

From “old school” to “farm-to-school”: Neoliberalization from the ground up

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Abstract. Farm-to-school (FTS) programs have garnered the attentions and energies of people in a diverse array of social locations in the food system and are serving as a sort of touchstone for many in the alternative agrifood movement. Yet, unlike other alternative agrifood initiatives, FTS programs intersect directly with the long-established institution of the welfare state, including its vestiges of New Deal farm programs and public entitlement. This paper explores how FTS is navigating the liminal terrain of public and private initiative, particularly the ways in which it interfaces with neoliberalism as both a material and discursive project. It examines the political emergence of school food programs and finds that FTS is strikingly similar to traditional school programs in objectives, but differs in approach. Yet, in their efforts to fill in the gaps created by political and economic neoliberalization, FTS advocates are in essence producing neoliberal forms and practices afresh. These include those associated with contingent labor relationships, private funding sources, and the devolution of responsibility to the local, all of which have serious consequences for social equity. The paper also discusses how FTS programs are employing the rhetoric of neoliberal governmentality, including personal responsibility and individual success, consumerism, and choice. While these may be tactical choices used to secure funding in a competitive environment, they may also contribute to the normalization of neoliberalism, further circumscribing the possibilities of what can be imagined and created to solve social problems.

Key words: Alternative agrifood institutions, California, Community food security, Devolution, Farm-to-school programs, Neoliberalism, School nutrition, Sustainable agriculture

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Introduction

Among the many new initiatives in the burgeoning alternative agrifood movement, farm-to-school (FTS) programs, which bring fresh, local produce into schools, are at the forefront. The level of enthusiasm for and rapid proliferation of FTS programs makes them of great

interest to activists and academics alike, particularly given their intersection with established public welfare programs. This public context of FTS programs makes them substantially different from other innovations within the alternative agrifood movement. While other alternative food institutions such as CSAs and farmers’ markets share many goals with FTS programs, they are

substantially private institutions. FTS programs, on the other hand, derive from and must work within the longstanding national school meals public entitlement program. That is, FTS programs work within the historical context of a welfare state program in which solving social problems was seen as the purview of the federal government. At the same time, FTS programs must work within the contemporary context of neoliberalization, in which solving social problems is seen as the domain of individuals and the market. For these reasons the national (old school) and FTS (new school) food programs are strikingly similar in their objectives; it is in their approach that they differ, as we will discuss. Yet, these differences in approach, as we will argue, both enable and reflect neoliberalization.

As a doctrine, neoliberalism holds that the market is the most efficient and, hence, most optimal way to meet human needs. As a practical political economic project, neoliberalization has involved the privatization of public resources and spaces, minimization of labor costs, reductions of public expenditures, and the elimination of regulations seen as unfriendly to business (Jessop, 2002; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Peck, 2004). Neoliberalization also involves displacing state governance to international bodies, private firms, and local government, albeit each at different times and in different ways (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). The process of neoliberalization thus leaves many gaps in services, regulations, and social protections in its wake. Displacement to the local is what many refer to as devolution, which effectively places the responsibility for filling these gaps on smaller-scale institutions, which may be counties, cities, or individual school districts. Because neoliberalization in many respects involves roll-backs and devolution of existing institutions rather than the imposition of new pre-conceived institutions, those institutions that emerge are necessarily undetermined and, thus, variable (Larner and Craig, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002). How and for whom the gaps created through the process of neoliberalization are filled therefore determines the character of neoliberal forms.

In this article we explore how FTS is navigating the liminal terrain of public and private initiative, particularly the ways in which it interfaces with neoliberalism as both a material and discursive project. The paper is based on a review of national FTS programmatic literature and exploratory research on K-12 FTS programs in California. This exploratory research included examination of two different FTS databases developed by the National Farm-to-School Network and the California-based Community Alliance with Family Farmers, reviews of reports and assessments on existing California FTS programs, informal discussions with FTS activists, and participant observation at FTS meetings and workshops, many of which described how existing programs

are working. We focused this research on the districts and schools that have implemented farm-to-cafeteria programs in some form, although FTS encompasses a broader range of activities.¹

We realize that these programs are in pilot phases – few districts have come close to wholly supplanting traditional school food with locally purchased food – and our purpose is not to evaluate them. Rather, we wish to raise larger issues about the overall conceptualizations of FTS that we think bear consideration as these programs continue to develop. While most of our empirical findings reflect how FTS is being conceptualized and operationalized in California, many of the issues they reflect are relevant to FTS programs in general.

First, we discuss why FTS programs have become so popular and the ways in which they are galvanizing and potentially politically powerful. Second, we review the political emergence of school food programs, placing FTS programs in historical and conceptual context. Third, we examine some of the key ways that FTS differs from traditional school food programs and how these differences are creating neoliberal forms and practices, irrespective of the intentions of those putting these programs together. Finally, since neoliberalism is not only a political economic project but also one that instills particular ideas of what it means to be a good citizen, we discuss how FTS programs are employing some of the rhetoric of neoliberal governance in ways that go against the grain of efforts to improve social equity.

Something for everyone: The political power of farm-to-school

FTS programs have garnered the attentions and energies of people in a diverse array of social locations in the food system and are serving as a sort of touchstone for many in the alternative agrifood movement, in part because they serve the needs of different groups of people. According to Vallianatos et al.,

FTS can be broadly defined as the ability to connect schools with local and regional farmers to benefit both sets of participants. FTS initiatives connect school food services with local farmers in partnerships that are intended to bring healthier, fresher food to school meals programs while at the same time supporting local farmers by providing an additional source of income and a relatively secure market (2004: 415).

One of the reasons that FTS has captured so much excitement is that it brings together at least three groups of advocates whose concerns and activities had previously been quite separate, namely those involved in alternative agriculture, anti-hunger, and public health and

nutrition. Under the banner of community food security, FTS draws on the aspirations of all three in ways that promise fruitful synergies.²

The desire to get healthier food into schools has converged with many of the goals of alternative agrifood movements in the US. For example, advocates of alternative agriculture hope that FTS will provide more reliable markets for small-scale, often organic farmers by enhancing the development of local food systems. Direct marketing is seen as critical to the survival of more ecologically oriented farms, particularly insofar as the growth of the organic industry has squeezed smaller – and ostensibly more sustainable – growers out of retail establishments (Guthman, 2004). Moreover, unlike other direct marketing possibilities, FTS is potentially much more stable, especially if farmers can lock in multi-year contracts. In these ways, the idea of forming direct, embedded relationships with nearby school districts seems a reasonable means to improve farm income. Given that alternative agrifood institutions have prioritized entrepreneurial approaches as solutions to food-system problems (Allen et al., 2003), the emphasis on marketing in FTS programs constitutes another point of congruence with the alternative agrifood movement.

Anti-hunger advocates hope that FTS programs can improve political support for the now-flagging free and reduced-price lunch programs as entitlement programs come under attack. For, even though the school lunch program is one of the few remaining federal entitlement programs to survive the cutbacks in social welfare programs, it tends to be under-enrolled and underutilized so that schools are not even getting benefits for which they are eligible (Rimkus et al., 2004).

As for public health advocates, they see FTS as a way to improve the nutritional intake of children, as, for instance, salad bars supplement, if not supplant, the fast food menus that have become a regular feature of school lunch programs. For example, managers of the Davis Unified School District salad bar program reported that children's consumption of fruits and vegetables had increased dramatically compared to the amount they consumed in the hot lunch program, far exceeding the USDA minimum requirements (Brillinger et al., 2003).

In addition to the particular interests of these different groups, FTS is potentially politically powerful due to the scope of people it reaches, the fundamental nature of the issues it addresses, and the fact that school lunch is something many school-age children encounter every day. Nationwide, schools serve 6.5 billion meals each year, affecting 27 million children and their parents, as well as teachers, school administrators, food-service workers, and food producers and processors. School food programs are also accessible to children in all income categories, unlike CSA and organic foods, which have

been shown to privilege relatively wealthy eaters (Guthman, 2003b; Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002). And, unlike farmers markets or CSA, school food programs engage children five days a week rather than once a week, so exposure to alternative agrifood products and processes is continuous rather than intermittent. Beyond this, FTS programs are also an example of “scaling up.” That is, rather than just providing an alternative to the system, the FTS movement is working within existing institutions and holds significant promise in this regard (Rimkus et al., 2004). Many food activists hope that changing the procurement practices of buyer institutions with substantial economic muscle will push producers to alter production practices to those that are more sustainable and socially just. The potential of FTS to reverberate through more “industrial” commodity chains might provide the example and impetus for other institutional buyers, such as hospitals and prisons, to change their practices, as well.

Thus, FTS is also getting the attention of those seeking fundamental change in the food system. According to Gottlieb, the “explosion of interest in alternative school-food programs suggested that a social and ecological approach to sustainability in the school-food universe (with implications for broader food-system issues) could be identified” (2001: 265). FTS programs also provide practical advantages for advocates working toward food-system change in that they can work within the protectorate of a public funding stream that already exists and is relatively secure. This has huge practical advantages, given the funding contortions that NGOs have to go through in order to get competitive funding for their work.

Not only have FTS programs garnered wide-ranging support, it would be difficult to argue against them on principle. Since school food issues are bound up with ethical questions around family life, the purpose and scope of public education, the politics of race, and the production of consumers and citizens of tomorrow, FTS programs are likely to interest people from all sides of the political spectrum. Discursively, FTS is a slam-dunk; it is hard to malign an objective of providing nutritious food to children. Indeed, this objective has been a matter of American public policy since the beginning of the century.

The political emergence of school food programs

Both traditional school food programs and FTS programs arose out of concerns with the same two issues: the nutrition of school-age children and markets for farmers. The fact that they operate differently cannot be understood outside of a broader consideration of federal food and agricultural policy, coupled with the deepen-

ing fiscal crisis of the state that has resulted from neoliberalization.

School food programs have been part of the American psyche and public budget for a very long time. The earliest school food programs date to the 1700s, although it was not until the 1930s that the US federal government started school food programs to ameliorate the twin conditions of farm surpluses and malnutrition during the Great Depression (Roberts, 2002). In 1946 the National School Lunch Act became law, rationalized as a national security measure based on the notion that malnourished people would not be efficient workers or soldiers (Gottlieb, 2001). This Act, which remains in effect today, has enabled schools to provide children with at least one reasonably nutritious meal five days a week, for which the schools receive reimbursements and donated commodities from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The Act has benefited both farmers and children. The National School Lunch Program has provided support to farmers in the form of government commodity purchases that reduce surpluses and thereby prop up the prices farmers receive for their products on the open market. The school lunch program was a later extension of the New Deal farm policies that were designed to support farm prices to keep farmers in business. The school lunch program has also provided an important form of support for low-income children because it has functioned as an entitlement program in that reimbursements to the schools are based on the family income level of participating students, and are tiered at free, reduced, and full-price lunch. To be eligible for free lunches, for example, family income must be less than 130% of federal poverty line; to be eligible for reduced price lunches, family income must be less than 185% of poverty level (USDA/FNS, 2004). Particularly since the 1996 welfare "reforms," low income families are increasingly relying on programs such as school lunch which require relatively less documentation (Winicki, 2003).

Impetus for instituting changes in school food programs has come from at least two sources. First is a concern with the nutritional makeup of school lunches. The second is the budget slashing that has been part and parcel of the process of neoliberalization. Nutritional issues first became prominent in the late 1980s. In 1988, the US Surgeon General released a report that for the first time made a clear connection between dietary factors and chronic, preventable health problems, and stated that school food programs should be based on principles of good nutrition (Koop, 1988). New dietary guidelines were developed, and a 1992 study showed that, while school lunches met the guidelines for vitamins and minerals, they greatly exceeded the recommendations for fat, saturated fat, and sodium (Roberts, 2002). In part this is due to the fact that school food programs have served

as an outlet for commodities judged to be in surplus by USDA. The continuation of farm support, despite the neoliberal dogma of letting the market work, has led to systematic overproduction of certain commodities.³ As a result, subsidized foods have been available to school food programs based on economic rather than nutritional criteria. For example, in 1962, orange juice was selected as a surplus commodity available to school food programs, but when a freeze reduced the surplus, orange juice was removed from the school-foods list, despite its nutritional value (Gottlieb, 2001). Typically, 20% of food service budgets come from such commodities, because they can be obtained at below market prices, despite growing concern that over-feeding of supported commodities, such as processed meat and processed cheese, is at cross-purposes to health and nutrition (Sims, 1998). In other words, while the original purpose of having school lunch programs was that children were not getting enough food, now there is concern that they are getting too much of the wrong foods.

Concerns about nutritional quality have coincided with a deepening fiscal crisis in public education over the past 20 years. California schools, once considered among the best in the country, have fared particularly badly because of Proposition 13, which rolled back and froze property tax rates for property held by 1978. Per pupil spending has declined precipitously since then (Carroll et al., 2005).⁴ To shore up public funding bases, many school districts have put in vending machines, contracted with fast-food chains, and signed pouring rights contracts with soft drink companies – increasing sales of "competitive" foods allowed by federal law.⁵ According to the 2000 California High School Fast Food Survey, 95% of California school districts reported selling fast foods. This strategy to use school food provisioning as a profit center has also been associated with declining health among the nation's youth. It is widely believed that having soda and fast food is contributing to rapid increases in the rates of childhood obesity and type-2 diabetes (Critser, 2003; Nestle, 2002). In addition, the a la carte menus provided through fast food franchises are more popular than the school lunch program among students, resulting in declining participation in the federal lunch program even among income-eligible students. Reduced volume has forced these programs to continue to cut costs in order to remain afloat. Many schools that continue to participate in the federal program have found it to be more economical to buy "heat and serve" meals from national distributors than to provide meals prepared and cooked on the premises, thus in effect emulating the products of the fast-food franchises.

A number of efforts have been initiated recently to rectify these kinds of problems in the school food system. At least 38 states have introduced legislation to improve

school nutrition, 15 of which are addressing the issue of whether children should have access to soft drinks in vending machines (La Corte, 2005). In 2001, California lawmakers passed legislation proposed by State Senator Martha Escutia to establish health standards for food served to public-school children. California Senate Bill 19 specifies fat and sugar content limits for elementary school food and regulates the sale of unhealthy food and beverage items in all public schools. After being amended to apply mainly to elementary schools, the so-called Pupil Nutrition, Health and Achievement Act was passed and signed by the governor, and took effect in January 2004.⁶ In addition, several school districts have passed soda bans in their schools, including the Los Angeles Unified School District Board which unanimously voted to ban soft drinks in all LAUSD schools, not just elementary schools, although recently sports drinks have been exempted from the ban.

As potentially consequential as these regulatory actions might be, it is the FTS programs that have emerged as the cutting edge to improve the state of school food service. Today, approximately 400 school districts in 22 states nationwide have a FTS project underway, of which about 30 are in California (National Farm to School Program, n.d.b; Vallianatos et al., 2004). The apparent beginning was in Hartford, Connecticut, where a program called Farm Fresh Start was initiated in 1994–1995 with the goal of increasing local produce in the school lunch program. That same year, the US Department of Defense Personnel Support Center, working together with the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and the Agricultural Marketing Service, began buying and delivering fresh fruits and vegetables to schools. 1997 emerged as a watershed year in the world of FTS. It was then that the Community Food Security Coalition adopted its "Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids" initiative, the goal of which was to expand FTS purchases in school cafeterias as well as promote education on nutrition and environment (Gottlieb, 2001). In that same year, Santa Monica, California started a pilot Farmers Market Salad Bar that has since become the model for many such programs.

The approach has been endorsed by the federal government. For example, the US Department of Agriculture developed two FTS programs in 1997 in Florida and North Carolina as an effort to support local, minority farmers. Then in 2002, the Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (that year's farm bill) gave further legitimacy to FTS by encouraging institutions participating in the school lunch and breakfast programs to purchase locally produced foods, to the maximum extent practicable (Rimkus et al., 2004). The USDA also has developed a "Small Farms/School Meals" initiative that encourages small farmers to sell fresh fruits and vegetables to schools and schools to buy this wholesome produce from small farmers (USDA/FNS, 2000), although it has never

been funded. Likewise, funds to help school food service personnel develop relations with farmers and equip kitchens was included in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act signed into law in June 2004, although appropriations were never made to support the program.

Aside from the basic funding embedded in the National School Lunch Program, funding for FTS initiatives has come from non-federal sources. In California, for example, FTS has received support from the 2002 "Buy California" initiative and the Department of Health's California Nutrition Network. FTS programs have become popular with private foundations as well, and some of these funders have initiated individual FTS programs in California.

The newly emerging political and financial support for FTS will, no doubt, provide additional impetus for its growth. Yet, because FTS has grown from the ground up, support for it is necessarily uneven and site specific. We would argue that this idiosyncratic site specificity is reflective of neoliberal approaches to providing services and is one of the key ways that FTS diverges from the uniform, national traditional school food program.

Same but different: School food with neoliberal flavor

The farmers are able to sell fresh produce for local schools for use in their meal programs, and children get the benefit of adding fresh fruits and vegetables to their diets. It is a win-win situation for everyone involved – Shirley Watings, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, USDA (USDA/FNS, 2000).

Traditional school food programs and FTS programs have nearly identical goals. They are (1) to provide children access to nutritious food to ameliorate health problems, and (2) to provide markets for growers' commodities. By way of illustration we note that the purpose of the 1946 National School Lunch Act was to (a) "safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children" and (b) "encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food" (Gunderson, 1971). Similarly, the purpose of the Farm to School Program is to partner local farmers with nearby schools so that: (a) "children can enjoy tasty fruits and vegetables, while connecting with farms – the source of their food"; and (b) "farmers can develop an additional source of income" (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.b: para. 4). These goal statements illustrate that both traditional and FTS programs are designed to improve the finances of farmers and the nutrition of school children.

The differences lie, then, not in basic purpose, but in methods for achieving the purpose (Table 1). At their

Table 1. Comparison of traditional and FTS programs

	Traditional school food programs	Farm-to-school programs
Purposes	1. Safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children 2. Encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food	1. Provide children access to nutritious food to ameliorate health problems 2. Provide markets for growers' commodities
Motivating concerns	1. Market for farmers' products (surplus commodities) 2. Poor nutrition of school children (hunger; nutrient deficiencies)	1. Market for farmers' products (local farmers) 2. Poor nutrition of school children (obesity, type-2 diabetes, excess fat and sugar, nutrient deficiencies)
Food qualities preferred	Cheap, easily available	Local, fresh
Prototypical forms of food	Hot meals; surplus meats, cheese, eggs, and processed fruits and vegetables	Salad bar; fresh fruits or vegetables; locally canned or processed fruits and vegetables
Geographic focus	National	Individual school or school district
Intended benefits for growers	Propping up prices for surplus commodities	Stable markets for local growers
Intended benefits for children	Provision of nutritious food, especially to children at nutritional risk due to low incomes	Provision of healthy, fresh food to children regardless of income; learning about farms and farmers
Who does the work	Food service staff	Food service staff, NGO staff, volunteers
Type of work	Food preparation and assembly, procurement from central sources	Food preparation and assembly, procurement from multiple sources
Financial support	Secure, federally funded; foods donated or subsidized	Variable, often dependent on private funding; usually food is not discounted or donated

programmatic core, FTS programs emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables over processed food; local over national vendors; small over large farmers. These differences also reflect an overarching reorientation (perhaps inadvertent) from public to private and national to local. Therefore, while some of the operational differences enumerated in the table are merely epiphenomena of these more fundamental differences, they nonetheless contribute to the process of neoliberalization. In what follows we highlight those aspects we believe to be key.

Who provides the funding?

As we have discussed, traditional school food programs, including the national school lunch program, have operated as entitlement programs, so the cost of providing meals has been subsidized by the federal government both through reimbursements for school lunches and through providing foods at below-market prices. While school food programs have always been expected to be self-supporting within this subsidized framework, in the environment of cutbacks in public education funding there is now pressure for many school food programs to

generate revenue above and beyond their costs of operation. In some areas, school food programs are expected to operate as "profit centers," thus the justification for having fast food concessions and vending machines.

FTS programs are thus emerging in an economic environment that is much more penurious with public resources than when federal school food programs were originally developed. FTS organizers have had to adapt to this economic situation. For example, the description of a workshop at a December 2004 FTS conference read, "How to improve student nutrition (and profit!) by including fresh, local fruits and vegetables in the school lunch program" (CAFF, 2004). In addition to needing to turn a profit, FTS programs have substantial start-up costs for facilities and equipment to transport, store, prepare, and serve fresh food. This is because so much existing school food is provisioned on a "heat and serve" basis that many schools no longer have the capacity (i.e., facilities, equipment, and staff) to provide food prepared on the premises. Thus, FTS programs are often under a double pressure to generate revenue at the same time that they are incurring additional start-up costs (even though the actual food cost may be lower). Many FTS programs therefore

require financial support above and beyond the formula public funds that pay for the national school food program.

Instead, FTS programs are supported by a combination of private and public funders (“partnerships”), with funds usually doled out through a competitive grant-making process. In California, virtually all existing FTS programs have thus far been subsidized by some combination of special, one-time competitive funding from public agencies and private foundations. For example, the Ventura program received a grant for a refrigerated truck from the Chez Panisse Foundation and its food director is paid for through a grant from the California Nutrition Network and tobacco settlement funds. Occidental College’s Center for Food and Justice received a nearly \$700,000 Kellogg Foundation grant in 2002, which helped provide seed money for several FTS programs throughout the state.⁷

One question is whether these programs can sustain themselves without increases in regular, stable funding. That FTS programs exist at all is due primarily to the largesse of private foundations. Yet foundations change priorities and generally do not provide long-term funding to the same programs. Many FTS programs, particularly new ones, would be in jeopardy if the economy continues to decline and funding becomes even scarcer. The key point here is that while public funding has been regular, universal, and relatively secure, private funding comes from a competitive (market) process that is idiosyncratic, particular, and unreliable over the long term. Traditional school programs, that is, have been supported by federal programs that have subsidized consumers and producers. To date, there is no comparable stable source of support for FTS programs.

Who does the work?

In traditional school lunch programs, food was acquisitioned, prepared, and served by food service staff. While not all of these jobs have been union jobs, at the very least employees received certain protections and benefits. It is also worth noting that early federal food programs provided jobs for unemployed women under the Work Projects Administration (WPA) (Roberts, 2002). More recently, many schools have been forced to bring in prepared food from major institutional food suppliers (e.g., Sysco) or outsource their entire food service to address cost issues (and these institutional suppliers are non-union). Of course, many of the budget cuts themselves have been the result of attacks on the cost of public sector employees under the developing neoliberal mode of governance.

Existing FTS programs are already coming up against this problem, as there are few workers and facilities to actually do the purchasing and preparatory work that farm-fresh food requires. Ironically, one solution to this

problem has been for schools to request processed, packaged food for the FTS programs in an effort to save labor costs. Another solution has been to rely on the services provided by the non-profit organizations that are currently involved in school food. Some of these NGOs do a significant amount of the distributional and administrative work that school districts are not in a position to handle. For example, the staff person who organizes Marin Organic’s FTS program is paid out of funds from the Ecoliteracy Project; the bookkeeper and forager of Gold Coast Collaborative (GCC), a group of farmers that provides food to three different California schools districts, is paid from a grant to Community Alliance with Family Farmers, a major California-based sustainable agriculture organization. It is worth noting that early assessments of the Davis FTS program found that it was complicated by union objections to having consultants (non-employees) working in the program. Apparently, the union and its pre-existing job descriptions were interfering with the flexibility needed for FTS (Brillinger et al., 2003). Albeit unintentionally, the labor practices of FTS programs seem to align with the flexible labor practices of neoliberal efforts to de-fang unions and roll back pay and benefits through the use of contract and flexible labor. They may not meld well with institutions or impulses that value the social protection of workers.

Another solution to the labor problems has been to rely on parent and community volunteers (Ohmart, 2002). However, volunteers tire and tend to move on as their children move through the school system. Not only are volunteers not a long-term, stable source of labor, reliance on volunteer labor can undercut the bargaining power of employees. Volunteerism itself has often been used to justify cuts in state services, thereby furthering the process of neoliberalization (Hyatt, 2001).

Which farms benefit?

The National School Lunch Program, as we have noted, has been supported by federal commodity programs that have often disproportionately benefited large-scale growers. FTS is premised on the idea that small or mid-sized “family scale” farms can instead be the suppliers of school food programs and will reap benefits through the market rather than through subsidies. While it would be premature to draw conclusions, it is not clear that the FTS market model can provide a viable source of income for such farmers. For example, of six farmers interviewed for Ohmart’s (2002) report on the Davis program, FTS was generating between 1 and 10% of their income, with most at the bottom end. Some farmers have already been asked to charge schools less than they do regular customers. This is because, according to Ohmart, the profit-loss calculus is the measure by which school districts judge the success of FTS programs.

Nor is it clear that small farms will be the ones to benefit from FTS. It is telling, for example, that Earthbound Farms, the largest organic vegetable producer probably in the world, recently approached at least two different school districts in the Central Coast region of California to start an FTS partnership and even offered to pay for an additional food service employee. This raises the question of how to balance the regular provision of fresh, nutritious food to school children with the provision of markets for small-scale growers. It also points to the ways that entrepreneurialism works, often with the large overtaking the small, as has happened in the organic industry (Guthman, 2004).

How is it procured?

One of the ways that FTS advocates propose to tip the market scales in favor of small farmers and school food programs is to cut out the “middleman.” It is hoped that cutting out market intermediaries will simultaneously solve problems of insufficient revenue for producers and high costs for consumers. Traditional school food programs procure food from a limited number of market intermediaries, including the federal government, not only to reduce costs, but also to constrain the accounting and insurance requirements associated with multiple vendors. This operational style contrasts markedly with FTS, the very idea of which is to purchase directly from local, small farms, multiplying the number of potential vendors but in doing so cutting out the nefarious “middleman.” It is ironic, then that the biggest operational challenge for FTS programs is actually getting the produce from the farm to the school. FTS programs have found that it is not as simple as having many different farmers deliver to schools – there is too much uncertainty on both sides and the transportation costs and logistics are formidable.⁸

Despite the rhetoric of cutting out the middleman, many FTS programs have had to recreate intermediaries for the programs to work and, in some cases, FTS programs have been created by new sorts of “middlemen.”⁹ In California thus far, FTS programs employ a wide variety of procurement practices, from establishing direct contracts with farms (including a CSA-box model), to arranging gleaning and delivery by a third party, to the use of farm and farmers market foragers (who take orders and arrange deliveries), to the use of traditional distributors. The most lauded model to emerge is farmer collaborations, such as the GCC, made up of farmers from the Santa Barbara/Ventura county areas who sell to three different California school districts. What is significant about GCC is that it is both a project of CAFF, a non-profit organization that is effectively subsidizing FTS programs by taking on many of their distribution functions and represents an ironic road to farmer cooperation

that has been so lacking historically. That some of these intermediaries are regular distributors, some are independent agents, and some are non-profits providing these services as part of this program should serve as a reminder that market intermediaries provide a valuable and needed service. It is not the market intermediary per se that is the problem; it is their often usurious, even predatory practices.

For schools, working with multiple vendors is particularly onerous in an era of prescribed cost-cutting. In fact, a study of direct purchasing of produce for schools concluded that obstacles to local purchasing would be reduced if local growers and producers would work together so that school food service ordering and payment could occur through a single representative (Gregoire and Storhbehn, 2002). In addition, the middleman is often a company that provides employment for many people whose potential loss of income is by definition not win-win. That is, the language of “win-win” erases who loses – and there are always losers. In its emphasis on benefiting farmers, FTS programs may tend to overlook the needs of other economic agents in the food system. A lack of attention to non-farmer stakeholder groups, such as school service staff and administration, is now seen as a major operational obstacle for FTS (Rimkus et al., 2004).

Which schools benefit?

Traditional school food programs have at times been inefficient and unappetizing, to be sure, but as public institutions they have come with a certain guarantee of equal access and protection under the law (or at least the possibility to litigate/adjudicate on behalf of these goals). FTS programs, in contrast, have emerged in highly idiosyncratic ways and will continue to do so, in the absence of standard, sustained support, with significant equity consequences. Communities and districts with the greatest resources – personal, political, financial – are most likely to develop into the most successful and longest-lasting programs.

For example, two of the programs often cited as exemplary both have particular, one might say unique, sets of resources and circumstances. Santa Monica-Malibu was the first district in California to adopt a comprehensive FTS program and Bob Gottlieb is credited with initiating it. Bob Gottlieb is a professor at Occidental College who has specialized in excavating the social justice aspects of American environmentalism and more recently has focused on food and justice issues. Exemplary in his bridging of academia and activism, Gottlieb, a parent in said district, first came up with the idea of purchasing from farmers and had the wherewithal to approach the school food service director, who was skeptical at first. The program has also benefited from the many

celebrities who live within the district, including Kenny G, who had his personal chef promote the program.

The impetus for Berkeley Unified, a somewhat more diverse district than Santa Monica–Malibu, came largely from the “foodie” community symbolically led by maverick chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse. Waters had already experimented with the Edible School Yard and began the Chez Panisse Foundation, to “transform ... public education by using food traditions to teach, nurture, and empower young people” (Chez Panisse Foundation, n.d.: para. 1). In addition, Berkeley houses the well-endowed Ecoliteracy Project, which initiated a food systems project in 1998, and has since funded several initiatives in this arena. Unlike many other districts, however, Berkeley began with a comprehensive school food policy, inclusive of food security concerns, that has broad support in the community and has only recently moved into FTS.

Compton is one of the few “inner city” districts to have a FTS program. Whereas only 27% of Santa Monica’s students participate in the federal lunch program, 75% of Compton’s students do – and 95% are eligible. Yet they, too, had a unique circumstance in the background of their dynamic leader, Tracie Thomas, who was the assistant schools services director at Santa Monica, where she was inspired to experiment with Compton. In addition, she had management experience in the fast-foods industry, where she learned how to run efficient food services (MacVean, 2004). Unlike Berkeley and Malibu, Compton Unified has received no external funds to support the start-up costs of the salad bar program. According to Thomas (2004), the district was able to pay for its salad bar only by getting more children to participate in the federally subsidized breakfast program, since this provides the FTS program with additional revenue. However, this has meant extra costs for the Compton program that are not incurred by schools with lower rates of subsidized lunches. This is because school food programs must meet federal nutritional guidelines if they are to receive subsidies for free and reduced lunch. The Compton salad bar is completely reimbursable under the federal lunch program because it includes meat/meat alternatives – obtained from federal commodity programs – as well as milk and bread. In Compton, this has meant hiring an extra person to observe the salad bar to make sure students are taking what the guidelines require, as we learned in a conference workshop. It has also meant serving things like commodity-surplus cubed bologna in their salad bar. In contrast, in districts with low federal lunch participation there is more flexibility to serve food closer to the alternative agriculture imaginary. And if labor is one of the key obstacles to providing such food, it is easier in affluent districts

because of the availability of parent volunteers. In effect, then, these wealthier schools are substituting very fresh, organic salad bars for fast food franchises, while “inner city” schools are less able to circumvent the sometimes anachronistic rules of the National School Food Program.

Who controls? Who governs?

Traditional school food programs, as we have noted, have been governed by federal policy and implemented at a statewide level, which if nothing else has guaranteed that these programs have been regulated with the broad public benefit in mind, notwithstanding the influence of commodity interests. Agrifood activists, however, have largely embraced the discourses of agrarian populism and bioregionalism that have so strongly shaped the sustainable food and agricultural movements, including the turn to the local as the ideal scale at which food provisioning should be organized (Allen, 2004; Guthman, 2004). And so it goes with FTS programs: in a list of four ways that school districts implement FTS programs provided by the National Farm to School Program, three emphasize the importance of local rather than health.¹⁰

The turn to the local rests on the presumption that social justice and ecological sustainability can be achieved by proximity (Kloppenborg et al., 1996). It also is based on the idea that governance is most effective and accountable when done at the local level. Although alternative agrifood activists, including FTS advocates, largely reject the notion of governance by private international bodies such as the WTO, the populist localism they do embrace happens to resonate with the neoliberal devolution of responsibility and accountability to the local. In the case of FTS programs such resonances are particularly troubling because school food programs are public entitlement programs designed to ameliorate the effects of poverty, while devolution has serious consequences for equity. Devolution also abdicates responsibility on the part of the federal government and places it in the hands of those who happen to reside in a community, regardless of whether they have the will or wherewithal to act.

As discussed above, individual FTS programs such as those in Berkeley and Santa Monica have been developed almost solely by the initiative of major movers and shakers, albeit with some snowball effects. As a result, only certain districts, it appears, have garnered the initial interest and resources to make FTS work, while most districts have not. In the current framework, there is no reason for this pattern to change. Where resources and desire are abundant, programs will flourish; elsewhere they may never get off the ground or be of poor quality, no matter how much children may need them. Not incidentally, to the extent that labor arrangements are individually determined by specific schools or school

districts, localist FTS programs also weaken the bargaining power of workers in the programs. That is, the localization of specific labor agreements undercuts the power of collective bargaining by large numbers of workers to secure wage and benefit packages. While local participation in decision making may be important to ensure that programs are culturally sensitive and inclusive of place-specific stakeholders, if the goal of FTS is to provide all schoolchildren with excellent nutrition, standards, and resources, decision-making cannot be only local because this can only produce inconsistent and ultimately unequal results.

In sum, what is different about traditional school food programs and FTS is not the purposes but the ways the purposes are conceptualized and implemented. FTS promotes fresh fruits and vegetables rather than surplus commodities such as cheese and meat. It sources from local rather than distant producers and, in several of the cases we examined, attempts to eliminate market intermediaries. It also depends on flexible labor (whether paid or volunteer) and non-secure funding streams. In some ways, FTS is caught between the declining social protection of the welfare state, but with many of its rigidities intact, and the flexibility and innovative possibilities of neoliberalism, but with its unfortunate social justice consequences. In addition, the fact that FTS has attracted private support (albeit variable and uncertain) is in keeping with the local-governance and partnership-based modes of policy development typical of latter day neoliberalization (Peck and Tickell, 2002). In these senses, the reason that FTS programs look like neoliberalism is because they are neoliberalism, the emergence of a new configuration of state-society relations engendered by a hostile roll back of the Keynesian state.

To be sure, the educational environment is becoming decidedly marketized and FTS programs have had to operate within this context. Better than anyone, FTS advocates know the characteristics and consequences of insecure funding streams and the role and tenuous nature of “charismatic” leaders and they are working within this bind. These same constraints have also led, however, to the employment of some of the more troubling discourses of neoliberalism, as we discuss in the next section.

Neoliberal governance: Measurement and choice

As a concept, school districts buying their foods locally from local farmers clearly represents a “win-win” opportunity. Yet, with numerous logistical, administrative, and financial barriers, the devil truly is in the details (Azuma and Fisher, 2001: 13).

We beg to differ, seeing the devil in the almost inevitable production of neoliberal forms as activists and advocates rightfully attempt to fill in the growing gaps in

state regulation and entitlement. Yet, neoliberalization is not only a political economic project, but also one that instills particular ideas about citizenship and subjectivity to produce hegemony for the political economic project – what some refer to as governmentality. Discourses of personal responsibility and individual success, consumerism, and choice all figure in the production of neoliberal subjectivity. FTS advocates employ variants of these discourses – often strategically to gain access to funding streams and garner political clout. Our concern here is that these nods to individual performance and measurement, and an embrace of consumerism and choice, endorse and may further ways of producing people as neoliberal subjects.

Performance and stigmatization

Paradoxically, neoliberal governmentality has entailed new forms of state intervention in private lives (Duggan, 2003). While there is nothing new about the use of social controls to enforce behaviors, today, in the name of “accountability,” individual and institutional performance is increasingly measured, tracked, and surveilled – often aided and abetted by new information technology (Power, 1997). For example, rather than producing knowledge through traditional forms of education and socialization, schools and other institutions are simply “held accountable” for meeting what appear to be rather random objectives such as standardized test scores. Good performance is awarded with carrots (incentives), while poor performance is punished with sticks (sanctions). These sorts of mechanisms help separate the deserving from the undeserving to justify the drastic inequalities associated with economic neoliberalization. This accountability is imposed without a concomitant provision of resources to help effect the expected outcomes. In our observations, advocates of FTS programs often invoke neoliberal frames of academic performance and obesity as justifications for their programs.

In regard to academic performance, the “Crunch Lunch Manual,” a how-to guide for FTS based on the Davis experience, states that, “The Farmers Market Salad Bar program is based on the premise that good nutrition and a healthy diet are related to positive academic and behavioral student performance in the classroom” (Brillinger et al., 2003: 1). In that same manual, the authors highlight a study that found that students who participate in an educational framework, called Environment as an Integrating Concept – quite similar to the curricular elements of FTS programs – “have higher performance on standardized tests in all subject areas, reduced discipline and classroom management problems, and increased enthusiasm for learning” (ibid.: 2).¹¹ Likewise, Evans (2004), nutrition education consultant with the California Department of Education, discussed

at length the benefit of FTS for academic performance as keynote speaker at a recent FTS conference. In a survey of 9,000 schools, she said, 87% of principals said the primary reason for having school gardens was academic achievement, and 73% said they had seen improved academic performance from their students, as measured through test scores. The links between good nutrition and children's abilities to learn are well-established; the problem is that standardized test scores have become the key measure of school accountability despite that they are both rigid and spurious. The concession to standardized testing on the part of FTS advocates is especially troubling given its centrality to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which punishes "underperforming" and therefore undeserving schools and their students by withholding public funds.¹²

Obesity rhetoric is another trope of neoliberal governance that separates the deserving from the undeserving by effectively valorizing those who in their thinness apparently embody more self-control in a world where fast, junky food is everywhere (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006). FTS advocates nonetheless employ rhetoric about the "epidemic" of obesity. All three sessions at a December 2004 FTS conference (CAFF, 2004) began with the issue of obesity, and virtually every FTS publication does the same. The USDA has taken on this cause, as well. Soon every school that participates in the school lunch program will have to have a wellness policy. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it is striking that the USDA is justifying the idea of wellness precisely in the language of which we have been speaking: "put[ting] responsibility at the local level, recogniz[ing] the critical role of schools in curbing the epidemic of childhood overweight, and provid[ing] an opportunity for school districts to create an environment conducive to healthy lifestyle choices" (Miller, 2005: slide 3).

While we do not dispute that diet and exercise-related increases in childhood obesity are cause for concern, the extensive use of obesity discourse is problematic because it gives credence to the ways in which obesity is increasingly measured, surveilled, and punished in specious ways. Already some individual schools have implemented "weigh-ins" for children and are putting the results on report cards, and at least three states (Texas, Georgia, and New York) have considered legislation to make reporting of Body Mass Index a requirement for all public schools. These practices of measurement and surveillance have the potential to increase the stigmatization of and shame felt by overweight children, thereby punishing them for not measuring up to the standards of the ideal neoliberal citizen. While the employment of performance and accountability discourse is perhaps primarily strategic in order to garner interest in and funding for FTS

programs, it nevertheless aligns with some rather pernicious neoliberal constructs.

Consumerism and choice

We are interested in students as customers and we are running it like a business. The customer is right ... our students dictate what we do ... we are teaching our children to make choices – Tracie Thomas, Compton USD, Food Security Summit, USC, June 2004.

FTS programs embrace consumer choice as a primary form of governance. Yet, as Dean states, learning how to make choices, "to be shaped guided and molded into one capable of exercising freedom," entails systems of domination including enhanced surveillance and punitiveness (1999: 165). This, he says, constitutes a neoliberal paradox. Nevertheless, rather than calling for the restructuring of what most would argue is an impaired school food system, FTS advocates look to choice as a mechanism for creating change, framing their programs in terms of the rights of children to have choices rather than in terms of their rights to nutritious food. For example, a common claim in support of FTS is that if children knew where their food came from and/or tasted food fresh from the garden they would make better choices in what they eat in school settings. Spearheaded by Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard, many FTS programs incorporate taste tests and food education as part of the curriculum. While we have little reason to controvert the tastiness of, say, fresh-picked Swiss chard (cooked with salt and olive oil), the assumption here is that change will come through changes in taste and consumer education. Indeed, despite the language of the "food system" and the focus on policy and institutions, the underlying theory of change is that by shifting what is supplied, "demand," as exercised in the marketplace, will follow.

Accordingly, FTS advocates often emphasize developing children as consumers. In a section on improving markets for family farmers, the National Farm to School Program packet reads, "And by showing the children that fresh local produce is delicious, FTS connections turn on the next generation of consumers to locally grown food" (National Farm to School Program, n.d.a: 4). We recognize that consumption choice has become a commonly understood mode of contemporary political action, and we support education in favor of ethical consumption. We hold, however, that the elision of the distinction between consumers as purchasers and consumers as eaters conflates citizenship and consumerism – a key neoliberal conceit, as Dean (1999) argues. The idea of consumer choice is especially appealing because it absolves people of the need to do anything else beyond selecting products for purchase.

This elision thus reinforces the idea that social change is simply a matter of individual will rather than something that must be organized and struggled over in collectivities (Allen and Kovach, 2000; Guthman, 2003a). Creating and making “better” individual choices does not necessarily add up to the task of changing the political-economic priorities and patterns that are at the heart of the problems with school food programs or with public schools in general, as the charter schools movement seems to suggest.

Conclusions

FTS programs are a rapidly developing institutional form with numerous benefits. Providing fresh fruits and vegetables to children at school will no doubt increase children’s consumption of these important foods. FTS programs have captured the imaginations of a wide spectrum of activists, who otherwise might find little overlap in priorities, and they are serving as focal points for galvanizing support around alternative agrifood goals. These programs also have a broad and deep reach, with the potential to affect many “ordinary” people in an everyday context. In developing these programs, however, virtually all FTS advocates employ discourses and practices that have a distinct neoliberal flavor.

In many ways, this is not surprising. FTS is, after all, part of the constellation of initiatives promoted by alternative agrifood movements that have for the most part accepted neoliberal notions of governance such as individualism, entrepreneurship, choice, and devolution (Allen, 2004). It is also a consequence – sometimes unintended, sometimes acknowledged – of working within the increasingly marketized educational environment. Moreover, like other alternative agrifood institution leaders, FTS advocates have to start somewhere, and they must take care to not alienate those in power positions in the institutions they are trying to change. In addition, sometimes the employment of notions such as accountability and choice are simply tactical choices for the purposes of fundraising, media advocacy, and “partnering.” The competitive nature of securing funding dictates that applicants utilize “hot” topics and discourses in their proposals. In a media-saturated world where one must appeal to “moral values” and/or find issues that “resonate,” it makes sense to utilize the ubiquitous news stories about obesity and test scores. Regardless, in their efforts to fill in the gaps created by political and economic neoliberalization and by employing its rhetoric, FTS advocates are essentially producing neoliberal forms and practices *de novo*, most notably those associated with contingent labor relation-

ships and private funding sources, and the spuriousness and unevenness that necessarily follow.

No doubt the constant struggle and fire fighting needed to establish FTS programs obscure the presence of alternatives to neoliberalism. Indeed, neoliberalization itself constrains the imagining of alternatives and the politics of the possible. As Peck and Tickell point out, discourses of neoliberalism are particularly compelling because of their “self-evident alignment with the primary contours of contemporary political economic power” (2002: 384). In this way, neoliberalism has become a “regime of truth” that justifies everything, including itself, with notions of progress and rationalization, and in so doing, reduces the political space that allows for questioning or reflexivity (Ostraukaite, 2002). The construction of FTS programs without regard to how neoliberalism constrains the politics of the possible may in fact aid in the “normalization” of neoliberal discourses, forms, and practices. This is particularly problematic in the case of FTS programs because it extends logics of competition and privatized management into schools, which have historically been public domains.

Fortunately, school food programs also provide a perfect site for opposition to neoliberalization. Resistance can be justified in terms that are traditional and well-established in the American psyche, such as the importance of universal education. School food programs have the potential to politicize and mobilize many otherwise alienated people, fostering critical thinking and political action. Innovative school food programs can be developed that pair the values of equity and universal access with the latest knowledge about the role of fruits and vegetables in a healthy diet. Rather than concede the inevitable disparities of devolution, public funding and state support should be used to effect improvement across the board for all children, not just those who happen to be in “progressive” or affluent schools. Schools are still public institutions funded by public monies, sanctioned by law, public policy, and public will. FTS advocates can seize the power in this and develop healthy school food programs that meet the needs of all children regardless of their class, circumstance, or political cachet. A step toward resisting neoliberalization could be to develop healthy food programs in schools where they are most needed, which is not necessarily where conducive circumstances readily materialize.

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Notes

1. Curriculum oriented programs such as school gardens, farm visits, nutrition education, and cooking classes as well as school food policies also come under the banner of FTS. Nevertheless, the cornerstone of FTS is the farm-to-cafeteria programs.
2. According to the Community Food Security Coalition, the definition of community food security is “all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources.”
3. Most of the farm supports go to major agribusiness players who now constitute the powerful farm lobby that both advocates for continuing these supports and influences the guidelines (Nestle, 2002). The persistence of federal support for farmers, particularly in the area of export subsidies, is clearly related to geopolitical ends (e.g., food aid as a bargaining chip), which particularly today trump the cost of these subsidies.
4. By way of illustration, in 1969–1970 California spent about \$400 per pupil above the national average; by 1999–2000 it spent \$600 below the national average (Carroll et al., 2005).
5. In 1972, Congress passed an amendment to the Child Nutrition Act that eliminated any existing restrictions on the sales of “competitive” foods in schools, defined as those that are sold during meal periods that compete with the federally reimbursable school meals. Despite challenges by the USDA and recommendations by the US Surgeon General and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), decisions regarding the availability of such food remains in the hands of state and local boards of education (Nestle, 2002).
6. Although the Bill was modified to not regulate food sold in high schools, it contained a pilot program to provide LEAF (Linking Education, Action, and Food) grants to middle and high schools willing to adopt nutrition policies paralleling the bill’s elementary school requirements. Several California school districts such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland are basing further changes on the intent of the bill.
7. The purpose of the grant was to improve children’s health and to aid California’s family farmers by expanding the market for local farm produce (Gerber, 2002). According to the Kellogg Foundation’s annual report, the grant was intended to “develop infrastructure and tools to expand and institutionalize the FTS program throughout California” (Kellogg Foundation, 2002).
8. Schools must also track things such as food production, student participation, and vendor quality, whereas farms are always affected by seasonality, weather, farmer whims, and

so forth, but have few, if any, reporting requirements, adding to the mismatch of institutional styles (Ohmart, 2002). A growing literature gives advice on the many things that are being done to ease these problems and we have little to add here.

9. This includes “DOD Fresh,” a program of the Department of Defense. In some states, DOD has been the major conduit for local produce, now providing services to other institutions besides military bases (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.a). Schools can use “commodity entitlement funds” in addition to school meal reimbursements to buy from DOD, and DOD will provide some of the procurement and quality control services that have been too costly for schools. In California, however, DOD is not set up to procure this way.
10. They point out that in regions with colder climates local food can be processed in season and served to children throughout the year. Yet it could hardly be argued that canned, frozen, or dried local foods would be more nutritious than processed non-local food or fresh non-local food.
11. See report for more details: State Education and Environment Roundtable (2000). *California Student Assessment Project: The Effects of Environment-Based Education on Student Achievement*. Accessed on June 1, 2005 at www.seer.org/pages/csap.pdf.
12. Apparently, NCLB is also affecting high performing schools that do not follow correct procedures. In February 2005, it was reported that up to 310 California schools, many of which reported exemplary test scores, were in danger of facing severe sanctions because participation rates among special education students were below the federal government recommendations. This example supports the point that the real purpose of NCLB is to gut public education (Sturrock, 2005).

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