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Generational Change: Local/Indigenous

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While living a day in the life of a young nutrition-lacking teenager in Brooklyn, the author of The American Way of Eating, Tracie McMillan, writes:

“at home [the teenager’s grandmother] refused to cave in to her granddaughter’s taste for junk food. Instead, she fed Vanessa [the teenager] traditional Latin-Caribbean fare: pots of rice and beans, platters of plátanos, sticky and sweet. ‘It’s kind of hard to eat healthy around here’ said Vanessa, and we went for a walk to Burger King, where she got a Whopper” (pg. 4).

Vanessa and her well-intentioned grandmother prove that, indeed, you can lead a horse to water, but you can not force it to drink.

However, Vanessa’s case is not rare. Although unfortunate, many children have at least some form of access to healthy food, but choose the unhealthy alternative instead. This is the case in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where issues of nutrition and sustainability collide. Nutritious food is in many ways foreign to the people in this food desert, meaning that a systemic issue has occurred in the Hill District: there is generation after generation failing to choose nutrition over junk. With this in mind, it is clear that to fix this issue of food and sustainability in the Hill District, change must occur with the children of the community. This change would also be most effective if addressed, largely, in a community school.

Therefore, in an effort to develop healthier eating habits in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, specifically among the younger generations of the neighborhood, the Board of Directors of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) should allocate the resources necessary to provide Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 with school lunches consisting primarily of local foods, because it is not only healthier, but also more affordable and sustainable.

The issues of the Hill District began approximately thirty years ago, when the Mellon Arena effectively cut the Hill District off from Downtown Pittsburgh. This, coupled with the closure of the Penn Incline (serving to transport people to and from the Hill District and the Strip District), resulted in a thirty-year period where residents of the Hill District had no access to a full service neighborhood grocer and great difficulty in finding transportation to other neighborhoods to fulfill this need. These two events mark a thirty-year period of time in which the residents of the Hill District became generationally dependent upon cheap, unhealthy, and processed foods. While suburban residents shopped in ever-growing super markets, Hill District residents turned to limited-service convenience stores to feed themselves and their families.

Although the Hill District is no longer considered a food desert, it still seems like one. By definition, the lack of access to full service grocery stores classified the Hill District as a food desert, but in 2013, a single Shop n’ Save opened up in the Hill District. Accordingly, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Services no longer classifies the neighborhood as a food desert. Nonetheless, the effects of the thirty-year food desert continue to be felt. In deed, the Hill District is still extraordinarily unhealthy – which means it probably shares the same problems of other low-income areas. Jerry Shannon, author of Food Deserts: Governing Obesity in the Neoliberal City, notes that the “obesity epidemic” especially affects low-income areas (par 4). Shannon adds: “the consumption of
sugar-laden drinks, highly processed snacks, and fast food have been most closely linked to this trend" (par 4). Sugar-laden drinks, highly processed snacks, and fast food are exactly the kinds of foods being served at convenience stores. Although a full-service grocer now serves the community, the convenience stores that once took the place of the grocer still compose a large part of the Hill District diet. This habit of purchasing unhealthy food clearly has outlasted the food desert years, as Diana Nelson reports for the Pittsburgh Post Gazette “the [Hill District Shop n’ Save] is doing about a third of the business expected” (par 8). While it is possible that Hill District shoppers are searching for lower prices elsewhere, it is much more likely that the community still frequents limited-service convenience stores to sustain themselves. This, no doubt, contributes to the obesity epidemic that Shannon associates with low-income areas. Thus, because of the Hill District’s troubled history with food, it is clear that lack of nutrition is systemic. However, it is no longer lack of access that negatively impacts the health of the Hill District.

In fact, many recent studies argue that food deserts and their ubiquitous lack of access to healthy foods have no correlation to obesity in communities. Soumya Karlamangla puts it best in her article “Food Deserts may Play Little Role in Obesity, Rand Study Says” for the Los Angeles Times, when she writes “conventional wisdom suggests that if you live in an area devoid of fresh, healthy food, you won’t eat well. These so-called food deserts, the logic goes, are a root cause of the obesity epidemic” (par 1). It does seem logical to assume, that, if low-income areas are more prone to obesity because of the higher prices of healthy foods, then a lack of access to these foods might also make large contributions to obesity rates. However, this is not the case. Karlamangla reports that the Rand Corp. published a study “that found virtually no link between the type of food and drinks that Los Angeles County adults consume and the proximity of fast-food outlets, grocery stores and convenience stores to their homes” (par 4). Quite simply, access is not the solution to solving the health issues of low-income neighborhoods. Instead, I argue that lack of access was the original cause of the obesity epidemic that Jerry Shannon notes took place in the 1980s. However, while local governments and the “neoliberal city” have tried to improve access to healthy food outlets, obesity and other health issues have not yet improved. Whereas a lack of access was the root of the problem, increased access cannot be the solution. In fact, habits and lifestyles have revolved around unhealthy food, so access alone will not be the problems solution. Instead, solution must involve lifestyle and attitude changes. For a significant improvement in health to occur in the Hill District, it will have to begin in a community school.

Improving access to healthy foods in underserved areas after a thirty-year food desert is not a solution; this is indicative of the foreign role that healthy foods hold in communities like the Hill District. The Shop n’ Save that opened in the Hill District two years ago offers both cheap, unhealthy, and processed foods in addition to its healthy produce. For thirty years many Hill District residents became dependent on these cheap unhealthy foods, so what impetus do these residents have to buy healthy produce when it has been essentially unavailable and foreign to the community for so long? This access does nothing but give the Hill District residents a more expensive option for their families’ diets when for the past thirty years these families have scraped by without the produce. Essentially, what is needed now is a re-familiarization and healthy foods education programs for both student and parent. The solution is not one of access, but of familiarity, and if PPS is willing to invest in the future of the Hill District, then this proposal is entirely feasible.

Providing school children with healthier meals always will be and always has been a noble goal. However, these goals rarely come to fruition. Still, in 2012 First Lady Michelle Obama sponsored legislation that was actually passed and drastically changed school lunches across the nation. This change was controversial, and many argue that it does not actually improve the health of American children, as Elizabeth Harrington of the Washington Times notes that a Government Accountability Office (GAO)
audit of the National School Lunch Program found “a total of 1,086,000 students stopped buying school lunch, after participation had increased steadily for nearly a decade” in her article “1M Kids Stop School Lunch Due to Michelle Obama’s Standards”. Although the new standards had attempted to provide children with more nutritious school lunch items, some reports have found that the new standards have actually pushed students away from school lunches. Regardless, these new changes are the regulations by which PPS must abide. In a USDA Food and Nutrition Services press conference highlighting the changes the new school meal standards would make, the USDA notes that the changes mainly include:

Ensuring students are offered both fruits and vegetables every day of the week; Substantially increasing offerings of whole grain-rich foods; Offering only fat-free or low-fat milk varieties; Limiting calories based on the age of children being served to ensure proper portion size; and Increasing the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat, trans fats and sodium (par 4).

The USDA has sought to eliminate eliminate fats, sugars, and processed foods from school lunches on a national scale. With these goals in mind, supplying children with local and seasonal foods, which is most often fresh produce, seems like a logical advancement for children’s health. This advancement would be particularly remarkable for a low-income area that is plagued by issues regarding nutrition. Since the aforementioned legislation was passed in 2012, PPS is currently operating under these guidelines.

However, I argue that purchasing local and unprocessed foods would greatly improve the nutritional value of Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5, given that even with the new standards students do not eat nutritiously.

Even while operating under the new standards, Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 does not make students familiar with healthy foods, which is the most reasonable solution to the lack of nutrition that faces the Hill District. According to figure 1, PPS considers one lunch to be a hot entrée, two vegetable servings, milk, and a serving of fruit. Indeed, PPS does encourage students to eat fruit and vegetables, however students are free to continue eating unhealthy entrees and can very easily throw out the fruit and vegetable servings. PPS has not incorporated vegetables or fruit into their “hot entrées,” which speaks to my earlier argument that access to fruit and vegetables is simply not enough. Figure 1 also displays that on sample meals. For example, on December 15th, the main lunch for students will be mozzarella sticks with marinara sauce, and a day later, students will eat boneless chicken wings and garlic bread. These meals do not reflect the nutrition that the USDA hopes to provide all children with. Perhaps some kids will choose to eat their fruits and vegetables, but the fruit and vegetables are very clearly easy to avoid since the main entrée does not incorporate them. Figure 1, however, reveals something disturbing as well. The current menu that Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 uses reflects the current situation in the Hill District: although fruit and vegetables are available, they are always coupled with unhealthy counterparts. In fact, mozzarella sticks are exactly the kind of food you can get at gas station convenience stores. Even the meals provided to Hill District students at school are headlined by cheap junk, and the vegetables can be too easily pushed away. With this lunch menu, students are asked to pick between what is familiar to them, and produce that has only recently become accessible to their community. Much like the adult residents of the Hill District, the students have very few reasons to actually eat the fruit and vegetables they are encouraged to eat. To better achieve the goals set forth by the USDA, and to improve the health of the Hill District at large, local foods must be incorporated into the main entrée of the lunches provided by Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5.

Local foods will greatly improve the nutritional value of school lunches, while also familiarizing Hill District students with healthy produce. It is imperative that Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 begins to serve local produce for lunch and in its hot entrées, as opposed to healthy produce that requires distant transportation for both nutritional reasons as well as environmental reasons. In her publication for North Carolina State University, Research-Based Support and Extension Outreach for Local Food Systems,
Rebecca Dunning notes that many studies have recognized that local foods have more nutritional value than transported foods because of the shorter period of time between harvest and sale (par 42). Without having to be prepared for long travel, or having to sit in distribution centers, local food boasts more nutrients than its imported counterpart. Furthermore, a shorter period of time between harvest and sale also means greater flavor. This is important when trying to persuade the future generations of the Hill District to make healthy produce a part of their diets. Vegetables, in children’s pop culture, have a particularly poor reputation; when trying to get children who are largely unfamiliar with produce to eat vegetables, it is important that these vegetables are actually fresh and flavorful. Of course, this is but one aspect of the benefits of Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 placing a heavy emphasis on local foods.

Ultimately, Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 adopting a model for school lunches that centers on local foods is more sustainable than non-local foods, in addition to being more nutritious. Local foods do travel less in transportation, which is the most important reason for utilizing local foods. Dunning adds “locally sourced food by definition, travels fewer miles from source to destination than non-local foods” (par 51). Local foods travelling less than its counterparts is not shocking, in fact it is logical. Still, it is important. Not only can serving local foods help reduce emissions from transportation, but eliminating transportation is also less costly.

Eliminating transportation is the obvious environmental benefit, however food waste is the less obvious benefit of local foods. By familiarizing students with local food as a part of a main entrée, students are less likely to contribute to food waste. Earlier in this proposal, I noted that children may have to take fruits and vegetables, but this does not mean that they will eat them. This is little more than a probable guess and a possibility, as there is no statistic to cite specifically what Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 are eating and throwing away. However, soon enough there will be. In fact, even PPS is suspicious of what their students are really eating. On the Pittsburgh School Lunch blog, PPS food services announced that a graduate student at Chatham University has began a study on what students are leaving on their plates after lunch — a term dubbed plate waste (par 3). Students can easily avoid their required fruits and vegetables, when it is only used as a side. Yet, if local produce was to be used in the main entrée for lunches, students would have but little choice to eat the vegetables and ultimately familiarize themselves with them. In doing this, PPS can also help the environment in eliminating food waste — and eliminating food waste is important in creating a more sustainable future. In “Cultivating a Better Food System: The Ingredients and Recipe for a Sustainable Future”, the author, TC Topp, notes “food produces methane gas when it decomposes in landfills and is 27% more potent than carbon monoxide in its effects on climate change” (par 6). In other words, aside from food waste being wasteful, it is also harmful to the environment. Conventional logic would also argue that even if local-food goes to waste, at least it did not travel a thousand miles only to be wasted. Only through utilizing local foods in the main entrée of school lunches can PPS benefit both the environment and the nutrition of Hill District students.

Familiarizing Hill District children with local foods has both nutritional and environmental benefits, but even by making local foods a larger part of school lunches, the health and sustainability issues in the Hill District are not totally solved. After all, what power do the children in the Hill District really have over what is served after school hours while at home? Not all children have providers like Vanessa’s grandmother who will make an effort to ensure their children or grandchildren will eat well. Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5, and other community organizations, should also hold educational meetings for Hill District parents about the importance and the benefits of eating healthy and locally. Hopefully this will give community members an impetus for purchasing healthy produce from the Shop n’ Save and also accessing resources like the MLK Jr. Community Garden. This familiarity, however, must begin with the future of the Hill District. The greater access of produce to the Hill District is positive, however the next step in advancing the health of the community is familiarity.
Since access is not enough to combat obesity and nutrition, the Hill District should be provided with a community school, preferably Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5, that focuses on local and unprocessed foods to benefit the community’s health and its environment. This more advanced lunch program will help circumvent the health issues evident in today’s Hill District. It is necessary to help raise the next generation of Hill District residents in a food environment that is conducive to healthy habits, since it is not enough to only add access to healthy foods. While the health of the Hill District would definitely improve by adopting a more local-food friendly lunch menu, the environment would also improve because of the elimination of travel and food waste. However, it is important to include Hill District parents in the efforts of changing the health habits of the future Hill District generations, as to ensure this added effort does not go to waste. Yes, PPS feeds its students, but it also has a duty to help students develop healthy lifestyle habits. Clearly, the Hill District has been the victim of a toxic food environment, and since PPS has the opportunity to help foster a culture of healthy foods for the neighborhood, this proposal should be taken seriously.

Works Cited


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**Child Nutrition**

All weekly menus meet the following guidelines based on the USDA nutrition standards for 2015:
- Acceptable calorie range for the age group
- All grains served are whole grains
- <10% of calories from saturated fat
- National sodium guidelines
- Five sub-groups of vegetables offered
- Choices of fruit and vegetables offered daily

**Special Diets**

Does your child have an allergy, religious restriction, or medical condition that requires special diet consideration? Contact the district’s Registered Dietitian, Elizabeth Henry, for more information and accommodations. 412-529-3309, ehenny1@pghboe.net

**Make a Complete Meal**

Kids that eat at school can take the following items at lunch:
- Hot entrée
- 2 vegetable servings
- 1 fruit serving
- Milk choice

At breakfast:
- Main entree or cereal
- 2 fruit servings
- Milk choice

PPS is an equal opportunity employer and provider.

**Weekly Lunch Alternates**

Don't like what's for lunch? Try these instead: Vegetarian option offered daily. Just ask!
- M: PBJ or Cheese Salad
- T: Toasted Cheese or Popcorn Chicken Salad
- W: PBJ or Fresh Deli Wrap
- Th: Toasted Cheese or Chicken Fajita Salad
- F: PBJ or Fresh Deli Sandwich

**Happy Holidays**

**We're Hiring!**

The Pittsburgh Public Schools Food Service Department participates in the National School Lunch Program and serves approximately 19,500 free lunches every single day to students across the district.

School breakfast is free, too!