

# The New York Times

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## It's Healthy, but Must Kids Eat It?

To the Editor:

As your front-page Rotherham Journal makes plain, we cannot rely solely on efforts to improve nutrition to remedy America's obesity crisis.

As kids will be kids and resist eating healthy food, increased physical activity must be part of the solution. Unfortunately, the fear of legal liability has resulted in the loss of significant opportunities for exercise.

Playgrounds are boring to anyone over 5 when they are stripped of seesaws, slides, swings and jungle gyms, and hiking trails and sledding hills are being closed.

A Massachusetts elementary school has just banned the game of tag.

To alleviate the obesity crisis, we need to focus as much on providing children with increased opportunities for active, stimulating and creative free play as on changing the way they eat.

**Franklin H. Stone**  
**Executive Director**  
**Common Good**  
**New York, Oct. 19, 2006**

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## Glorious Food? English Schoolchildren Think Not

By [SARAH LYALL](#)

ROTHERHAM, [England](#) — Five months after the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver succeeded in cajoling, threatening and shaming the British government into banning junk food from its school cafeterias, many schools are learning that you can lead a child to a healthy lunch, but you can't make him eat.

The fancy new menu at the Rawmarsh School here?

“It’s rubbish,” said Andreas Petrou, an 11th grader. Instead, en route to school recently, he was enjoying a north of England specialty known as a chip butty: a French-fries-and-butter sandwich doused in vinegar.

“We didn’t get a choice,” he said of the school food. “They just told us we were having it.”

The government’s regulations, which took effect in September, have banished from school cafeterias the cheap, instantly gratifying meals that children love by default: the hamburgers, the French fries, the breaded, deep-fried processed meat, the sugary drinks.

Now schools have to provide at least two portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day for each child, serve fish at least once a week, remove salt from lunchroom tables, limit fried foods to two servings a week and cut out candy, soda and potato chips altogether.

The rules apply to schools in England and Wales; Scotland has a separate healthy lunch program.

But weaning children who consider French fries a major food group is not easy. There is no nicotine patch equivalent for chicken nuggets.

And many parents object to being lectured by Londoners like Mr. Oliver, whose angry television show “Jamie’s School Dinners” first alerted the nation to the horrors of school food like “Turkey Twizzlers” — minuscule bits of meat processed with many nonmeat products, molded into shapes and deep-fried.

“No matter how healthy it is, if kids don’t like it they’re not going to eat it,” said Julie Critchlow, a parent at Rawmarsh, a high school set between a sprawling housing project and the south Yorkshire hills. She mentioned the school’s new low-fat pizza and tagliatelle and meatballs as being particularly unappetizing to her children and said the cooks were so overworked that the baked potatoes were being served half-cooked.

The fact that Rawmarsh now bans children who do not go home for lunch from leaving school has made things worse, she said, leading to an overcrowded cafeteria and the elimination of the old fast-food-down-the-road option.

“They shouldn’t be allowed to tell the kids what to eat,” Mrs. Critchlow said of the school authorities. “They’re treating them like criminals.”

Mrs. Critchlow has become a notorious figure in Britain. In September she and another mother — alarmed, they said, because their children were going hungry — began selling contraband hamburgers, fries and sandwiches to as many as 50 students a day, passing the food through the school gates.

The mothers closed their business after they were vilified in the national news media as “meat pie mums.” Mrs. Critchlow now feeds her children lunch at home.

Shaken by the bad publicity, the school says that the two women represent a small minority and that most children are happy with the healthier menus, which include two hot choices every day — entrees like haddock provençal, beef curry and navarin of lamb — as well as baked potatoes for the unadventurous.

If the children really hate the food, Rawmarsh argues, they can bring brown-bag lunches.

“It doesn’t happen overnight; it takes an effort,” said Sonia Sharp, a local government official, speaking of the campaign to win the children over. “We have the responsibility for ensuring the health of our children. We want to teach them how to make the right choices for themselves.”

The menu changes at Rawmarsh are being replicated across Britain, which, much like the United States, is grappling with the issue of how to regulate school food to improve children’s health. Although Britons collectively are not yet as fat as Americans, they are the fattest people in Europe. If current trends continue, the British Medical Association says, by 2020 some 30 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls here will be clinically obese.

There are no national figures yet on how many children have rejected the new food. Kevin Morgan, a professor of European regional development at the University of Cardiff who has studied school meal reform, said anecdotal evidence showed that at least for now, many students have switched to brown-bag lunches.

“Parents are giving their children packed lunches, which are invariably inferior from a nutritional point of view to the school meals from which they were recoiling,” he said. He said that put pressure on school cafeterias, which need to serve enough meals a day to generate the revenue to remain financially viable.

In addition, he said, many lunchroom cooks are struggling to make the switch from deep-fried, microwaved dishes to food made from scratch.

Boris Johnson, the Conservative Party’s spokesman for higher education, waded into the debate recently, saying first that he applauded parents’ rights to “push pies through the railings,” but then modifying his remarks when they caused a national outcry.

“As long as we have the packed lunches and parents are going to be irresponsible enough to want to put all the crisps and the junk in the packed lunch,” he said, using the British term for potato chips, “there is no way that schools can win.”

Schools that have tried to win students over appear to have fared better than those that impose bans, Professor Morgan said.

The Royal Docks Community School, a high school in Newham, south London, is one example. The school began gradually introducing menu changes last year, consulting parents, students and the local school district.

Within six weeks, said the head teacher, Sean McGrath, the cooks had reduced the use of cooking fat by 75 percent. The school also barred younger students from going out during lunch, but did it class by class, over a few months rather than all at once.

The cafeteria now serves about 650 lunches a day, to just over half of the school's students. Last year, Mr. McGrath said, the figure was closer to 250.

But here in Rotherham, Andreas Petrou insists that no amount of explaining will convince him that a French fry sandwich is not a decent meal. If confronted with the school food, he said, he will do what all his friends do: gather as much bread as he can, "put half an inch of butter on each slice," and call it lunch.