

# Parents, schools must work together for healthy kids

The school lunch wars entered another battle recently when a public school in Chicago banned children from bringing homemade lunches. Instead, the children are forced to eat public school cafeteria food or go hungry. Ironically, the ban is intended to force children to eat healthier.

The idea that school cafeteria food is healthier than what parents would pack for their own children is, in many cases, absurd. After a Chicago public school teacher started a blog protesting the cafeteria lunches served by the district, an effort was made recently to make school cafeteria lunches more nutritious by including grains, low-fat dressings and at least one vegetable. For many parents, though, even Chicago's improved



**WARREN  
BINFORD**

Guest Opinion

nutritional standards for children's meals are not even minimally adequate.

The latest research continues to show the negative impact that pesticides have on developing children, lowering their IQs and increasing their cancer rates, for example. Thus, many parents pack primarily organic fruits and vegetables in our children's homemade lunches. I know of not a single public school that serves several organic fruits and vegetables in its cafeteria meals

every day. The fact that districts are bragging about the inclusion of low-fat dressings on their menu shows just how bad school cafeteria meals have become.

Ironically, as the story of the Chicago ban was breaking, the Fukushima radiation plume was making its way across the Pacific towards the Northwest United States. Some parents (including me) were conscientiously packing small amounts of seaweed in our children's lunches to ensure they had enough natural iodine in their thyroids to help prevent absorption of radioactive iodine. Were public school cafeterias making the same effort to protect our children by promptly responding with nutritional defenses to the unfolding environmental crisis? I doubt it.

There is no question that our children's health is a national priority. America's children are struggling with obesity, diabetes and a rise in a whole host of childhood diseases. The way to respond, however, is for schools and other governmental entities to partner with parents, not to exclude them. Together we need to teach our children healthy eating, playing and living.

What can schools do? Bring back daily physical education. Teach nutrition. Expand after school sports. Ban soda and candy machines. Prohibit junk food on campus no matter what its source. And, of course, serve nutritious cafeteria food for those children who need it.

What can parents do? Make it a priority to buy organic whole foods for our families. Prepare

and eat healthy meals together. Enjoy sports and other physical activities as a family. Limit the amount of time spent with electronics, and, of course, pack healthy lunches for our children as frequently as we can.

And when we do pack homemade lunches for our children, let's always remember to include a note reminding our children how much they are loved. After all, a healthy heart is not just a physical state, and a parent's love is one ingredient that a school cafeteria lunch will never include.

*Warren Binford of Salem is an Assistant Professor of Law at Willamette University College of Law where she teaches the Child and Family Advocacy Clinic and International Children's Rights. She can be reached at [wbinford@willamette.edu](mailto:wbinford@willamette.edu).*