The Politics of School Lunch in Hawai‘i
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Introduction

For the last two years, every third Thursday, I have been going down to Sunset Beach Elementary School (SBES), on the island of O‘ahu to serve the Fresh Choice Salad Bar to about three hundred elementary schoolchildren eating school lunch. One child in particular, Kaden, asks me for a special request every time he comes through the line: “I would like three cucumbers and two carrots please.” He is very particular, and will be sure to tell me if I have inadvertently placed one too many carrots on his plate. He is so polite and happy to receive the correct number of vegetables that it makes my day every time. After several years as an active parent advocating for better school food on the School Community Council at SBES and with the help of the Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation, a local non-profit organization we were able to convince the school administration, as well as the School Food Services supervisor and kitchen staff that the SBES children would not only enjoy, but also nutritionally benefit from the addition of fresh fruits and vegetables to their school lunches, at least once a week. Along with a series of dedicated volunteers, I thoroughly delight in serving the kids their salad, rewarding those who say please and thank you, as well as interacting with the kitchen staff on a regular basis. While the establishment of the salad bar was several years in the making, now that the program has been in place for almost two years, I can safely say that the pilot program has been successful in many ways, even though it has already faced a few challenges as well. Not all schools in Hawai‘i are as lucky as Sunset Beach Elementary to have a salad bar, even if it only occurs once
a week, and most don’t have the option of including any fresh, unprocessed foods in their school lunches.

This paper proposes to examine the successes and challenges of the school lunch program in Hawai‘i’s public schools to determine whether we are on track to make beneficial changes to the school menu for Hawai‘i school children, in several respects: nutritionally, environmentally, and programmatically. First, I provide a short history of the school lunch program in Hawai‘i. Then, using qualitative interview methods, I investigate the issues surrounding school lunch in Hawai‘i, comparing it to the existing literature on the same topic in the mainland United States. I discuss the current status of school lunch in Hawai‘i, and through a narrative analysis of my interviewees’ responses, explore the successes and challenges faced by activists, school food services supervisors, and kitchen staff in negotiating the difficult process of improving school lunch in Hawai‘i.

**History of School Lunch Program in Hawai‘i**

During the early part of the 19th century, wealthy white sugar plantation owners started importing laborers from Asia, starting with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and eventually Filipino workers to do the hard labor required to plant, harvest and export large amounts of Hawai‘i grown sugar cane to the mainland United States and beyond (Takaki 1983). While initially, most of these laborers came by themselves and stayed single, others eventually came with families, or themselves imported picture brides from their home countries to come to Hawai‘i and start families. The descendants of these imported laborers caused an influx of school children into Hawai‘i’s schools at the same time as the number of children of Hawaiian descent was declining due to death and disease. Many plantations had small schools on the premises, especially to teach the children English, which for the most part was not spoken at home, so that they would
become effective plantation laborers themselves when they came of age to do so. Most children
came prepared with a packed lunch from home, and many ethnic groups kept to themselves,
encouraged by the plantation owners to isolate themselves from other groups, in order to prevent
any concerted labor efforts to organize and strike across ethnic groups for better wages and/or
working conditions. However, people working together side by side in difficult conditions
eventually learned to communicate with each other, developing Pidgin English to do so, and
“talking story” over shared food. This improved communication led to two major multiethnic
strikes (1920, 1924) which did improve wages and conditions, and eventually allowed more
families to move out of the paternalistic plantation system and into towns with regular public
schools (Takaki 1983). These former plantation workers started multitudes of small businesses
in areas all across the main islands, and continued to struggle to provide for their families, but at
least they were no longer beholden to the plantation owners for their livelihoods.

The public schools in these Hawai‘i settlements started to grow, both in size and in
number. Following the policies on the mainland United States, by the middle of the twentieth
century, there was a school lunch program geared toward making sure that schoolchildren had
access to at least one filling, hot meal per day. In Hawai‘i, that lunch was also cooked with
ethnically and culturally appropriate food. Thus, many of the school lunch recipes contained a
high level of fat, and every single meal contained meat of one kind or another. Many of the
recipes remain the same, yet as a state, we have followed the national trend toward high numbers
of obese children, especially in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations, which are
genetically and socioeconomically at risk for a host of obesity related diseases such as high
blood pressure, heart disease, and most importantly diabetes. Nutritionally, the recipes from the
middle of the twentieth century are no longer appropriate to the needs of today’s children who
are much more sedentary and no longer labor on the plantations, yet School Food Services (SFS) in Hawai‘i has yet to substantively change its policies and menus to reflect these new dietary needs.

During the time of rapid growth of the schools, everything was cooked from scratch, and many of the “cafeteria ladies” were former plantation workers, mostly of Okinawan descent, who had moved off the plantations with their families yet still needed gender appropriate jobs that allowed them to work during the school day and be home with their children in the afternoons. This gendered trend is similar to that found in the mainland United States at this time and reflects acceptable social norms of the time, which approved of women having jobs that would have been extensions of their roles as wives and mothers (Poppendieck 2010). The fact that cafeteria staff was, and tends to continue to be, women of mostly Okinawan descent is unique to Hawai‘i and reflects an ethnic and family network system very common to a variety of industries and job classifications in Hawai‘i.

**Literature Review**

There is a dearth of academic literature on school lunch in Hawai‘i and this deficiency is what I hope to remedy with this project. Though the topic has been addressed a few times by our alternative weekly newspaper, the *Honolulu Weekly*, there is much more academic literature available on school lunch in the mainland United States. The two most recent and exhaustive histories and reviews of the National School Lunch Program are Janet Poppendieck’s *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (2010) and Susan Levine’s *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (2010). These two books provide an assessment of the current status of school food in the America, focusing on the history and politics of the school lunch program, as well as the implications of the privatization of school
food services in cafeterias nationwide. Marion Nestle’s 2003 *Food Politics* briefly discusses the influence of marketing on school children, discussing the impact of private companies offering fast food to children as well as the politics and lobbying geared toward influencing school districts to allow certain large soda companies what she terms “pouring rights” to serve soda in schools both at lunch and in vending machines. However, this book is somewhat outdated given that much of the country (including Hawai‘i) is now on track to eliminating any soda and even sports drink availability in schools due to pressure from parents and popular media scrutiny about the negative effects of soda on children’s weight. In *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way we Feed our Children* (2007), Ann Cooper and Lisa Holmes discuss procurement issues surrounding school food in various school districts, and focus on offering Cooper’s “home” district of Boulder Colorado as a model for the implementation of changes to the school food services to revert back to scratch cooking through re-training of the cafeteria staff, educating children about nutrition, and offering recipes for tasty food that children are likely to eat at school. Most recently, Amy Kalafa’s book entitled *Lunch Wars: How to Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for our Children’s Health* (2011) provides parents and activists with a step-by-step guide to changing school food around the nation, again modeled after Kalafa’s successful efforts in her children’s own school. These last two books however, are relatively light on the academic analysis, instead focusing more on activism and its practical applications.

Cora Peterson’s 2011 article in *Food Policy* details the negative effects of the inconsistencies of the commodity reimbursement system whereby schools receive in-kind food funding for certain commodities in order to cook certain meals. Mirtcheva and Powell analyze stigma for participation in the School Lunch program as evidenced by peer to peer ridicule for
buying school lunches in various neighborhoods (2009). This article found that a higher rate of participation in the free and reduced school lunch program was directly correlated with higher peer stigma for eating school lunch. Bhatia, Jones and Reicker analyzed the increase in school lunch participation when competitive (fast) foods were eliminated in a pilot project in San Francisco in their 2011 article in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Finally, in their 2010 article “Childhood Obesity and Schools: Evidence from the National Survey of Children’s Health,” Li and Hooker argue that even though they used a small sample, the results of their study linked higher Body Mass Index in children eligible for free and reduced school lunches, linking low socioeconomic status with higher rates of obesity. This wide variety of perspectives on school lunches from policy, to health, to politics all point in one direction: the school lunch system is broken and needs to be fixed in a substantial number of ways.

Hawai‘i is no different than the rest of the nation in this respect, and follows the same devastating trends in high rates of obesity for certain ethnic and socioeconomic groups. However, we are unique in a variety of other ways, detailed below, which highlight the importance of this project. While there is no documented academic literature on Hawai‘i’s school lunch issues, there is quite a bit of popular literature devoted to the issue as well as a large popular cultural attention dedicated to school lunch issues on the mainland United States. The attention paid to superstar chef Alice Waters’ Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, California, was instrumental in bringing attention to this issue, especially among urban, wealthy elites. Furthermore, Jamie Oliver’s television show *Food Revolution* both in Huntington, West Virginia and Los Angeles, California brought widespread attention to the challenges faced by school districts everywhere to change school food to more nutritious, less processed, and hopefully better-tasting food for our school children. This attention has led to a huge political movement,
made up of mostly women (though certainly not all) activists themselves getting involved with school food issues as extensions of their roles as mothers. At the risk of being a cliché myself, as a researcher and activist I fit into this trend as well, and hope to contribute to significant changes in the school food system in Hawai‘i through continued research and activism.

**Methods**

While the entire Hawai‘i state government is regulated by Sunshine Laws to promote government transparency and accountability, somehow, the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HI DOE), and especially the School Food Services branch seem exempt. An examination of the Hawai‘i school food website reveals, well, nothing. There is very little substantive information on the website that is accessible to interested parties. In another attempt to find information about SFS in Hawai‘i, a legislative request from a Farm-to-School task force for HI DOE procurement procedures went unanswered. Therefore, the methods for this project focused on open-ended interviews with cafeteria staff, School Food Services supervisors, as well as activists working on school food issues in Hawai‘i. Furthermore, consistent personal participation in the Hawai‘i School Lunch program in various capacities for the past three years allowed me access to certain information discussed in this paper that I would have not known existed had I not been deeply involved in the process of getting a fresh choice salad bar at Sunset Beach Elementary School on the North Shore of O‘ahu.

Since this project is at its beginning stages, I interviewed six people involved with school food services in various capacities: 1) the Windward District supervisor for the island of O‘ahu, 2) three cafeteria staff from three elementary schools around O‘ahu (Sunset Beach Elementary, Moanalua Elementary, and Aikahi Elementary) representing different geographic areas and demographic characteristics, and 3) two activists from the Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation, a non-
profit organization dedicated to improving agricultural literacy and nutrition education, along
with making substantive changes to school lunches in Hawai‘i. I interviewed each respondent
individually and on separate occasions between December 2011 and March 2012. The
interviews lasted between twenty minutes at the shortest and two and a half hours at the longest.
Each interviewee signed an informed consent form. Three of the interviews occurred in the
respondents’ respective “home” school kitchen. One interview occurred at a Starbucks in order
to protect the respondent’s anonymity according to her wishes. Both activists were interviewed
at their place of work. My own knowledge of various issues surrounding school food is
interspersed throughout this narrative in order to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture of
the realities of school lunch in Hawai‘i.

Status of School Lunch in Hawai‘i

The Hawai‘i Department of Education is a single, seven-island system serving
approximately 70% of the 180,000 children in 256 public schools. The school food services
branch distributes about 100,000-125,000 school lunches each day (Egi, interview 2011) and is
the 10th largest school food authority in the nation with an $82 million budget (Hawai‘i Food
Service Toolkit 2011). There is a five week cycle menu with the same recipes recycled over and
over again which has remained essentially unchanged for the last thirty some odd years. Within
that time period however, many of the foods that were originally cooked from scratch have
turned into pre-made, processed foods which cost more from the vendors, but reduce labor costs
in Hawai‘i’s cafeterias. With Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” platform as an impetus,
Hawai‘i’s School Food Services is embarking on a campaign to go back to scratch cooking
through retraining of cafeteria staff (Egi, interview 2011) however, that plan has been stalled
indefinitely due to significant budget cuts owing to the poor economy.
As with cafeterias on the mainland, School Food Services receives commodity shipments from the federal government through the Department of Defense. However, while mainland cafeterias receive a variety of surplus commodities, Hawai‘i schools only receive rice, sugar, ground beef, turkey meat, cheese, canned fruits and flour which only constitute about 10% of the cost of the meal (Egi, interview 2011). Since Hawai‘i is in the middle of the North Pacific, storage of commodity foods adds to the HI DOE’s food costs, so the free food isn’t so free after all (Kishida, interview 2011). Therefore, importing large quantities of commodities to Hawai‘i has not been found to be as cost efficient as procuring foods on an as needed basis through procurement contracts negotiated by the Department of Defense.

No matter the source of the food, increasing participation in the school lunch program is key to the success of any school food program, including Hawai‘i. Normally first quarter participation is relatively high and is usually higher in elementary schools than in middle and high schools. Lunch prices are the number one barrier to school lunch participation. The statewide average for participation is about 75%. In 2007-8, the average participation at elementary schools was 90% and the middle and high schools were at 50-60% (Egi, interview 2011). The biggest loss in participation came two years ago with a major price increase from $1.75 to $2.75 per lunch. Current school lunch prices are at $2.75 for full price, 40 cents for reduced price, and for children eligible for free school lunch, there is no cost to the child. Each school lunch costs $4.70 to make. Labor costs account for 55%, operations 15%, and the food itself costs 30%. According to one school lunch activist, 55% of the school lunch going to labor costs is extremely high in relation to the poor quality of food we are serving our children (Kishida, interview 2011). Thus the cost of one school lunch breaks down as follows: $1.39 for food, $2.57 for labor, and $0.74 for operations. As of June 2011, the U.S. Department of
Agriculture reimbursement rates are as follows: for free lunches, the USDA reimburses School Food Services $3.18, for reduced price school lunches, the reimbursement rate is $2.78, and finally for full price lunches, the reimbursement rate is $0.30 (Hawai‘i Food Service Toolkit 2011). However, as noted above, a Hawai‘i school lunch costs $4.70 to make, so School Food Services are operating in the red to begin with. In order to make up for the deficiency, special funds are raised with the help of adult lunch sales as well as a la carte menu items. This latter detail is important since one of the distinguishing characteristics of Hawai‘i’s school food system is that there has NOT been a wholesale privatization of cafeteria food in the public school system, and that there are no fast food companies operating within the school lunch framework here. This is a challenge as much as it presents an opportunity. While there are fewer opportunities to sell separate menu items that appeal to children used to fast food, there are also no fast food companies to drive out of cafeterias as has been the case on the mainland. An adult lunch costs $5, and a second lunch for a hungry child costs $4. These expenditures are all encouraged because they help the Hawai‘i School Food Services make up for revenue lost on the school lunch costs.

The USDA reimbursement rates are based on each lunch served needing to have at least three of the five components of a school lunch in order to qualify for reimbursement. The offer (children get a choice of menu items) versus serve (the lunches are already pre-made and the children have no choices as to what goes on their plates) dichotomy presents a host of additional issues. For example, on an “offer” program meatball lunch day, a child could conceivably walk away with three meatballs, some rice, and a chocolate milk to qualify for reimbursement. This lunch would consist of protein, starch and dairy, and thus meets the minimum of three items from the five possible school lunch components. Furthermore, the same lunch on a “serve”
program, might also include canned peaches in syrup and some iceberg lettuce contributing to additional sugar intake beyond the chocolate milk’s own 26 grams of sugar for an 8 ounce quantity. Finally, that lunch may get wasted and thrown in the trash can uneaten since none of the items are all that appealing to begin with.

Title I schools are those schools that have over 51% of students eligible for free and/or reduced school lunch. In some cases there are more students eligible for free and reduced school lunch than apply, but they tend to avoid submitting an application because the forms are cumbersome and not available online, notwithstanding the fact that some of the families needing to apply may not have easy computer access in the first place. These barriers create some remarkable situations. For example, some students in high school cafeteria with long lines will eat in line and when they get to the cashier and they are told that they do not have any money in their account, they are made to throw away what’s left of their lunches. One cafeteria worker told me that the cashiers and kitchen managers who make the kids throw away their lunches “have no heart” and that she lets the kids go through if she knows they are from poorer families (Anonymous, interview 2012). These students learn to eat very fast because it is perhaps the only hot meal they may have (partial) access to all day. While there are many quandaries facing the cafeteria staff in instances like these, there are also several beneficial aspects to being a Title I school.

Title I schools have access to a Power Up Produce (PUP) program available through the Department of Defense (DoD) whereby cafeteria managers are given a budget to buy locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables in order to expose children to a greater variety of produce. This program is not allowed to compete with the school lunch program, yet cafeteria staff can serve these additional fruits and vegetables either during recess or after the regular lunch line.
Additionally, a similar program called the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) provides additional funding to Title I schools to buy more fresh produce, no matter the provenance. From my interview sources however, I found that many cafeteria managers tend to continue the processed food trend by buying precut and prewashed produce, which cost more, and run down their budgets relatively fast, because they either don’t have the labor to prep whole fruits and vegetables and may be reluctant to “waste” time on doing so (Chinaka and Miyata, interviews 2012). Thus, even if given the budget to include more fresh fruits and vegetables, regardless of whether they are locally grown or from the mainland, the individual cafeteria managers ultimately make the decisions whether to include them on their respective menus.

**School Lunch Successes in Hawai‘i – General HI DOE**

While Hawai‘i seems to be trailing the mainland by several years in terms of steps taken to increase the healthiness of school lunches, there have been several School Food Services directives in recent years that highlight a trend toward a healthy eating consciousness for Hawai‘i’s schoolchildren. In 2010, SFS sent a memo to kitchen managers asking them to increase the number of “cooked from scratch” lunch meals from zero (yes, zero) to at least three out of five lunches per week. This would seem to be a step in the right direction, since it would eliminate the number of days that children are served precooked and rewarmed chicken nuggets, chicken and/or pork patties, etc. Additionally, since 2010, the recipes for rice (a staple in most of Hawai‘i’s ethnic foods including school lunches) have changed to what is called “hapa” rice, or brown and white mixed rice. The recipes are different with each kitchen, with some kitchens serving 75% brown rice/25% white rice, and some kitchens inverting the proportion completely. This mixture of brown and white also applies to flour for baking, as all the rolls, hamburger and hot dog buns, or any bread items for that matter, are mandated to be made with mixed wheat and
white flours. The sugar content has also been reduced in baked-from-scratch goods, though many of the pre-made baked items still contain quite a bit of sugar because the staff feel that “the kids like it better” (Anonymous, interview 2012). Butter has been eliminated from almost all baking and is substituted with canola oil to reduce unhealthy fat content. With the advent of salad bars and prepared salads available at many high schools, some even going into the elementary schools, there has also been an increase in the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, though as mentioned above, many kitchen managers opt for precut and prewashed items that are themselves processed and treated with preservatives to keep them fresh during their long journeys from the mainland. One time, during the Fresh Choice Salad Bar service, I opened a new bag of lettuce in order to refill our trays, and out wafted the sickly smell of chlorine – a chemical used to wash and preserve iceberg lettuce for institutional use.

School Lunch Successes in Hawai‘i – Activism and Individual Schools

At the individual school level, there have been some major successes in improving the quality of school lunches in Hawai‘i, as well as including more fresh fruits and vegetables on the regular menu. Moanalua Elementary School was a leader in showing other schools that implementing salad bars could be done within the required budget and to satisfy all types of appetites. Cafeteria manager Bobby Chinaka used to serve 8-12 salad bar items each day, but when he lost two positions due to budget cuts, he had to terminate the salad bar option for his school, despite great opposition from students, parents, and staff. He argued that having the salad bar prevented waste and encouraged children to eat healthy fresh produce. He even trained his cafeteria staff to prep the salad bar and they agreed that it took less time because the preparation occurred in smaller quantities. It also encouraged their creativity and led to high morale in his cafeteria kitchen. He lamented the fact that the budget cuts made him “no longer
different, no longer unique” (Chinaka, interview 2012). When speaking about the salad bar, Chinaka became extremely passionate.

With the salad bar, kids learn about food, sanitation, and not wasting food because you learn how food is precious because it took you that long to grow it. We had the garden, and when we had more kids coming, I was growing sugar cane, pineapple, lettuce, all kinds of stuff. Can you believe that even local kids had never seen sugar cane grow before? Or pineapple? That’s crazy! How is that possible? It used to grow everywhere. We were so much more self-sufficient when I grew up. We had local milk, local eggs. We were the biggest growers and exporters of sugar cane and pineapple! I cut up the sugar cane, and put it in plastic baggies and sent an email to the teachers to tell the kids to come pick ‘em up after school to take home. (Interview 2012)

Chinaka was able to save money by cutting waste and introducing kids to new produce they no longer know, even though Hawai‘i had a long-standing tradition of self-sufficiency, dating back to the ancient Hawaiians. He took advantage of the flexibility allowed by SFS to create a good working environment for his staff, to develop a loyal following from staff, students, and parents, and to include healthy foods on his menu with as many local options as possible.

Salad bars and prepared salads range from everyday availability bought and prepared by the cafeteria staff, to once a week, special Fresh Choice salad bars at select schools where the parent teacher organization pays for the produce and it is prepped by cafeteria staff. The latter type of salad bars are usually requested by activist parents, working either with a non-profit organization such as the Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation, or perhaps through their respective School Community Councils to make and implement policy for healthier lunches according to their corresponding school’s wellness policy. This is particularly significant because the wellness policies at each school were developed in 2006, but have yet to be enforced on a regular basis throughout the HI DOE even though this goes against federal Department of Education regulations.
Four of my interviewees told me that for some kids, school lunch is the only hot meal they get in a day because they don’t have access to wholesome foods at home. It stands to reason then, that school lunch is also the only access some children have to fresh whole fruits and vegetables, since it is likely that many of their dinners consist of fast food. Two of my respondents who have worked in Hawai‘i cafeterias for a total of over sixty years combined argued that with the sagging economy, many parents in Hawai‘i work two jobs due to the high cost of living, and that they are told by their student monitors that they eat fast food five or six times per week. Their parents have no time to prepare healthy foods from scratch, and tend to “grab something on the way home from work” (Miyata, Chinaka, interviews 2012). This trend is certainly not isolated to Hawai‘i, though I would argue that the high cost of living there exacerbates the problem and that parents may want to prepare wholesome foods for their children, but that having two (or more) jobs prevents them from doing so.

Subverting the large centralized HI DOE School Food Services system seems to be possible and two of the kitchen managers I spoke with both cited the creativity allowed by School Food Services within the standardized five week cycle menu as their saving grace. Until budget cuts robbed him of two key staff, Chinaka used the school garden to implement garden parties whereby he would serve kids the vegetables and fruits they had grown themselves. As long as it wasn’t competing with the school lunch program, this was a totally appropriate way to introduce kids to new produce. He argued that “they may not like vegetables, but they going eat ‘em because they grew ‘em” (Chinaka, interview 2012). Indeed, one of the central issues facing SFS in implementing changes is whether today’s students, who are used to processed foods, will actually eat the healthier options if they are presented with them. Both Suanne Miyata and one of the Sunset Beach Elementary School cafeteria workers lamented the younger staff’s and
students’ preference for chicken nuggets. Miyata told me that some of her younger workers would serve the kids nuggets everyday if they could, since that would likely increase participation. She knew it wasn’t healthy and hoped that the SFS directives would continue to encourage “from scratch” cooking. “Given the challenge to be creative,” she said, “the older generation of workers wants to be creative. I cannot say the same for the younger folks” (Interview 2012). This generational gap seems to manifest itself both in SFS staffing and in the tastes of the various student populations. While the staff that has been working in cafeterias for years knows what constitutes a healthy meal, the newer staff has grown up with the same processed foods as the students, thus it will certainly be a challenge to retrain them to cook healthy “from scratch” meals for future generations of students.

School gardens are becoming more prevalent throughout Hawai‘i schools though in various types of iterations and some schools are including them in the curriculum in order to encourage students to learn where their food comes from. Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation provides an agriculture and nutrition education curriculum for schools that have enough interested teachers. Other schools have school gardens of their own, whether through parent involvement and teacher or community interest. Regardless of how the garden is cared for, the cafeteria staff is not allowed to include any of its produce in its school lunch due to food safety mandates passed down from SFS as well as the Hawai‘i Department of Agriculture. Thus, while kids may grow a bumper crop of green beans, unless teachers or cafeteria staff are willing to go beyond their regular duties and prepare them for distribution outside of the school lunch parameters, the students will not be able to taste the fruits of their garden labors. As one activist put it, “this is a missed opportunity for kids to see the entire journey from farm to table and learn how to grow and cook their own food” (Kishida, interview 2011). This point seems to exemplify Hawai‘i’s
lack of political will to do what is necessary to change both the school food system as well as start educating children about their food’s provenance and the importance of healthy eating.

**Challenges – General HI DOE**

The Hawai‘i DOE School Food Services branch faces a number of barriers to change in the school lunch program. The first and foremost, mentioned by every single respondent, is the budget situation. A ten percent budget cut across the board for the Department of Education in Hawai‘i has left SFS in dire straits due to rising food and shipping costs. The only option has been to furlough cafeteria staff two days per month in order to save on labor costs as well as eliminate positions through retrenchment and a reformulation of staffing patterns according to participation. As mentioned above, the school lunch price increase from 2010 drove participation down, so many kitchens lost staff due to the new staffing formulas. In response to the loss of staff, cafeterias were not able to provide students and staff with cooked from scratch meals as often, defeating the policies set by School Food Services to increase the quality and healthfulness of the lunches in the first place.

In addition, many facilities in school cafeterias consist of serving kitchens, with larger kitchens serving as centralized food preparation kitchens, or “cooking” kitchens, which then distribute foods to the smaller, satellite “serving” kitchens. This lack of cooking facilities in each kitchen lends itself to the continuing service of processed and reheated foods, as they hold up better to re-warming by definition, as they have been inherently formulated by the manufacturers to do so. Thus there is no incentive to retrain the labor force, since the facilities do not warrant the retraining and the budget cuts have prevented any large scale training from taking place (Miyata, interview 2012). In fact, if and when any training is available, it is on a volunteer basis, and with the labor force already working above and beyond their duties to make
up for lost staff, they are unlikely to attend. This creates somewhat of a resistance to change on the part of the staff, though it seems difficult to blame them for their attitudes due to the unexpected furloughs and across-the-board pay cuts. Finally, the staff is hired by the school principals and they are not required to have any food service experience. They can transfer laterally from janitorial services for example, and are trained on the job, again taking time away from potential creativity in the development of healthy menu items within the parameters of the five week cycle menu as well as the USDA regulations for school lunch reimbursement.

School Lunch Challenges – Activists and Individual Schools

There is a resistance to change in the HI DOE that is applicable to the school lunch menu in many ways. First, the attitude of School Food Services management, at least as seen from the kitchen managers, the cafeteria staff, and the activists themselves seems to be that “what has been done for decades is working just fine” (Kishida, interview, 2011) so there is little incentive to make any large scale changes. The lack of policy enforcement in terms of wellness policies, as well as menu and recipe changes is also a road block to change. The stringent food safety rules and regulations prevent direct farm-to-school sales, so that children are not able to eat the foods they grown in their own school gardens in the cafeteria, and kitchens are not allowed to accept produce from individual farmers who may be willing to bypass distributors and vendors to provide locally grown produce to school cafeterias because they are not necessarily food safety certified. Mr. Chinaka argued that if the kitchen workers, who are all HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points – safe food handling practices) trained were able to become certified, this would facilitate the inclusion of locally grown produce in Hawai`i’s school lunches (Interview 2012). Whereas the production side of the produce may not be food safety certified, if the kitchen were permitted to handle the food, they would be able to remedy any food safety
issues through HACCP handling and would be able to ensure the safety of the food for Hawai‘i’s school children. Even so, activists and SFS officials both argue that the supply of locally grown produce is not high enough to meet the demands of 100,000-125,000 school meals each day nor does the kitchen staff have time to research local farms and produce availability (Miyata, interview 2012). A 2010 Feasibility Study commissioned by the Hawai‘i State Legislature found that the agricultural production and farmer distribution capabilities in Hawai‘i were not sufficient to supply all of Hawai‘i’s schools with produce on a regular basis. However, this presumes and “all or nothing” approach that does not allow for smaller farm-to-school programs to flourish (UH Feasibility Study, 2009). One of the key components of the barriers to change is the sheer size of the HI DOE, and that Hawai‘i’s island geography in and of itself makes things more difficult than they would be in a mainland school district of a similar size that was not surrounded by the Pacific Ocean.

**Potential Solutions**

There are so many barriers to improvement for Hawai‘i school lunches that the task of coming up with solutions or creative ideas that are likely to be implemented is extremely daunting. That said, each interviewee, from the lowest ranked kitchen staff I interviewed to the SFS supervisor overseeing more than fifty school cafeterias all pointed in the direction of the lobbying savvy of the School Food Services Director. One activist told me that the director’s willingness to become a more public figure is important (Kishida, interview 2011). Two cafeteria managers and their supervisor all argued that the director has to be very political, and she needs to lobby for her program in order to receive more money for School Food Services (Egi, Chinaka, Miyata, interviews 2011 and 2012). It seems extremely important to note that each interviewee talked about politics and lobbying unprompted by me at all. They are all aware
that with tight budgets, the director of each government branch has to be an activist for their respective programs and they were unsure that their director was doing as much as she could for them. Interestingly, all three of these interviewees were planning on retiring within the next few years.

While understanding the political angles of this issue is certainly key to successfully changing the system within the confines of restricted budgets and programmatic resistance to change from labor, getting parents involved at the individual school level is also a critical component of securing the availability of more healthy food in Hawai‘i school cafeterias.

“There seems to be a lack of education about what is going on in the food revolution,” said Dexter Kishida (interview 2011) and non-profits like the Kokua Hawai‘i Foundation and the Hawai‘i School Garden Hui among others, are attempting to redress that issue by involving parents and community members in garden and nutrition education through the school curriculum. They have been working at the legislative level, involving sympathetic legislators in drafting “Farm-to-School” bills that while popular, rarely get funding or enforcement capabilities. One avenue for change that has not yet been tapped is testimony and policy change at the Board of Education level, since legislative action has proven to be less than useful so far.

Regardless, all parties involved acknowledge that there nothing is going to happen overnight (Kishida, interview 2011) and that it may take an entire generation to change the system, but that if we don’t take small steps now, we will continue to be left behind in the food revolution.

**Conclusion**

Because the HI DOE is one (very large) school district, it would seem like a single signature expressing the political will to make alterations to the school lunch program from the SFS director could potentially change everything for the better. However, there are many
extenuating factors that have proven to be barriers to the improvement of school lunch in Hawai‘i. These are as follows:

1) Legislative restrictions about food safety issues;
2) Budget cuts necessitating furloughs for cafeteria workers;
3) Inadequate facilities preventing staff training for “from scratch” cooking;
4) The sheer size of a school district spanning seven islands surrounded by the Pacific Ocean;
5) Agricultural issues concerning the availability of produce supply for SFS demand and feasibility of their distribution;
6) Resistance from cafeteria workers to go above and beyond their job descriptions when they have been furloughed and lost wages due to budget cuts;
7) Resistance from students to eating new foods that may be more difficult to procure and prepare but are essentially better for Hawai‘i’s children.

These seven issues, among others discussed in this paper, seem like the biggest obstacles faced by Hawai‘i schools to implementing changes in the school lunch program.

Fortunately, there is hope for Hawai‘i’s school lunch program in that the SFS director has assembled a “rogue group” to instigate change from the inside of the system. While the director did pull the team together, according to several interviewees, she does not have much input into day to day kitchen operations (Egi, Kishida, Chinaka, Miyata, interviews 2011 and 2012). Perhaps this group’s formation is a harbinger of positive changes to come. Requests for an interview with the SFS director for this project have thus far remained unanswered.

One potential avenue for future research/action would investigate in more depth how locally sourced foods fit into the school lunch program in Hawai‘i in terms of providing a
reliable institutional market for Hawai‘i’s agricultural products. While the size of the HI DOE does appear to be an insurmountable obstacle to the implementation of Farm-to-School programs, there would seem to be no reason not to try to implement either pilot projects or geographic district-wide policies that would allow for inclusion of locally sourced foods into some of Hawai‘i’s school food menus, even the antiquated five week cycle menu at least instead of continuing the current (failing) “all or nothing” approach. This would ensure a market for Hawai‘i’s farmers, reduce our dependence on imported foods, and provide healthy alternatives for Hawai‘i’s school lunches.
Works Cited


Egi, Sharon. December 16, 2012. Personal interview with the Windward District School Food Services supervisor at Sunset Beach Elementary School.


Kishida, Dexter. December 9, 2011. Personal interview with a school food activist at Kokua Hawai`i Foundation.


