

Health

Organic canteen food for better kids

By JAMES MELDRUM*

In a previous article, we looked at the key benefits that a predominantly organic diet can provide for children. With increasing attention by parents, educators, nutrition experts and society on the role of school canteens in promoting healthy eating, can organics play a part in changing the school menu for our kids?

Are there any examples from here or overseas we can learn from? Healthy school meals can lead to better-behaved students who are more alert in class, according to a report by the UK Soil Association.

The report found that students who eat meals made with fresh (preferably organic), unprocessed ingredients have "better concentration, improved attention spans, are less likely to be hyperactive, and are calmer and more alert in class. They also have an increased capacity to learn and are less likely to be absent from school" (*Soil Association, 2004*).

Even a small change such as switching to organic milk can help children's concentration and behaviour, it is claimed. According to the researchers in Wales, "organic milk contains 64% more Omega 3 fatty acids than non-organic milk. In some cases, organic milk contains 240% more Omega 3 acids".

The researchers also claim "behaviour problems often improve if you switch your child to organic milk ... and that organic milk consumption, compared to non-organic milk, can reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's" (*Medical News, 2004*).

SCHOOL CANTEEN IMPACT

Most of us are familiar with the impact Jamie Oliver has had on improving school lunches in Britain. Last year the Blair Government responded to the success of the TV chef and the increasing backlash from parents for better school meals for their children by announcing a series of plans to swap junk food for 'organic and local' fresh meals (*OCA, 2005*).

In Australia, the role of school canteens is coming under increasing scrutiny. Late last year, *The Sunday Age* in Melbourne ran a series of articles profiling Australia's childhood obesity crisis and questioned the effectiveness of many school canteens (and many State governments) in providing nutritious and healthy lunch options for students.

NSW is leading the way in healthy canteens by making it mandatory for State schools to provide food options in line with the *Healthy Kids' Buyer's Guide*". On the other hand, the Federal and Victorian Governments believe it is not the role of governments to be prescriptive of what can, and cannot, be eaten at schools.

However, recent developments in Britain demonstrate families do want the Government to intervene to protect children's health (*OCA, 2005*).

School canteens can play a pivotal role in effecting behavioural change because they are ideally placed to directly influence children's lives and impact their food choices. Indeed, adult food preferences are formed during childhood, so it is critical that efforts are made to significantly improve availability of healthy food options at school.

An ideal way is to provide organic alternatives to conventional, highly processed foods containing too much fat, salt, sugar and artificial additives.

Bell and Swinburn (2005) found that "canteen users consume significantly greater amounts of foods likely to promote unhealthy weight gain, such as fast foods, confectionery and packaged snacks.

The types of foods and beverages that predominate in school canteens not only undermine the health and nutrition curriculum, but also create the impression that foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar and salt belong on the plate as 'everyday foods' rather than on the side as 'occasional foods'".

VENDING OPTIONS

You may not have heard of Gary Hirshberg, but he got a shock one day when he asked his son what he had eaten at school. "Pizza, chocolate milk and Skittles," was the reply.

Some parents may not have been surprised, except that Hirshberg is chief executive officer of Stonyfield Farm, the largest organic yoghurt company in America (*OCA, September 2004*). So what did he do? Stonyfield now supplies schools with vending options selling healthy snacks and organic treats.

It is not just organic food companies that are encouraging a change to our canteen menus. Here and overseas, schools, organisations and governments are taking the initiative by removing junk food from canteens and introducing organic and healthy alternatives:

Since 2000, it has been obligatory to offer organic food in Italian schools. Although only 500 of 8100 communities regularly offer organic meals or organic components for lunches for schoolchildren, more than 25% of Italian children eat organic, as most large cities adhere to the regulation.

And in Emilia Romagna, legislation was passed requiring all day nurseries and primary schools in the region to offer exclusively organic meals to about 350,000 school children. (*OCA, October 2004*).

In France, about 300,000 organic meals are served each year in 10 schools in Languedoc Rousillon, and 400,000 a year in the Provence-Alpes-Cotes-d'Azur region (*Soil Association, 2003*).

South Africa has gone a step further through its EduPlant activities, which promote cultivation of organic food in schools across the country. EduPlant has reached 14,500 educators

from more than 12,000 schools around South Africa in the past nine years (OCA, September 2004).

At the University of California, the United States, students can order organic salads prepared in the first-ever certified organic kitchen on an American college campus (OCA, April 2006).

Many schools in Britain have introduced organic food. For example, at St Peter's Primary School in Nottingham, children still eat pizza but the bases are homemade in the school kitchen using organic milk, organic oil and organic flour.

At the Monterey Institute of International Studies, a small, private graduate university in Monterey, California, with about 700 students from around the world, one activist student led the way to convert coffee sold on campus from conventional to about 90% organic and fair trade (OTA).

Although it would be erroneous to argue canteen food is the cause of all children's health problems, most of us would agree school is a place that should encourage healthy attitudes to food and well-being.

Canteens are symbols for kids – and what parents and educators do to provide nutritional guidance to kids can be undermined when junk food is freely available from school canteens.

Nourishing our children's health by providing healthy canteen food and beverages should be a priority for every school, and schools should not wait for government regulation before they act. Canteens can make a real difference to the lives of kids right now.

And organics can be part of that difference. It is time to change the menu – for our kids. ■

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* James Meldrum is co-founder of Whole Kids.

