



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on December 23, 2011

L.A. School District's Healthy Lunches Spur Junk Food "Black Market"

The Los Angeles Unified School District embraced First Lady Michelle Obama's "war on obesity" campaign earlier this year when school officials launched a program to phase out junk food and offer a "trail-blazing" new menu of black-bean burgers, quinoa salad, and a catalog of other "healthy" foods. But according to an article published by the Los Angeles Times, L.A. Unified's efforts to purge its school cafeterias of cheeseburgers and fries has in fact spawned an underground ring of junk food bootlegging.



The new menu, introduced this fall, was lauded as a revolutionary step toward eradicating the "growing epidemic" of obesity, diabetes, and other health issues percolating among America's youth. The *Times* reported that ever since the district radically altered its food menus — "think Caribbean meatballs and pad Thai, in place of nachos and strawberry milk" — uneaten lunches are finding a home in the bottom of school trash bins. However, writes the L.A. paper, not only is the food unpopular, poor logistics have also attributed to the program's hasty demise:

The district put considerable effort into getting its giant food-dispensing operation to prepare 650,000 more complicated and healthful yet palatable meals each day. But that's a big challenge, and the results have been mixed. Some entrees that came out fresh and yummy during last summer's taste test, when they were prepared under ideal conditions, have unsurprisingly not survived the test of mass production. In some cases, they've been served more than a week after the ideal date. Many students are throwing out lunches they find inedible, a waste not only of food but of taxpayer dollars. And some bring snacks to tide them over, mostly in the form of cheap junk food: chips and sodas.

Indeed, L.A. Unified's much-hyped new lunch menu has failed miserably, as principals in the district report widespread criticism and excessive food waste, with unopened milk cartons and untouched entrees and salads being heaved, en masse, into school dumpsters. Participation in school lunches has plunged by the thousands, as students are ditching the cafeteria and complaining of headaches, stomach pains, and even anemia.



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In another article published last week, the *Times* [described](#) how uproar over the new lunch menu has generated a flourishing “underground” market for chips, candy, fast-food burgers, and other banned foods. Iraides Renteria and Mayra Gutierrez, two students at Van Nuys High School, don’t even bother lining up for lunch anymore. Instead of waiting in the withering cafeteria lines for food, which Mayra calls “nasty, rotty stuff,” the two juniors smuggle in every day three bags of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and sodas. “This is our daily lunch,” Iraides told the *Times*. “We’re eating more junk food now than last year.”

Complaints about the food were so epidemic at Van Nuys High School that principal Judith Vanderbok pleaded in a letter to the food services director, “Please help! Bring back better food!” Ms. Vanderbok even went so far as to compare the program to Prohibition.

Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh compared the natural reaction of the L.A. education food “market” to how actual economic markets react to sudden changes. “Now the Los Angeles Unified School District, second largest in the country, it’s the largest to try the government-approved school lunch menu that was championed by Michele Obama,” Limbaugh [asserted](#). “The only problem is kids are refusing to eat the stuff.”

Honing in on the schools’ newly-developed underground commerce operation, Limbaugh criticized the district for the “black market” that has emanated in response to the revised lunch menu: “... And just like everywhere else in the free market, if people can find a way around what’s dictated to them they will do it, and a black market ends up being created... There is a mafia, there is an organized crime of alternate food at lunch!”

On Tuesday’s program, one caller asserted, “No matter what the government tries to do to squash [the free market], capitalism and free enterprise will survive.” “That’s an excellent point,” Limbaugh responded. “It actually was the free market triumphing over a command-and-control economy from the White House.”

The outspoken and often controversial Limbaugh also cited a daunting trend that has evolved in L.A. schools: Participation in the school lunch program has foundered to a mere 13 percent. “Eighty-seven percent of the students are finding lunch on the black market,” Limbaugh [averred](#). “Back-alley lunches. Look what the kids are learning at the Los Angeles Unified School District.”

Moreover, he exclaimed:

This is another thing. The school lunch, of course, is provided el freebo. The kids are refusing to eat it. Instead, there’s a black market for burgers, tacos, whatever. Where are they getting the money to buy this stuff on the black market, folks? Hmm? Hmm? Weren’t we told that the students and their families were so financially disadvantaged, that there was so much financial struggle going on they couldn’t afford their own meals. That’s why we even have to start serving school dinner in Memphis. And yet students seem to have plenty of money for a black market school lunch menu. And, by the way, you know somebody’s making a profit in that black market. This is not being done out of the goodness of somebody’s heart. So back-alley lunches at the Los Angeles Unified School District.

In response to the sudden decline in participation, school officials are contemplating bringing back the exact foods they just recently phased out. L.A. Unified’s food services director, Dennis Barrett, announced they will be amending the menu, and hamburgers and other “junk” foods will replace some of the more exotic dishes, including beef jambalaya, pad Thai, and black-eyed pea salads.



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Officials said that the district is even bringing back (albeit with low-fat cheese and a whole wheat crust) a student favorite — pizza.

Photo: First lady Michelle Obama in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House campus on May 17, 2010, where she announced a new agreement between the Partnership for a Healthier America and Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (HWCF) in support of the 'Let's Move!' childhood obesity campaign: AP Images



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