

Introduction

WHY WE NEED TO FIX THE FOOD AND THE JOBS

In 2004, after a long day at work, Lisa, a forty-eight-year-old assistant cook in New Haven, Connecticut, took off her apron and joined a delegation of workers to give her carefully planned testimony to a packed school board meeting.¹ “Good evening, distinguished board members and all in the room who have an ethical obligation to our children,” she began. “I see some faces whose children I have had the honor of personally feeding. I use the word *honor* because it is the highest trust a parent can give, letting someone else care and nurture their children,” she continued. Even though Lisa was in a union, UNITE HERE Local 217, she worried that speaking before the board of education might result in workplace retaliation.² But, as she later told me, she felt morally obligated to draw attention to the district’s cost-cutting measures.

Aramark, the for-profit company tasked with managing New Haven’s school lunch program, had slashed workers’ wages and benefits and lowered the quality of the food they served. Lisa had lived in the city her entire life, raised children who attended the city’s public schools, and worked for sixteen years as a “lunch lady” in the city’s foodservice department. “Maybe many aren’t aware things are not good,” Lisa surmised, “because my coworkers and I, at immense personal cost, have attempted to maintain standards and keep the children from being affected, including working extra hours without pay.” But, she explained, “We are wearing down quickly under a corporate management mentality, with wages that are not in keeping with the cost of even getting to work, let alone feeding our own families.” What’s more, workers had been instructed to hawk unhealthy “new and enticing extras” to children who could afford to pay for brand-name chips, drinks, and candy, while kids in the free and reduced-price lunch program received food Lisa said was not always of “decent quality.”

The expectation that cafeteria staff work harder and faster made it increasingly difficult for them to find the time to “wipe a child’s nose, tie a shoe, or take a moment to ask, ‘Why aren’t you eating that, sweetie? Well, maybe I have a minute to help you with that.’” If the board of education stayed the course, Lisa warned, “The once caring, nurturing, smiling lunch lady will be a thing of the past.”

With the rise of a modern-day food movement, attempts to “fix” school lunch abound, but too often, they fail to engage, learn from, and respect the nation’s lunch ladies. High-profile champions like Michelle Obama, Alice Waters, and Jamie Oliver have helped to popularize school gardens and scratch-cooked lunches. Meanwhile, parents, social entrepreneurs, nonprofits, academics, policymakers, and even some major food companies have worked to make school lunches healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable. But these initiatives will be limited in impact if frontline school kitchen and cafeteria workers are not valued for the care they provide to America’s children. Workers like Lisa are not a cost to minimize, but rather a force for positive social change. This is a core argument of *The Labor of Lunch* and a missing link in most theories of change that inform contemporary school lunch activism.

The coalition of New Haven cafeteria workers, activists, and allies fighting to cut ties with Aramark knew that the most meaningful reforms to school lunch programs allow space for workers to lead. Lisa’s 2004 speech was part of a multiyear campaign that finally convinced the board of education, in 2008, to bring management back in house.³ It was a victory for workers, who wanted, and won, a greater role in determining lunch policies and priorities.⁴ It was also a victory for the public, improving the quality of food and care for tens of thousands of children. Lisa had written out her speech on a stack of 3 × 5 notecards, which she hung onto for years. In 2012, during one of my many visits to the city’s central kitchen, she pressed the stack into my hands and told me she wanted me to understand what she had helped to accomplish.

I now understand that the struggles Lisa and her allies faced at the local level were a microcosm of challenges faced at the national level. The New Haven school lunch program is part of the US National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which was created in 1946 with the goal of uplifting the health of the nation’s children and supporting the American food and farm economy. For over seventy years, however, the NSLP has failed to escape the trap of “cheapness.” *Cheap*, in the way I use the term, isn’t just a synonym for low-cost.⁵ Rather, it is the guiding political and economic philosophy, business strategy, and consumer expectation that shapes our everyday lives—one that

has had disastrous effects on the healthfulness of school lunches and the wider world. The cheap, factory-farmed, and industrially manufactured foods that make up the core of the “standard American diet” are making us sick—so much so that treating preventable dietary diseases has become a multibillion dollar industry.⁶ Cheap production practices contribute to climate change, which threatens our very survival on the planet. And cheap pay traps millions of families in poverty—including those of many school food-service workers who struggle to make ends meet.

The NSLP operates within a political climate of austerity in which cheapness reigns supreme and care is assigned little economic value.⁷ The nation’s 56.6 million elementary and secondary students (50.7 million of whom attend public schools) all qualify for subsidized school lunches, whether they purchase them at “full price” or receive free or reduced-price lunches.⁸ The majority of the 32 million children who participate in the NSLP come from low-income households and are disproportionately students of color and children of either single mothers or married mothers who work outside the home.⁹ Another 20 million school-aged children opt out of the NSLP, instead bringing packed lunches from home; purchasing food from their school’s à la carte line, a nearby restaurant, or a corner store; or simply skipping lunch altogether.¹⁰

The federal government determines subsidies through a formula that dispenses cash funds and an allotment of agricultural commodities (physical food) per child served. Yet the NSLP’s \$13.6 billion budget doesn’t stretch very far. During the 2018–2019 school year, the maximum federal reimbursement for a “free” school lunch in the contiguous states was \$3.54, and \$0.45 for a “full price” lunch.¹¹ After schools paid for labor, administration, equipment, facilities, and ongoing utility costs, they typically had just \$1.50–\$1.75 to spend on each tray of food.

Local school food authorities, who are typically hired by a district superintendent or school board, are pressured to make public care cheaper. Squeezing school kitchen and cafeteria workers by reducing their benefits, hours, and wages is one tactic. Purchasing cheap industrially processed food, serving it in dingy, dark school basements, and making do with outdated, inadequate equipment are others. The effects of this cost cutting reverberate across the fields, factories, and warehouses that form the supply chain of the NSLP’s cheap food economy and the 21.5 million workers employed across the US food chain.¹²

Keeping the NSLP locked into this model of cheap food cuts against the basic premise of food justice, a process that, as Rasheed Hislop puts it,



FIGURE 1. Workers making prepack sandwiches in a central kitchen facility. Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, 1974–ca. 2003, National Archives and Records Administration.

encompasses “the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality’s root causes both within and beyond the food chain.”¹³ A better school lunch program isn’t a silver bullet for achieving food justice, but it is an ideal place to begin making a national commitment to shift toward healthy and sustainable diets that support community well-being.¹⁴

The NSLP operates largely as a social welfare program for low-income families and a public subsidy for large-scale factory farms and processed-food companies. Since the 1970s and the widespread embrace of neoliberal political and economic projects, the pursuit of cheap food, cheap labor, and cheap care has pushed millions of middle- and upper-middle-class families out of the NSLP.¹⁵ They pursue seemingly “better” alternatives for their own children, but in so doing they fail to hold Congress, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and Big Food companies accountable for the quality of the NSLP. For these tens of millions of Americans, packing school lunches is part of the morning ritual. Yet it adds to the mental load and list of domestic chores performed by individual caregivers—often women—and inadvertently reduces political will to invest in an NSLP that provides high-quality food and care for all children and families.¹⁶

Sorting children into “free,” “reduced price,” and “paid” categories diminishes the political will that is so desperately needed to advance food justice in our nation’s schools. Sociologist Amy Best reminds us that failing to treat the food that young people consume as a public good exacerbates class inequalities and devalues the unwaged and low-waged care work disproportionately undertaken by women. “It is in this context that private markets step in,” she argues, “capitalizing on this disconnect and in the process both undermining our ability to envision food as a public responsibility and part of a public and widely accessible system of care, and accelerating our drive toward increasing privatization and devaluation of public goods.”¹⁷

Ultimately, school lunch is about community. It’s also about the conflicts between civil society, the government, and the private sector over what children should be fed, whose responsibility it is to feed them, who should do the work of feeding them, and what, exactly, this work should entail. More often than not, food for children to eat at school is prepared by a woman—a child’s caregiver, a private sector factory worker, or a public sector lunch lady—for free or for poverty wages. Let me pause for a moment to explain how debates about school lunch are fundamentally about care: what it means to care well, how much care is worth, and whether caring for public goods like children and the environment should be the private responsibility of individuals in the home or a public responsibility that is collectivized and shared.

Care isn’t just about personal relationships, families, or even communities—we’re interconnected in a globalized world that demands we care for distant others and our shared environmental commons, if we are to care well. Scholars Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto define care as a “species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible.”¹⁸ When we understand care in this way, we begin to see how questioning the social organization of care strikes at the heart of how economies work. And when we recognize that homes, schools, and commercial food production spaces are all part of a broad, political economy of care, we can better situate our personal struggles and desires within political discussions about the future of the NSLP.¹⁹

School lunch workers are all part of a larger political economy of care that currently depends on (mostly) women’s unpaid and low-wage labor in order to function. Care work, also known as reproductive labor, encompasses the mental, manual, and emotional work required to sustain life and provide for the next generation.²⁰ It has long been cast as “women’s work,” and therefore assigned little economic value within the patriarchal institutions and



FIGURE 2. School lunch worker serves free lunches to children in a Washington, DC, kindergarten in 1942. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

capitalist economies that depend on the ability to access a ready supply of cheap (if not free) reproductive labor. Doing the laundry, feeding the family, helping the children with their homework, managing their logistical and transportation needs, and worrying about their futures are just a few examples of the unpaid care work that happens in American homes every day. Such care work is often done out of love and duty when unpaid, but when it moves into the market, those who perform this labor (e.g., domestic workers, home healthcare workers, daycare workers, K–12 teachers) struggle to escape the societal expectation that care should be cheap.

School cafeteria workers care for the nation's children, yet they cannot afford to adequately care for themselves or their families on the paychecks they bring home.²¹ They face precarious employment conditions that demand

self-sacrifice as an integral part of striving to care well for students. We cannot fix school lunch without fixing these jobs. School cafeteria workers are among the lowest paid public sector workers, and their rate of unionization lags far behind that of K–12 teachers. Racial equity is also a problem: white women and men are more likely to be in supervisory positions and to hold the advanced degrees that child nutrition departments now require of new foodservice directors in school districts with more than 2,500 students as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.²² This formal requirement makes it difficult for frontline foodservice workers to climb their way up the school lunch job ladder, since as of 2008, only about 24 percent of frontline K–12 cafeteria workers had ever been to college and only 3 percent had earned a bachelor’s or higher degree.²³

The School Nutrition Association (SNA), a national nonprofit association with 58,000 members employed in school nutrition programs, doesn’t publish detailed statistics on the demographics of the NSLP workforce. However, US Census data suggests that frontline cafeteria workers’ race and ethnicity largely mirrors the population of the states where they live.²⁴ My own anecdotal observations suggest that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately clustered in the lowest rungs of the child nutrition profession, which is common in other types of food chain labor and care work.²⁵

Even more significant than the poverty-level wages these frontline school foodservice workers earn is the lack of full-time work in schools that have outsourced the labor of cooking to faraway factories. The average K–12 cafeteria employee worked twenty-five hours a week for forty weeks in 2008, earning an annual median income of just \$9,300. These extremely low wages pushed over one-third of the nation’s 420,000 school cafeteria workers to participate in at least one public assistance program designed to address food insecurity or child and family poverty.²⁶ These workers can and should be lifted out of poverty, while school districts transition to “from-scratch” preparation using locally grown and sustainably sourced ingredients, if the NSLP is to ever reach its full potential as a beacon of food justice and community health.

A NEW FUTURE FOR SCHOOL LUNCH ACTIVISM

In December 2018, the Trump administration rolled back hard-won updates to the NSLP’s nutritional standards—including restrictions on refined grains, salt, and flavored milk—which was a blow to school lunch activists.

Playing defense and preventing further erosion to the integrity of the NSLP is vital, but not sufficient.²⁷ It's time to go on the offensive and to create the program we want to see. To do so, we will need to cultivate a transformative school lunch politics that is responsive to escalating concerns about climate change, environmental justice, and racial justice. We will need to make new connections between school lunch and feminist food politics, while tapping into the growing strength of the food justice movement and the emergence of a new generation of worker-led campaigns for economic justice. Through it all, we'll need the active support of parents—including both upper-middle-class parents whose children bring lunches from home and working-class parents who cannot afford to refuse the financial subsidy provided by the NSLP. We'll need the support of all parents who want schools to serve minimally processed lunches made with nutritious ingredients—what I call “real food”—instead of highly processed, industrial factory food that looks as if it could have been pulled from the freezer section of the local supermarket or purchased at a fast food restaurant.

We can make school lunches reflect American families' needs and desires for a healthier, tastier, more ecologically sustainable and socially just food system, but not without the help of school kitchen and cafeteria workers.²⁸ The quality of their jobs and the quality of the food they serve are interlinked. More often than not, K–12 lunch ladies work multiple low-wage, part-time jobs and still struggle to put food on the table and a roof over their own children's heads. Yet there are plenty of lunch ladies who are school lunch activists in their own right. Some bend the rules slightly—serving a second helping to a child they know is hungry—while others rise up together to demand high-quality lunches for the children they feed (fig. 3).

Lisa's union, UNITE HERE, has emerged as a national leader in bringing the food and labor movements together in a holistic campaign for real food and real jobs. The union defines real food as “food that is cooked from fresh ingredients rather than processed items, is sourced locally and ethically, and utilizes production methods that are humane and respect our environment.” This definition and the priorities it outlines are likely familiar to many readers who identify as foodies or food activists, but the notion of what constitutes a real job, especially in the context of school foodservice, is fuzzier. The union defines real jobs as those that “pay a living wage (with health and retirement benefits), that allow workers to disclose food safety or quality issues, and to form a union through a legal and democratic process of their own choosing without threats and intimidation.”²⁹



FIGURE 3. UNITE HERE Local 1 workers gather in protest outside Chicago Public Schools headquarters in April 2012 as part of a series of actions in their real-food, real-jobs campaign. Courtesy UNITE HERE.

When real food and real jobs go hand in hand, school kitchen and cafeteria workers are far more likely to be hired into full-time jobs, which allow them to invest more of themselves into caring for children.³⁰ Their work is far more important than most people realize. School cafeteria workers attend to children’s physical and emotional needs in a host of ways: serving food; providing pureed meals to children with special needs; opening milk cartons for very young children; knowing children’s names, life situations, food preferences, allergies, and dietary restrictions; following food safety procedures; tweaking menu items to make them tastier and more visually appealing; lobbying for schools to serve healthier meals; assisting families in completing the paperwork for free and reduced-price lunch applications; and in some cases, personally paying for children’s lunch fees when they don’t have enough money.

School cafeteria workers also oversee the environment where many children experience hundreds of meals each year, from which many develop lifelong food and dining habits. They maintain the physical spaces where children eat: preventing cross-contamination, ensuring that food is stored at safe temperatures, washing lunch trays and tables, restocking napkins and utensils, cleaning the serving line and cafeteria floors, disposing of food

waste, decorating the cafeteria for holidays, posting signs or pictures with nutritional information around the cafeteria, and translating signs and other information from English into another language.

School lunch workers typically live in the communities where they work. It's not uncommon for them to have friends or acquaintances among the parents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors of the children they are feeding, just like Lisa in New Haven. This makes cafeteria workers especially well suited to what some feminist scholars call community mothering, or "weaving and reweaving the social fabric."³¹ When it comes to the public work of feeding children at school, community mothering involves fostering children's relationships and social connections both intra- and intergenerationally; it means knowing which children are friends, whether they are related to each other, and how they are connected to older generations. In schools with gardens or farm-to-school programs, it may also include connecting students to the people who grow their food by reminding them of the food's origins and the labor behind it.

Community mothering also encompasses the mental, manual, and emotional labor required to model respectful interpersonal behavior, mediate interactions between unruly children, and encourage cliques to be more accepting of difference. It includes caring enough about children to notice when they are coming late to school, making time to listen to them about what might be going on at home or in other areas of their lives, and talking to parents about their concerns. Launching community campaigns and applying for grants to send food-insecure children home on Fridays with backpacks of food for the weekend and advocating for healthier, fresher foods are other manifestations of community mothering that help to build a new economy of care in American public schools. In New Haven community mothering continues to motivate Lisa and her coworkers to use their collective power to fight for high-road reforms.

The social organization of care is an evolving social, cultural, political, and economic process secured through what feminist geographer Cindi Katz refers to as a "shifting constellation of sources," including the household, the state, markets, and civil society.³² So when I use the language of care to discuss the intimate and daily routine of feeding children, I am doing so in order to uncover larger structural questions about which institutions, people, and practices should be used to accomplish concrete caring tasks and to what ends.³³ How we choose to organize and reward the care work within the NSLP impacts children's health and well-being, the lives and

livelihoods of food chain workers, and the food and agricultural systems that feed us.

What exactly this “constellation of sources” should look like when it comes to feeding and caring for children during the school day has been a major point of contention among government agencies, civil society activists, and powerful agriculture and food companies for well over one hundred years. It wasn’t until after a half century of civil society activism and experimentation at the local level that the federal government created what we now know as the NSLP. While there was never an organized social movement that called itself the “nonprofit school lunch movement,” I use this notably ahistorical term in the first two chapters of this book in order to provide continuity across the multiple generations of school lunch activism that led to the NSLP’s creation and stabilization.

Looking backwards helps us to recast the long history of the NSLP as a social movement dedicated to creating a new economy of care and reshaping the nation’s public infrastructure for care provisioning. The successes and failures of the women (and their allies) who worked together to create public school kitchens and cafeterias during the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s) provide not only inspiration for the future, but also a needed reminder of how the NSLP was shaped by patriarchal views about the value of care work and how it should be organized. Likewise, the activists of the 1960s and 1970s who organized against the various forms of institutionalized racism and classism within the NSLP but failed to challenge the basic premise that food, labor, and ultimately care should be cheap offer a cautionary tale to the many real food activists looking to revolutionize how school lunches are sourced and prepared.

To learn about this history, I delved into stacks of trade magazines and how-to books written by well-known “lunch ladies,” and sorted through boxes of letters, training manuals, pamphlets, and photographs at the National Child Nutrition Archives in Oxford, Mississippi.³⁴ I read every issue of the monthly journal of the American School Food Service Association (ASFSa, now the SNA), from 1957 to 1981, as well as a collection of over 180 oral histories of child nutrition professionals collected through the National Child Nutrition Archives Oral History Project. This helped me better understand the breadth and commonality of experiences among school food-service directors, managers, and frontline staff over the course of the NSLP’s long history. But why, I continued to ask myself, have multiple generations of school kitchen and cafeteria workers faced such an uphill battle when striving to care well for the children they feed?

Some of the information I found aligned with the chronology of school lunch activism I'd learned about from historian Susan Levine's and sociologist Janet Poppendieck's excellent histories of the NSLP.³⁵ I did, however, uncover episodes of resistance and reinvention during my archival research that surprised me, including a (failed) campaign to make the NSLP free for all children and the resurgence of school gardens to combat rising food and energy costs in the 1970s. Such initiatives diverge from the trend toward privatization and commercialization that defined school lunch for generations of children attending school between the 1970s and early 2000s. Grappling with the trade-offs, missed opportunities, and partial successes of these earlier waves of school lunch organizing can help today's activists make strategic, informed decisions about when to make compromises and when to push for deeper, structural reforms.

To better understand what this might take, I traveled the country from 2011 to 2016, visiting over two dozen school districts, some for just a day and others for a week or more, in five states spanning the Midwest, New England, and the Southeast. I conducted semistructured interviews with over sixty school foodservice workers—ranging from dishwashers to cooks to citywide directors of child nutrition programs—and spoke informally with many more. I visited schools in rural, suburban, and urban districts with varying demographic profiles, but the field sites I chose for this project are by no means a nationally representative sample of the NSLP. Wherever I went, local foodservice directors often cautioned me to remember that every school is different and every community is unique. While I feel confident that I have assembled a picture that speaks to many common experiences within the NSLP, there are sure to be variations that I missed and important issues that I leave unexplored.

My daily ritual of reading the SNA's Smart Brief email newsletter, along with newspaper and magazine articles about school lunch and farm-to-school programs, helped me make sense of my own fieldwork within the broader national context. So, too, did the time I spent talking to dozens of Big Food sales representatives at the food shows linked to the SNA's annual national conferences in 2012 and 2016. Participating in legislative lobbying alongside child nutrition professionals at the SNA's 2012 legislative action conference, attending state and regional school food shows, and touring factories where industrial cooking equipment and USDA commodity foods are manufactured provided yet other windows into the NSLP. Stepping outside of these mainstream school lunch circles, I also attended conferences put on by

prominent national nonprofits, including School Food Focus and the National Farm to School Network.³⁶

Along the way I grew more critical of the strategies that for-profit companies are using to adapt to, and in some cases circumvent, the real food movement. The new generation of “clean label” and “like-scratch” premade foods these companies are manufacturing does have its virtues—fewer artificial additives and preservatives, for example—but it also has significant drawbacks. Namely, it continues to yield control of the NSLP to powerful players in the processed food industry and keeps frontline school kitchen and cafeteria workers trapped in part-time jobs that make it difficult to care well for themselves, let alone the children they feed at school. By following this industry-led approach—which I call “real food lite”—schools are inadvertently weakening the transformative potential of the real food movement to build healthy, ecologically sustainable, socially just community economies.³⁷

There’s another way to build a better meal on the lunch tray, and that’s to invest in the labor of lunch: revaluing the care work done by lunch ladies and providing them with the skills, time, and infrastructure necessary to prepare healthy meals from scratch (i.e., increasing what I call “culinary capacity”). Unlike real food lite, this high-road strategy has the potential to create better quality jobs for school foodservice workers, many of whom are the mothers and grandmothers of the children they feed. It also has the potential to help reverse the cheapening of the American food system, shifting power away from Big Food corporations to local communities and food chain workers. To achieve such a dramatic realignment, we must first identify and build “way stations,” or feasible social changes that create a path toward more emancipatory possibilities.³⁸

A major goal of this book is to help readers envision what these way stations might be through case studies of leading districts like Minneapolis Public Schools and others that are investing in real food and real jobs. I hope the book offers inspiration and concrete ideas for cocreating a better future rooted in a revolutionary politics of sustainability—one in which labor isn’t exploited, but valued; where care work isn’t denigrated, but esteemed; and where the natural world isn’t plundered, but preserved.³⁹

Lisa and the rest of New Haven’s school cafeteria workers are already well on their way to building the collective power necessary to push for change. They weathered the financial crisis of 2007–2009 by refusing to negotiate a new contract with the city. They were terrified by all the givebacks that teachers and paraprofessionals were forced to make during their contract

negotiations. But in late 2012, they geared up for a contract fight. Cristina Cruz-Uribe, the Local 217 organizer, recruited an organizing committee of workers who made a commitment to lead the campaign. They surveyed their coworkers to determine what the negotiating priorities should be, and the hundred-plus surveys all told the same story: workers wanted to be able to care well for themselves and “their kids,” both at home and at school. They went on community radio, spoke at events, and protested outside the mayor’s office—and eventually it paid off. Their 2013 labor contract expanded the number of full-time cook positions in the schools by thirty-two, while securing full labor rights for the most vulnerable group of substitute workers, raises across the board, and a commitment from the district to pilot new strategies for serving fresh and local food in the schools.

During the spring of 2013, I volunteered, with Local 217 organizer Cristina Cruz-Uribe, to help write a report based on the workers’ vision for school lunch in New Haven.⁴⁰ By then, I had been doing ethnographic research in the New Haven school lunch program for two years. As my research progressed, I found myself spending more and more time in the city’s kitchens and cafeterias and at union meetings, talking with workers. I realized their perspectives were practically nonexistent in academic work on the NSLP and largely absent from activists’ discussions about school lunch reform. Many of the workers told me they were used to folks like me from Yale University who came to the schools to do plate-waste studies, taste tests, and other forms of nutrition “interventions.” But these visitors had never really expressed much interest in them or their jobs, other than to ask for their assistance in whatever the academic study, taste test, or nutrition intervention might be. But the more time I spent in the kitchens, the more the workers shared stories with me, brought in old photographs, and introduced me to retired colleagues. I credit them for teaching me just how central labor is to the story of school lunch.

Public institutions like the NSLP are part of both the economy and our shared infrastructure for meeting the real and concrete need to care for ourselves and one another. School lunch activists have known this for well over a century yet struggled to overcome powerful political and economic forces that make their dreams hard to realize. *The Labor of Lunch* examines this long history of conflict, building on a rich body of academic and activist literature on school lunch reforms and uncovering hidden ties to feminist politics and labor struggles that extend far beyond the lunchroom. I hope my analysis will help readers recognize how gender and labor justice are inti-

mately interconnected to the ecological, public health, and social justice goals that animate contemporary school lunch activism. And perhaps more importantly, I hope it will help the movement weave them together into a powerful coalition politics.

There is much to be gained by providing high-quality, sustainably sourced, freshly cooked, universally free school lunches to all children. Likewise, there is much to be gained by creating high-quality jobs for school kitchen and cafeteria workers. And the foundation for coordinated collective action is already in place. Roughly 95 percent of public and nonprofit private schools in the United States currently participate in the NSLP. This means nearly every community in the country has at least one public, charter, or private school that participates in the NSLP, and many schools also offer breakfast, snack, and dinner to students through federal child nutrition programs administered by the USDA. If we organize together for a better future, we can leverage these public programs to advance food justice and a new economy of care in American public schools. Making such changes might seem daunting, but when we form coalitions—of youth, workers, families, activists, and scholars—we have the strength to remake the labor of lunch as we know it.