDS IN THE COMMONS



Kids Inherit the Earth

Teaching and learning in the school cafeteria

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Recently 14 Rhode Island students (high, middle, elementary, and preschool) **1** filed a class action lawsuit suing their state. Their complaint was that public education was failing to prepare them for civic life in our American democracy. They regretfully lost the suit – twice. If the state cannot prioritize civic education, how can our democracy, which depends on its fully engaged, savvy citizens hope to thrive?

The purpose of school in our country has historically been to make sure students may be civically engaged: serve on a jury, vote in elections, run for public office, assess the political landscape and help build a robust society based on our shared values. This co dependent social contract delivers the promise of democracy – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – to its citizens. Our government at its best is for the people, by the people.

The child's civic life starts at birth and parents play a crucial role in helping their children to develop their values, mindsets, civic knowledge, experiences and skills at home. But elementary grades - from 3K-5 – are

meant to provide the educational foundation and, after all, kids spend more of their waking time in school than they do at home.

The town squares of the school

Children learn peer-to-peer, maybe even more than they learn from teachers. Kids can start to embrace their civic rights and responsibilities in those spaces where they might be allowed more agency – for instance in the school's common spaces – the playgrounds, hallways, and, best of all, cafeteria.

The cafeteria is, in fact, the most prime common space in the school because it has so many juicy challenges and opportunities AKA teachable moments.

Students voice how the school cafeteria has civic tensions:

- Kids want to talk with classmates but it's too noisy in the cavernous echo chambers that most cafeterias are.
- Kids are hungry but they are repulsed by school food so those who can, pack their own lunch which distinguishes them from those who can't and leads to waste.
- Kids want to recycle (it helps the planet) but it's often pretty confusing to know how to do it.
- Kids are energetic but when it's crowded and noisy they get into fights.
- Kids are being managed by adults who don't expect the kids to be self-reliant. Without adults they know full well the cafeteria would quickly devolve into utter mayhem.

So where is the promise of democracy – life, liberty and pursuit of happiness – for kids in this situation?

What if the students could help improve their cafeteria experience? Kids could gain some agency. They would be motivated to learn to exercise

greater self control. This would help build a much needed life skill for the students. That, in itself, would benefit the entire school.

The school cafeteria is a microcosm of our democracy

The school cafeteria can be an extracurricular laboratory where kids sharpen their civic knowledge, mindsets, quality of life, and concerns about our planet's future. They can – want and need to – learn to take charge of their actions. The cafeteria is a place where kids can learn about natural resources (i.e., food, fuel), cooperation, self-reliance and responsibility to community. This concern for individuals' rights in balance with the greater good is core to our American structure.

In contrast, mid century elementary schools (like mine, in the borough of Metuchen, New Jersey) provided no such opportunity. Students were simply sent home for lunch. At 8 years old I galloped the ½ mile home – alone – on my imaginary horse, which I tied up under our baby grand piano before woofing down my peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Wonder Bread, and galloping on back to school in time for the bell. Very efficient. Good exercise. But this meant there were no school commons in which I could be civically engaged with my peers. This was a lost opportunity for me and much of my generation. Yet I was lucky to be loaded with agency as a kid partly because I had very little adult supervision (my parents were criticized for being too permissive) and tons of free time at home. I was on my own, and in the mid-century, I was also internet free. If I wanted to reach my friends I asked the operator to connect me. Or, I got on my bike.

School, in general, was a disconnect from the real world for me. It was prescriptive, repetitive, and predictable. A big yawn. Instead I developed my civic mindsets or skills with my neighborhood pals. With no adult oversight we dug a bunker in the rich clay soil of an abandoned lot. We built a fort. We made (and immediately sunk) a raft and studied tadpoles in the muck of Tommy's Pond down the hill. We took risks, played in the gully down by the Lehigh Valley railroad tracks. We took over the old hayloft in our barn.

I started to dream up ideas for clubs when I was about 9 – conjuring up a new one just about every week much to the delight of the friends with whom I collaborated. Over time this led me to have strong beliefs – in consensus building, independence and learning through experimentation. It was okay to fail. Just start over.

Another contrast between the mid century and now – there was no recycling or composting back then. But that need was swiftly being created. Unbeknownst to us kids, older people (as we called adults) were busily using up all our irreplaceable resources to create abundance and wealth in a country that had been in decline. Disposability was now promoted as a good thing. Planned obsolescence, as it was termed, creating churn, giving us a big and sustained economic boost. Concerns about the commons, therefore, were an annoyance, a distraction – back-burnered or simply ignored.

Now that the World's non-renewable natural resources are seriously becoming limited, however, and we are bursting at the seams with trash it's clear the short term, short-sighted fixes of the last century are seriously backfiring on us – and the kids are very aware of this legacy. It's a major bummer. They want to do better.

Can kids save the planet?

Young people are also tasked with cleaning up the mess in the coming decades. The Rhode Island lawsuit is just one example of how emphatically kids are standing up for their rights as Americans and as citizens. They ache to be prepared for their precarious future. Ed Zuniga-Valesco, a senior in high school in New York City, says, "I feel my education hasn't prepared me well for the future. I haven't been given enough information to arrive at a solution. Current events are brought up, but that's about it. Brought up."

Because we are very concerned about how we will face the environmental challenges of the future, the students who contributed to this article and I read a science fiction novel about global climate change called "The Ministry for the Future" by Internationally acclaimed writer Kim Stanley Robinson.

Speaking from the year 2071 Robinson reflects, in his TEDtalk, that the world is seriously compromised, deteriorated. Millions of people and animals have tragically perished. However, in some ways, the Earth has now started to stabilize, Robinson speculates, through decades of heightened awareness, global cooperation and compromise. He envisions the current decade – the 2020's – as one of cooperative innovation between the people of many nations. He reflects, "The more historians like me look at the 20s, the more amazing they become." 2 Who will be fulfilling this hopeful prophecy? The students who were let down by their education? The kids who have no real life experience of cooperation or collaboration?

My father came back from serving in World War II and then I emerged. I am a Baby Boomer. I will be well into my 80s at the end of the 2030s. Generation Xers will be around 50. Gen Z, the children of Generation X, who are reaching adulthood right about now and are feeling the pressure to turn our planet around will be around 30 in the 2030s when the Earth is projected to reach the tipping point for temperature rise. Gen Z, today's teens, and Gen Alpha, today's little kids, have a very heavy lift ahead of them. If Gen Z is the ending, can Gen Alpha be a new beginning? 3

On fertile ground: the school cafeteria

Helping youth to prepare for the future, to live in the new climate reality, needs to be a top priority for our educational system. And we need to start young. While preK 3 and 4 year old students have play incorporated into their curriculum, as children progress from 3K-12 in their education, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for student exploration in the typically programmed space of the classroom.

Time spent in the common spaces of the school like the cafeteria, therefore, provide opportunities for students to implement what they are learning in their classrooms – about community, responsibility, rules – so they develop the mental muscles that allow them to evolve socially and learn to solve problems in a group setting. Hence, [Kids in the Commons](#) part 1.

Eighth grader Bilal Homer says, "Schools waste so much food. Around \$1.2 billion worth of food in the US. It's our responsibility to lower the amount being spent. Recycling, composting, or even saving leftover food you don't eat can help with waste (especially in school). It's our responsibility to control it to protect the future."

Schools today strive to teach about the ways of the Earth in their curriculum. But they also teach negative lessons – if educators ignore or mismanage the common spaces of their school. But when they open the door for students to contribute to problem-solving we internalize the conditions that Robinson foresees as necessary for our positive future (cooperation, community, collaboration) that would give Gen's Z and Alpha a leg up.

The inequity

Schools with low resources may be stuck in old ways, or just stuck – exhausted. Unable to meet the challenge. Whereas those with high resources are already exploring issues related to climate change. They create greenhouses or tiny farms right on their campuses with the help of their parents' associations. Students get their hands in the soil, learn to appreciate their relationship to the Earth and see firsthand how food is grown.

Some elementary schools have student councils to which students get fairly elected by their peers to discuss, debate, research and act on issues they and their peers feel are important, such as the commons. They can help solve problems like recycling properly and fighting in the cafeteria. 3K-12 students have good ideas that should be heard but adults need to listen and take kids seriously. Even the littlest ones.

Michelle Del Villar, a sophomore in college in New York City says, "A cafeteria is a microcosm of society today, a place where education's power structures bump into one other — leading to a natural relationship-building environment between students and staff. It allows for rules and guidelines to be taught in a classroom and reinforced through social skills and collective interactions parallel to the ones in society." She adds, "The ambient characteristics of the cafeteria setting, when positive, allow students to

solidify a sense of belonging, especially elementary school children who are still developing their judgment of self-identity. Further obtaining a sense of ownership that has a direct correlation with their attachment to the cafeteria and community.”

Kids need a platform to debate and discuss issues relevant to their lives. Through their exploration of commons, especially in the cafeteria, schools can provide a framework based on an inquiry process. That framework can provide strategies for gathering accurate information, allow myth busting, distinguish objective vs subjective information.

Information is so instantaneously accessible, kids can find news that speaks to their emotions just like adults. They get their news from the vast and unreliable internet just like adults. As a kid in the midcentury all I had was an out of date set of the Encyclopedia Britannica we kept on our shelves at home or my textbooks at school. The adults in my life read a daily, local newspaper or listened to the radio and watched Edward R Murrow on Sundays on our television. Murrow was a man they trusted to tell the truth.

In contrast, the veracity of Youtube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and other video sources vary widely and remain largely unvetted. We know that. But kids will seek out that which reinforces their point of view, just like adults. And kids who don't know how to think critically become adults who don't know *how* to think critically. Adults get to vote and they get to run for public office. That's why it's imperative that children learn to balance their emotional and rational thinking at a young age. Robust, respectful debate and dialogue are key to a strong democracy.

The school cafeteria is a great common ground for developing and applying thinking and debating skills. Tying teaching and learning into the lived experience of children in ways that allow for controversy and relevance can open up the discussion for them. But in an era of division, how can kids bring up issues that elicit strong and conflicted feelings raised about a hot topic like the cafeteria? It helps to understand how we got here.

The history of the cafeteria

The first school lunch program was started by mothers in New York in 1853. That program struggled and then failed. ⁴ Other programs started by moms cropped up in the early 1900s. In many states students brought lunch pails (food was limited to that which wouldn't spoil) to school especially in rural areas. Kids ate in their classrooms or maybe a lunchroom in those early days. Early efforts to feed the children were still largely volunteer run. ⁵

The need for the poor children of America to get nutrition while in schools became a focus in many states. Some kids barely had shoes to wear to school, were malnourished and came empty-handed. Early school lunches were often seen as the main meal of the day for these kids.

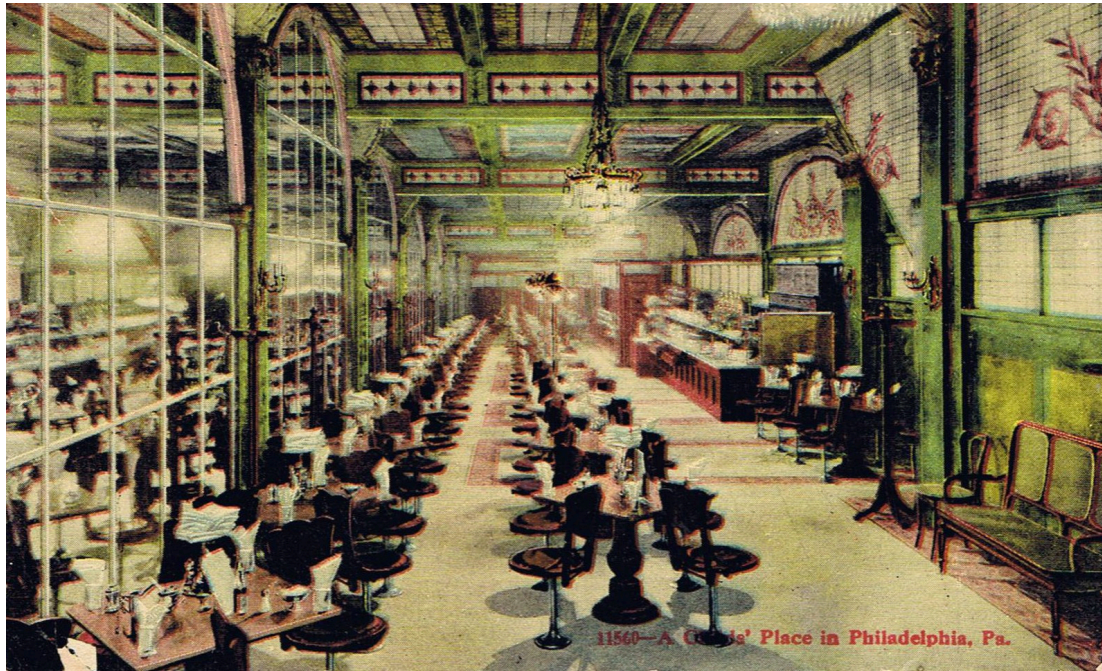
Damani Laidlow, senior in high school and Michelle Maniyeva, a college freshman, both in New York City public schools, say, "In an Abbreviated History of School Lunch in America" Emelyn Rude states that 'by 1900, 34 of the then 45 states had laws calling for compulsory education of all children under the age of 14. Well aware of the tremendous social inequality of this industrial era, reformers saw the need to improve the outcomes of all students drawn into the education system.'" ⁶

The nutrition movement in school grew

By the mid century the public and industry clamored for the federal government to provide nutritional assistance because children were seen as future workers in this industrial age. Cafeterias were starting to become more common with kids standing in assembly line fashion, to get their trays of food. This emphasis on efficiency limited social time for kids at lunch. President Truman signed into law the National School Lunch Act to, for one thing, prop up farmers' incomes. Industrial labor had become dominant as we shifted away from our rural agrarian economic roots.

"...It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress that these efforts shall be extended, expanded, and strengthened ... to safeguard the health and

wellbeing of the Nation's children, and to ... meet more effectively the nutritional needs of our children." 7



Children's cafeteria 1908 - reflected the modern assembly line approach to the cafeteria, inspired by the era of industrialization through which greater efficiency was seen in the factories of the day. Of course, this was an idealized not broadly realized vision. 8

The many challenges of school food

Issues of cost persist as problems in the cafeteria. Kids with means paid for public school lunch until 2017 when lunch became free for all. Until then those kids who didn't put money in the till were often stigmatized because they stood out.

Big questions about the nutritional value of the food, taste and visual appeal to kids are still raised. And over time the malnutrition issue of children has also become an obesity problem when schools add fat and salt to get all kids to eat what they are served. Serving cheap, tasty food, which is frequently low-nutrient, energy dense foods, solves two issues in the cafeteria while failing to prioritize health.

Laidlow and Maniyeva found that “In 1981 President Ronald Reagan thought ketchup was a vegetable. According to Congress, french fries, and pickle relish are also classified as vegetables.” ⁹ Laidlow said. “This is just preposterous and outright ridiculous because vegetables are something that are rich in critical minerals like potassium and vitamins like Vitamin C while french fries have a lot of fat and salt that could raise the risk of cardiovascular disease. Pickle relish is very high in sodium and a large portion of the calories in this food comes from sugar.”

Compounded by deep cuts in funding made by Reagan, problems in the cafeteria persisted. In the 1990s the Clinton administration’s school funding limited menu options using the food pyramid. It’s important to note the USDA guidelines can be abided by or ignored depending on how much the school or state relies on federal support, which is based on the degree of poverty in the state.

Children need to be well fed to be able to learn

More than 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program, 22 million of whom are from low-income families, so school meals remain a powerful way to improve poor diets. ¹¹ We were shocked to learn that one in 3 kids are on track to develop diabetes in the US. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ¹² the rate of childhood obesity in the United States has increased recently, especially among those in poverty.

Nutritional standards were reassessed and raised in 2013, due to efforts by Michelle Obama. The food pyramid became a food plate. New standards led to lowering salt intake and adding whole grains and vegetables and fruits into all meals. Schools complained that these healthier foods were not being eaten by kids partly because there was less salt and fat content. It’s also an optics problem and the food lacked visual appeal. In fact, high levels of fruit and vegetables are tossed, rejected by students ¹⁰.

The school food standards were dumbed back down by the USDA during the Trump administration backsliding into bad old habits only to have the

healthier guidelines quickly reinstated by the Biden administration creating a yoyo effect for nutritional standards. Add to that, supply chain disruptions of the 2020s, and the food, especially in many low resourced schools, is apt to be bland and unattractive. Kids these days who can bring their lunch to school do. Those who can't must eat the school food or go without. Worst of all, much of the school food continues to go uneaten and ends up in a landfill. Wasted.

The challenges of the social environment in school

Young children need to learn to develop positive connections with their peers. But the emphasis at meals is on getting kids fed quickly, not on kids' developing civic mindedness or developing healthy habits, or encouraging peer communication.

Further complicating things, cafeterias are very noisy places. The kids know they make the noise but can't help it since they are often talking in an echo chamber that amplifies the loudest voice and overwhelms the soft spoken. They are forced to talk louder to be heard.

Some kids act out during lunchtime. Phoenix Coffey, a fifth grader in New York City, says, "Some kids make trouble, doing things they aren't supposed to." The other kids leave it to the adults to fix and don't try to talk to the kids about how to improve the cafeteria. Coffey adds, "So when the adults aren't looking some kids do whatever they want. When you have been sitting in class for 4 hours you need some personal freedom."

I was called into the principal's office more than once for being disruptive in my high school cafeteria in the 1960s. I was a renegade teen. But, in my defense, our rights and responsibilities were pretty fuzzy and the mayhem of hurling mystery meat during food fights was just too much fun to resist.

The good and bad impacts of the commons in school

Children see what is going on around them regardless of whether it's talked about in school. At a young age, they judge fairness often in black and white

terms, with no nuance. If you agree the cafeteria is a microcosm of society, as Del Villar points out, guidance during teachable moments like the ones Coffey experienced would help kids balance their emotional / rational thinking on their journey to becoming adults. Since the students' responsibilities in the commons are often not developed by or agreed upon by them but rather created by adults for the convenience of adults, students are stymied about how to help when they see something is amiss. They rely on the adults to step in. Since they are often not even asked their opinions, they don't necessarily form cogent thoughts about these events. All of this means kids see the contradictions of adults (e.g., they say they trust kids but don't), the lack of faith in kids' intelligence (e.g., they say they think kids are scholars but they act as if they are incompetent) which only underscores that kids feel helpless to affect change. Kids can help turn that around. We can use the microcosm of the school commons to show the world how to do better. Kids need to know that, in America, with rights come responsibilities. This is an opportunity to exercise that balance.

The issues of food quality, waste, social environment, rights and responsibilities are all intertwined thorny issues both in the cafeteria and the world. It's estimated that over one billion dollars in food is wasted on an annual basis on uneaten school food in America. ¹³ Jaimie Cloud of Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education ¹⁴ engages educators and inspires young people to think about their relationship to the world and their ability to influence it in an entirely new way. She says that, "Nearly one half of all food goes to waste internationally either by not being eaten or composted or just rotting in the field." Kids can help by building awareness and strategies for change. While some municipalities like New York City have a goal of zero waste, success requires schools to do most of the heavy lifting. The New York City Department of Sanitation has a very robust school recycling program and, in fact, it's the law that all schools must recycle in all areas of the campus but this is simply not happening. Getting the kids to help could make this work. New York City kids could ask their principal to reach out to their district superintendent, for instance, or their Community Education Council (CEC) with a message. Note: New York City does not have school

boards but over 30 CECs which are largely volunteer run often by parents and guardians.

The future of democracy depends on cooperation.

An equitable public education is a necessity in a strong democracy. This needs to be a national right. And education needs to include freedom for kids to learn, explore and grow together on their own terms to some degree. Kids flood into school from many different backgrounds and home lives. The cafeteria is common ground, choices and rules in this space impact everyone in the school. We talk about giving kids' voices but adults often control kids' self expressions in ways that stifle or discourage them. Is this because adults don't trust kids? If so, we ignore this problem is at our own peril.

Maniyera says, "Children are the future. Kids' voices should be heard because if they're not, the adults would never know what needs to be fixed and how great or greater they could've made this world into a better place." The school cafeteria is the common space where civic actions occur every day. Let's listen to the kids. They have great ideas.

Our inquiry process explored the topic of the cafeteria as part of our overall project - Kids in the Commons. Visit <https://inquiringmindsinstitute.org/kids-in-the-commons> to see the lesson plans we developed.

Thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Waters and Dr. Patricia Crain de Galarce for their help on this project.

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[The Coddling of the American Mind](#)