

INTRODUCTION

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“When hungry, you cannot study.” Youth in Buenos Aires have united around this call to action, demanding #viandasdignas (decent meals) and an end to privatization of the public education system. They are organizing for the rights of all young people to be educated and cared for through public institutions. Using their collective power, they are calling on national and local government officials to provide quality nutritional meals, invest in school building infrastructure, and a moratorium on mandatory unpaid internships at private companies. For these youth, school politics and *school food politics* are one and the same, both involving struggles with the state over public resources and educational opportunity.

To draw media attention to their cause and exert political pressure, teenagers from the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires are engaging in direct action with the government and the broader public.¹ In September and October 2022, they halted classes and, in some cases, barred teachers and staff from entering the building.

While their campaign is ongoing, these youth are transforming school food politics. They engage with each other and with their teachers through *centros de estudiantes* (student councils), which are hubs for student organizing and governance. In these educational spaces, students learn about how school food contracting works, conduct studies of food quality, and develop outreach messaging to school administrators, the media,

government officials, and the public. And they question why, in a country that guarantees children and youth the right to a free public education from age four through university, their right to a free school meal ends with elementary school.

What they want is a better school food system, better for themselves and for the workers who feed them. This vision hinges on two key demands. First, the students demand that school meals be free for all students through the end of secondary school. Second, they demand new systems of accountability for government contractors and argue that contracts should be preferentially awarded to agroecological producers and cooperatives.

These Argentine students aren't alone in their desire for school food transformation. School meals are a site of social struggle and resistance in countries around the world.² A new wave of school food politics is happening at all scales, ranging from individual schools to the global School Meals Coalition, a pandemic-motivated initiative supported by the United Nations World Food Programme, which includes more than seventy-eight member states and a wide range of NGO partners.³

Taken together, the fifteen essays in this volume provide a global vista of how school food politics is transforming in productive ways, generating new answers to the foundational question Jen Sandler posed in *School Food Politics* over a decade ago: who feeds whom what, how, when, and for what purpose?⁴ The answers to these questions are the direct result of food and education politics, yet the people who are most impacted by the resulting programs and policies too often experience “politics” as an abstract and distant process.

School food politics is often thought of as the purvey of corporate food lobbyists, economists, and politicians who debate the specific contours of what schools serve, to whom, and for how much. This book rejects this narrow framing of who “does” school food politics. We see the individuals, families, and local community institutions who confront imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchal school food systems as politically powerful.⁵ They are important school food stakeholders whose perspectives matter.⁶ As we use the term, a stakeholder is any person or organization who has an interest—whether they recognize it or not—in the production and consumption of school meals. For a stakeholder group to successfully

engage in school food politics, they must first define the problems they wish to address and find avenues for change. But *how* do stakeholders change material conditions, challenge existing power structures, and assert collective responsibility for human and ecological well-being?

GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

The social organization of school meals⁷ varies widely across country contexts.⁸ It is the product of complex, place-specific histories, and stakeholder power dynamics. The first programs that were developed from the 1850s through the 1930s, mostly began as local charitable efforts that relied heavily on volunteer labor. Many of these programs were established to address childhood hunger and malnutrition, with the goal of improving the health of students from working-class and poor households. Public and compulsory education was expanding around the world, and schools proved to be an efficient institution to reach vulnerable populations. In some countries, such as the United States (US), governments began investing in the creation and growth of community-based school meal programs, partially as an outlet for redistributing surplus agricultural commodities at home and abroad.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, the growth of not-for-profit school food programs was fueled by postwar nation-building efforts focused on children's nutrition and as a means of expanding the influence of international aid organizations (i.e., the US Agency for International Development). The United Nations' (UN) World Food Programme (WFP) further accelerated the development of school food programs in lower-income countries in the 1960s and 1970s, while some higher-income countries with existing programs focused their attention on improving the quality and nutritional profile of school meals to address growing concerns about the health impacts of feeding children highly processed foods. Since the 1990s, countries have begun to grapple with a wider range of health and sustainability concerns in relation to school food programs and UN agencies have actively worked to promote sustainable and equitable development through, for example, Home Grown School Feeding initiatives, which now feed children in forty-six countries.⁹ This trend was bolstered by the

WFP's 2013 Global School Feeding Policy, which explicitly acknowledged the multiple benefits of school meal programs to different stakeholder groups and national priorities, while shifting the focus of the WFP to providing technical assistance to governments and bolstering government-led national school meal/feeding programs.¹⁰

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 163 countries had at least one school food program, which collectively fed 388 million children.¹¹ And coverage was increasing globally. The closure of schools around the world due to the health pandemic illustrated on global and local scales the importance of school-based meals as much more than just a nutritional supplement. During the pandemic, many countries worked to expand their school nutrition programs and by 2022 they exceeded pre-pandemic levels, serving 418 million children daily.¹² These programs most often serve lunch, although some serve breakfast or a snack in addition to or instead of school lunch. The majority of meals and snacks are prepared on school grounds or in publicly owned centralized kitchens.¹³ However, some programs contract with off-site private kitchens or serve only preprocessed items that require no preparation.¹⁴

As of 2021, approximately 40 percent of countries incorporated agricultural goals into their school food programs.¹⁵ These goals directly impact what students eat. More broadly speaking, the nutritional quality of school meals is variable, but nearly all programs include grains/cereals, legumes/nuts, oil, and salt, while only 44–54 percent of programs include eggs, meat, and poultry. Wealthier nations tend to serve a greater variety of foods and more processed foods, and certain regions (i.e., South Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific) include the highest average diversity of food items in their school meal programs.¹⁶ Most of these programs only provide food during the school year, but a small minority—including those in Cameroon, Hungary, India, Portugal, and Uruguay—also feed students during school breaks.¹⁷ In addition to food, 87 percent of these programs provided nutrition education and 68 percent incorporated school gardens. However, higher-income countries were less likely than others to incorporate educational or agricultural goals into their school food policies.¹⁸

There are significant disparities in school meal access both within and across countries. Children's right to food and education is constitutionally protected or guaranteed through laws or policies in some countries.

Whether these rights are universal or restricted to certain populations (e.g., students from low-income households) and under particular conditions (e.g., in rural schools) is a central issue within school food politics. Most countries focus their efforts on feeding younger students in primary schools, but even so, their access to school meals varies substantially by region (e.g., school meal programs reach less than 15 percent of enrolled primary students in the Middle East and North Africa and 85 percent of enrolled primary students in Latin America and the Caribbean). Twenty-six countries provided school meals to at least 95 percent of enrolled primary students, but only five countries—the Czech Republic, Eswatini, Finland, Nauru, and Palau—did the same for secondary students.¹⁹

Several countries that we discuss in this volume—namely, Brazil, Finland, Japan, and the US—have long-standing national programs that have influenced and helped shape the organization of school meals around the world. For example, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Paraguay modeled their school feeding laws after the Brazilian program.²⁰ And the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) in Canada, which is actively working toward the creation of a national program, is taking inspiration and lessons learned from multiple countries' programs, including Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US.²¹

School meals vary in how they are conceived: either a *public good* (i.e., typically organized as a not-for-profit government-sponsored/subsidized program) or a *private commercialized service* that is offered as a convenience to students and families. For example, unlike Brazil and Japan, where school meals are seen as a public good and provided universally to students, only 20–25 percent of Danish public schools have a school food program and these are largely offered as a commercial service.²² Most students eat from a privatized “packed-lunch-from-supermarket” supply chain, despite the recommendations of public health reports and advisory boards for the Danish government to create a national school food program.²³ And in countries like the UK and US, public school meal programs have come under fierce public criticism for their harsh and rigid means-testing eligibility criteria that restrict access to government-funded free school meals to a small percentage of students and shift the financial burden onto families that are struggling to afford the costs of food, housing, utilities, and other basic necessities.

The responsibility for financing school meal programs varies widely but is typically shared by governments and parents/caregivers. While some governments contribute only a small percentage to the cost of feeding children at school, or nothing at all, there are governments in every region of the world that provide full funding for school meal programs. In most programs worldwide, parents and/or other community members are required, or at the very least expected, to collaborate with the government to operate their local school meal programs. Many programs also rely on the students themselves to assist in preparing, serving, and cleaning up after meals.²⁴ Yet these important school food stakeholders typically have limited opportunities to participate in decision-making about how their programs should be designed, funded, and operated.²⁵

Civil society organizations and for-profit companies are two stakeholder groups that are widely involved in school meal programs, and their relative power and influence is a central topic of school food politics. Civil society is a very broad umbrella that encompasses social movement organizations like Via Campesina that fight for food sovereignty and nongovernmental organizations like those in India that are contracted by the government to manage and prepare school meals.²⁶ The values and goals that civil society organizations hold for school food programs are variable and do not always advance justice, sustainability, or democracy. Moreover, civil society organizations are not universally activist in nature, and we take a more nuanced view of civil society organizations in this volume. We are, however, more critical of both the corporate food industry and public-private development organizations that reinforce existing power dynamics within food systems and extend colonial and imperialist economic development priorities.

The corporate food industry and the corporatization of public schools more broadly are intimately intertwined, as the Argentine student protesters have made clear in their #viandasdignas campaign. Neoliberal goals of creating for-profit markets out of public education through privatization and commercialization of everything, including school food, often lead to a higher prevalence of ultra processed foods and other convenience items that require limited or no onsite preparation.²⁷ This overarching political-economic reality makes it difficult for schools to achieve the transformative educational potential of school food programs.

Yet there are examples globally that provide inspiration for how school food programs can be designed to push back against neoliberalism by creating collective and democratic experiences for students that prioritize values of caring for each other and the world around them. In Greece, eating school meals together with one's classmates is seen to strengthen social cohesion and solidarity. Likewise, in Finland, educators and policymakers see school mealtimes as an important avenue for teaching young people about civic engagement.²⁸ Such efforts vary in their respect for young people's agency—a culturally specific value and priority that can be difficult to accomplish in practice within the context of top-down national school food programs. What's more, some countries are constrained by transnational trade agreements, externally imposed development priorities, and internal political-economic oligarchies that reinforce neoliberal food and education systems.

POLITICAL GOALS AND IMPACTS OF SCHOOL MEALS

Cost-benefit studies show that public school food programs can generate returns as high as US\$9 for every US\$1 invested through positive impacts on education, health and nutrition, poverty, and local agriculture.²⁹ However, the extent to which these benefits are realized depends on how school meal programs are designed and the context they operate within. While certain goals are country and context specific, some are nearly universal. These goals include improvements in child health and nutrition, school attendance, and academic achievement for the most vulnerable populations, particularly girls.

There is ample evidence that school food programs meet these goals, especially for the most vulnerable students in a society, and a widespread assumption that these programs should be funded, ideally as a cost that is included in official government budgets.³⁰ This evidence has been of particular concern to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS nations), all of which are geographically vast middle-income countries with rapidly growing economies, large populations, and comparatively high levels of global influence. In Russia, this includes building out hot school meals to continue reforming a post-Soviet Union public education system, while in South Africa school meals are integral to cultivating a vision of schools as “inclusive centers of learning, care, and support.”³¹

By taking a closer look at individual programs and across geographical contexts, we gain a deeper understanding of school food politics. One area that deserves closer attention is the impact of school food programs on girls and women, which we argue is vital for the development of a feminist politics of food and education. In low-income countries, school food programs are widely touted as an effective tool for improving girls' school attendance and nutrition. Across country contexts, school food programs have the potential for broader change in gender relations within households and the economy. Firstly, lunch provision at school "allowed for" more mothers to work outside the home who may have previously been expected to labor only in the home and focus on the needs of their households.³² Secondly, because household food work is disproportionately done by mothers, they benefit from the reduced time, money, and mental labor spent on preparing lunches. Thirdly, women stand to benefit greatly from the jobs these programs generate, particularly when these jobs are well compensated, although this remains a significant global challenge.³³

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 1,668 new jobs were created for every one hundred thousand students fed by school meal programs.³⁴ Most of those jobs went to local community members, primarily women, who prepare and serve the food in school kitchens. They are part of a broader system of school food labor that includes the food chain workers who grow, harvest, process, and distribute ingredients; the nutritionists who develop menus; and the teachers who feed and educate students about food and nutrition. The majority of school food programs worldwide emphasize the creation of jobs or leadership opportunities for women, but, at the same time, programs in less affluent countries rely heavily on the unpaid labor of women workers.³⁵ And in wealthy nations such as the UK and the US—where school cooks are colloquially referred to as "lunch ladies" and "dinner ladies," respectively—the jobs are often not well compensated. However, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are at the forefront of using social policy to ensure that women are in positions of power within school food systems, ranging from leaders of agricultural cooperatives and associations to presidents of school feeding councils.³⁶

This intentional approach to women's empowerment through school food policy takes many forms and often integrates with and supports

healthy, sustainable food systems and food sovereignty. For example, the Integrated Program for Sustainable School Canteens in Côte d'Ivoire supports women-led micro-agricultural projects that sell food to school canteens.³⁷ Similarly, Tunisian rural women's cooperatives—who are given free use of school gardens—donate 30 percent of their produce to the schools and sell the rest through other market channels.³⁸

These examples are part of a broader effort to leverage the immense purchasing power of the state—through sourcing ingredients for school meals and other public programs—to drive innovations in global, regional, and local food systems that lead to better outcomes for people and the planet. This is one of the fastest-growing areas of school food politics.³⁹ It is actively supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. Their 2021 report outlines how public procurement can be a driver of food systems transformation. It presents examples and lessons learned from thirty-two countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America that are purchasing food for public programs in ways that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.⁴⁰

A related area of school food politics focuses on food sovereignty, particularly in former colonial states and among Indigenous peoples.⁴¹ Food sovereignty moves school food politics beyond questions of what, how, and from whom school food is procured and the role of the state in strategically directing public dollars. It asserts the fundamental human right to both policy participation (e.g., defining the goals and priorities of the food and agriculture systems one is embedded within) and to healthy, culturally relevant food that is produced through ecologically sustainable and economically just methods. For instance, Ecuador's school food policy mentions goals of sustainability and good living, which are actualized through public procurement of at least 35 percent of food purchases from peasant farming and the "popular and solidarity economy sector."⁴² In North America, Indigenous peoples and their collective organizations, such as The First Nations' Development Institute's Native Farm to School Project, are advancing food sovereignty through Native farm-to-school programs that "ensure young tribal leaders can experience traditional foodways inside culturally inclusive school food systems."⁴³

Food sovereignty within Native school food systems is as much a reflection of local conflict as it is a blueprint for larger-scale change. It reminds us that school food politics must do more than expand existing programs or make incremental improvements. Rather, school food politics must be connected to and act as a vehicle for challenging and changing systems of injustice, particularly in the frontline communities that are most economically and ecologically vulnerable to global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. This is, as we see it, the rationale behind *transforming* school food politics around the world—a project that requires us to engage with the politics of care or “the larger structural questions of thinking about which institutions, people and practices should be used to accomplish concrete and real caring tasks” and to what ends.⁴⁴

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL FOOD POLITICS

From Native Amazonian communities in Peru (chapter 3) to megacities like Seoul, South Korea (chapter 11), this volume asserts that school food programs are a valuable form of public care that can and should become a key arena for building just and sustainable futures. This argument furthers a key point from *The Labor of Lunch* that “debates about school lunch are fundamentally about care: what it means to care well, how much care is worth, and whether caring for public goods like children and the environment should be the private responsibility of individuals in the home or a public responsibility that is collectivized and shared.”⁴⁵

Care is an activity that includes “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”⁴⁶ As a form of government-sponsored care infrastructure, public school meal programs are a vital arena to begin renegotiating both economic and ecological relationships.⁴⁷ One way to do this is by practicing care-at-a-distance, holding distant others in emotional closeness rather than physical closeness through values-based supply chains that connect buyers with producers who emphasize fair labor standards, healthy food access, community empowerment, and ecological sustainability.⁴⁸

As a commodified form of care nested within a fiercely contested state institution, the labor of educating and feeding children at school is tethered to a legacy of feminization, racialization, and devaluation that is common across occupations that involve care work.⁴⁹ What's more, women do the majority of food work—often for low wages or in an unpaid capacity—in countries around the world, yet they control fewer resources and hold limited decision-making power over food policy or industry practices.⁵⁰ However, they are not without agency, and in this volume, we highlight numerous ways that women are leading efforts to remake social, economic, and environmental relationships through school food politics. We conceptualize their efforts within the broad umbrella of care-centered politics, which “has the capacity to provide values and ideas, and a perspective about change that not only challenges the neoliberal political consensus and its long-standing capitalist and market-centered underpinnings but the more extreme versions of the anticare politics that neoliberalism has bred too.”⁵¹

By using the verb “transforming” in our title, we assert a critical need to understand and do school food politics differently. We argue that a *transformative* school food politics is an inherently *feminist* politics of food and education. It is driven by inclusive policymaking processes that draw from the lived expertise of those most impacted. It is welcoming of collaborations that include a wide range of stakeholders—for example, students, their caregivers, teachers, cafeteria workers and other school support staff, labor unions, grassroots activists and nonprofit organizations, policymakers, and the private sector—while centering the voices and perspectives of the students and frontline workers who have historically held the least power in determining school food problems, policy, and practice. It pushes back against the economic devaluation of the gendered labor that goes into caring for, feeding, and educating children. Lastly, we conceptualize transformative school food politics as a distributed, transnational movement capable of learning from local, state, regional, national, and international examples.

Chapters in this collection explore both “why” and “how” school food politics shape and are shaped by these interlocking political-economic systems, providing new ways of seeing school food politics from often

overlooked and ignored lived experiences. Chapter contributors offer deep and broad funds of knowledge, often drawing from their own experiences, in-depth fieldwork, or participatory research with community partners. They share creative strategies for pushing policy levers and shifting mindsets, lessons for building inclusive solidarity coalitions, and prefigurative glimpses of care-centered school food programs.

Ultimately, this book makes the case for *policy protagonism* as a necessary ingredient for both pushing elected officials and other decision-makers to invest in public education and food systems, and holding them accountable when they do not.⁵² This concept, which we develop further in the next section, emerges from our need to understand how different stakeholders—youth, food chain workers, teachers, lobbyists, policymakers, state agencies, NGOs, and social movement organizations—identify policy “problems” and “opportunities” within school food systems and work toward solutions that contribute to the common good.

POLICY PROTAGONISM IN SCHOOL FOOD POLITICS

Policy protagonists assert ownership over school feeding and related policies, sometimes as individuals but often through collective action. The four attributes of policy protagonism that we draw out in this collection are (1) defining school food policy “problems,” (2) seeking power and resources to address those policy-worthy problems, (3) “using” social categories and symbolic identities such as perceptions of teachers as mothers and caregivers, and, finally, (4) demanding multiple seats at the decision-making table.⁵³

School food policies and systems too often emerge from a narrow framing of who possesses the knowledge and expertise to identify and define school food programming. As we show in this book, the distant and seemingly entrenched policy elites, transnational organizations, and multinational corporations do not have a monopoly on school food politics. Local school communities and solidarity networks have agency as policy protagonists: whether an Indigenous mother who prepares food for her community’s children or urban Black public high school students’ concern for “healthy deliciousness,” those closest to school food preparation and consumption have tremendous knowledge. They assert leadership and bring overlooked

assets to school food politics that can be used to define school food programming in their schools that is situated within the goals or visions of the broader community.

Identifying and defining policy problems is also part of collective action on larger scales. State- and national-level coalitions from diverse countries presented in this collection recognize school food as intertwined with other complex systems. They see school food politics as important in its own right—as vital for reimagining the infrastructure of everyday life—and as an entry point into addressing wicked problems such as climate change and poverty.⁵⁴ Some are also responding to the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, slavery, racism, classism, misogyny, and other forms of violence and oppression through their policy protagonism.

Food politics and school food politics have been loosely framed as engagement with the state.⁵⁵ Policy protagonists do engage with state agencies and officials. They also acknowledge that power and resources for addressing policy problems lie in cross-sectoral or cross-issue coalition building. The chapters in this collection—particularly those written by practitioners involved in these coalitions—reveal to us the wide variety of stakeholders who inherently care, or can be brought to care, about school food. The chapters also make an important intervention into how we conceptualize “politics” and how we value different forms of labor. Too often, the policy work that gets done behind the scenes—cultivating relationships, acknowledging and asserting care for others, and validating the issues most salient to them—is invisible and unaccounted for as a political resource or asset. We argue that this relational and care-centered work is a necessary and powerful driver of political change.

Policy protagonists often have an astute understanding of social categories and symbolic identities (e.g., teachers as second mothers or caregivers; mothers as cooks, not chefs; youth as uninterested in healthy food; women as farmers), and they assert them to clarify the “problem” and to seek the resources to transform school food systems. For example, in Brazil (chapter 10), feminist farmers use the symbolic identity of women as “nurturers,” and even though that knowledge is often overlooked or dismissed, they, too, understand and assert their valuable knowledge and positionality to make concrete changes to the pedagogy, philosophy, and practice of feeding children. And in Philadelphia, a major city in the US

(chapter 5), middle and high school students expand the social category of youth as *consumers* of school meals. Through their policy protagonism, they become youth entrepreneurs—renegotiating who feeds whom, how, when, and for what purpose—with the goal of providing “healthy deliciousness” to everyone in their school community.

What these disparate efforts have in common—and what unites them as expressions of a transformative school food politics—is how individual stakeholders demand to be included in decision-making as a community or as part of a collective, eschewing the spotlight as individual heroes. Each of the following chapters does important work in helping us understand the educational and caring potential of school food.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The chapters are organized into four parts, providing guideposts for learning from the contributors about how stakeholders engage in transformative school food politics at varied levels of governance. Many authors share strategies and tactics that have been successful in pushing the state to assume responsibility for feeding children at school in ways that support community well-being. Others shed light on the challenges, power dynamics, and potential compromises inherent in transforming school food politics. It is important to note, however, that this collection offers only a partial view of school food programs and politics around the world.

In the first part, “The Power and Potential of National School Meal Programs” (chapters 1–3), we ground the volume with a discussion of the power and potential of government-funded school meal programs as an expression of national politics. In the first chapter, Alexis Agliano Sanborn and Katsura Omori discuss how Japanese school lunch became a source of national pride and global inspiration through a series of government policies and investments across the entire school food system that emphasize nutrition, taste, cultural relevance, respect, and community collaboration. Their chapter invites us to think about the politics of care, both in terms of the policy goals of Japan’s universal school meal program and in the everyday actions of Japanese students who contribute to the labor of lunch—gathering, serving, and cleaning up after meals—participating in both formal and informal acts of *shokuiku* (food education).

The premise that governments should invest in the care “infrastructure of everyday life” through the creation of high-quality universal school meal programs and complementary pedagogical goals is further illuminated in chapter 2 by Jennifer Black, Sinikka Elliott, and Rachel Engler-Stringer.⁵⁶ Their chapter focuses on Canada, one of the few affluent countries without a national school food program. Responding to growing calls for state funding to support a national program coming from the Coalition for Healthy School Food, the Canadian federal government is actively debating the future of school meals. The authors collectively argue that transcending current deadlocks around the design of this program hinges on Canadian policymakers’ willingness to not only treat children as competent social actors but also to reject the narrow framing of “health” as synonymous with nutrition and to actively address issues of justice and equity.

Next, chapter 3 turns our attention to the power, potential, and problematics of *Qali Warma* (Vigorous Child, in Quechua), the national school lunch program in Peru, a global south country with a history of colonization and Indigenous erasure. Emmanuelle Ricaud Oneto’s chapter shows how mothers from two Amazonian Native communities, the Maijuna and the Napuruna, grapple with the constraints of the program and deploy strategies to adapt it to their community’s agendas. In both communities, mothers take turns cooking the meals and play a significant role in the school food system at the local level. In doing so, they follow local logics to discretely and, at times, profoundly deviate from the official government design of the program. Navigating the frontier between appropriation and resistance on their own terms, the mothers who cook school lunches in these Amazonian communities perform both reproductive labor and political work by claiming for themselves the power to decide who feeds whom, what, how, when, and for what purpose from within the constraints of the colonial settler state.

The second part of the book, “Claiming Space for Youth and Worker Voices” (chapters 4–7), further explores the question of who holds the power to decide these important facets of school food politics, focusing on two stakeholder groups—children and the workers who feed them—whose perspectives are too often ignored in discussions of school food policy. Chapter 4 by Kristiina Janhonen, Marjaana Manninen, and Karin Hjärleskog moves us to Finland, a country that has guaranteed all students the right

to free school meals since 1948. In Finland, national curricular standards ensure that school meals and mealtimes provide lessons in health, nutrition, and manners, as well as opportunities for students to participate in planning and implementing their local school meal programs. Learning on Dewey's pragmatist learning theory and the concept of *food sense*, the authors develop a flexible action framework using a home economics course, "Sustainability transformations in our school," that taps into the potential of both teachers and school catering staff as food educators.⁵⁷

The need to take children seriously and recognize their agency within school food systems is further illuminated in chapter 5 by Raven Lewis, who, with Jarrett Stein, focuses on Rebel Ventures, a youth-led nonprofit organization in the US. "Rebel" youth entrepreneurs, drawn from the school district of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and mostly students of color, know that kids want to eat good food: food that is nutrient-dense and is grown, prepared, and shared with love. So, they have developed products that are served to fellow students throughout the school district. This chapter is one example of how youth "do" school food politics, told from the perspective of one Rebel, Raven Lewis, who shares middle and high school students' lived experiences of school food, their motivations for starting and participating in Rebel Ventures, and the impacts it has had on their lives.

In a similar vein, chapter 6 by Rebecca Davis, A. Brooks Bowden, and Lisa Altmann shows what is possible when school nutrition workers become policy protagonists. Many students and families in the US rely on government-subsidized school meals to meet their daily nutritional needs, yet these meals are much harder to access during the summer months when schools are closed. In rural North Carolina, school nutrition staff developed an innovative program called the "Yum-Yum Bus" that uses school buses converted into mobile cafeterias to deliver food and educational materials directly to children's neighborhoods. Key to the program's success, they argue, was the strategic formation of school-community partnerships and the collaborative work of a diverse group of staff from departments and positions that do not always work together or have a seat at the policy table.

The importance of frontline school nutrition staff in meeting the needs of children and communities is further emphasized by Margaret

Read, Anne Moertel, Courtney Smith, and Jennifer LeBarre in chapter 7, which charts the innovations in policy, sourcing, preparation, and service that occurred during the first two years of the pandemic to allow schools to operate the largest emergency food program in US history. Federal policy waivers allowed schools to serve all students up to age eighteen free of charge, but this temporary universal free school meal program was ended at the start of the 2022–2023 school year. This sudden end to a widely popular program bolstered existing advocacy efforts, as more and more stakeholder groups began to believe it was both necessary and feasible to continue the pandemic “free for all” school meal programs through state or federal policy changes.

Part III of the book, “Struggling for Just School Food Economies” (chapters 8–11), continues this inquiry into the dynamic nature of school food politics and its transformative potential through a careful examination of policy protagonism, care ethics, and rural-urban alliances in Brazil, India, and South Korea. All three countries operate universal free school meal programs and leverage their school food budgets to accomplish other goals related to social justice and environmental sustainability.

In chapter 8, Prerna Rana explains how the Right to Food campaign, an Indian civil society initiative started in 2001, transformed India’s existing Mid-day Meal Scheme (MDMS) into the world’s largest free school lunch program. With a combined strategy of grassroots community action and judicial intervention, the campaign put pressure on state governments for effective implementation of national policy and a legal recognition of children’s right to food. Rana then examines other ways that civil society actors continue to shape the MDMS, from women’s self-help groups that cook meals in rural villages to the philanthropic organizations that run centralized catering operations to the left-leaning trade unions that oppose such public-private partnerships. Ultimately, she reveals the tensions inherent in Indian school food politics that are hidden when the concerns of “civil society” are seen as monolithic and reminds us to think critically about the politics of different stakeholder groups.

Next, in chapter 9, José Arimatea Barros Bezerra and Ludmir dos Santos Gomes give unique insight into the experience of two smallholder farmers, Ana and João, in the Brazilian state of Ceará with ties to the Landless Workers’ Movement, who formed a cooperative and became suppliers to

the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE) [National School Feeding Program], one of the world's largest free school lunch programs. Beginning in 2009, Brazilian schools were required to purchase at least thirty percent of the food served through the PNAE from local, smallholder farmers or their collectives. The compulsory policy language of the PNAE stands out as a global example of how governments can strategically use school meal funding to support the economic viability of smallholder farmers and socially disadvantaged food producers. Achieving this transformative potential, this chapter argues, is dependent on the agroecological farming and policy protagonism of small-scale producers like Ana and João whose local efforts are key to replacing *big food* corporations with anti-capitalist alternatives.

In chapter 10, Sônia Fátima Schwendler, Cristiane Coradin, and Islândia Bezerra also explore how Brazil's PNAE has created new avenues for agroecological feminist women farmers to engage in school food politics. Using oral histories of Landless Workers' Movement members who supply agroecological food to local schools in the state of Paraná, the authors reveal not only the benefits and challenges of participating in the PNAE but also the philosophical, political, and pedagogical commitments of these women. They show how Landless Women have successfully navigated the PNAE policy certification process, thereby earning a reliable income and the independence that comes with it. In sharing the perspectives of these feminist agroecologists, this chapter makes an important contribution to the volume, theorizing the importance of care ethics and women's empowerment to the transformative potential of school food politics.

In chapter 11, Seulgi Son then asks what role municipal governments can play in driving food system transformations through school meal programs. Beginning in 2011, after several decades of civil society activism in support of food sovereignty and against the privatization of school meals, South Korea enacted a universal free, eco-friendly school lunch policy. To accomplish such a wide-reaching transformation of the existing school food system, South Korea's central, provisional, and municipal governments developed novel procurement policies and infrastructure for sourcing and distributing eco-friendly school lunch ingredients. Bolstered by this experience, the metropolitan government of Seoul, South Korea's capital city, created the Urban-Rural Coexistence Meal Service Program, an innovative

effort to create short, direct supply chains between small- and mid-sized family farms in rural areas and public meal programs in urban areas. As Son's chapter reveals, transformations within school food politics can lead to greater efforts to reshape regional food economies.

In the final part of the book, "Tools and Campaigns for Systems Change" (chapters 12–15), we take a close look at tools and campaigns for systems change that have been effectively used in Canada and the US. In chapter 12, Christine C. Caruso, Lucy Flores, and Amy Rosenthal argue that stories are a powerful tool for sharing information and communicating diverse stakeholders' perspectives in ways that inspire empathy and action. They present one storytelling approach—composite narrative—as a promising method for sharing stories derived from multiple people's experiences. The authors explain how and why to use the composite narrative storytelling technique and offer three example vignettes based on data collected by the US-based nonprofit organization FoodCorps. Throughout, they emphasize the importance of incorporating an equity-centered and culturally responsive approach in all phases of research, communications, and advocacy, and demonstrate how they integrate this approach into the theories and techniques presented in the chapter.

Andrée Gaçoin, Michelle Gautreaux, and Anne Hales (chapter 13) then share how the British Columbia Teachers' Federation in Canada used facilitated think tanks to guide action and advocacy to address a longstanding issue that many teachers have witnessed and addressed daily in their classrooms: growing food insecurity among students and the abdication of government responsibility to meet this need. Grounded in a framework of union research as activist research, the authors share key themes from a union-organized think tank related to principles that can guide action and advocacy on food security in British Columbia, Canada. Importantly, this technique (virtual think tank discussion) and organizational structure (social justice union) allow teachers to come together—despite the time scarcity, overwork, fatigue, and burnout that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated across the teaching profession—to engage in policy protagonism.

The next two chapters take us inside two successful state-level campaigns in the US, allowing us to learn firsthand from the nonprofit organizations that helped build multi-stakeholder coalitions in California and Vermont. These campaigns fundamentally altered the scope of school food politics

in the US by offering proven templates for achieving state-level policy changes that guarantee free meals to all students and invest public dollars in farm-to-school programs that source local ingredients for school meals. In chapter 14, Anne Moertel, from the Center for Ecoliteracy, a California-based nonprofit organization that has been engaged in school food systems change for more than twenty-five years, tells the story of how California became the first state in the US to create a universal school meal program in 2021. Moertel articulates core strategies and lessons from this campaign that secured government-funding and policy commitments to provide every student with free, freshly prepared, California-grown school meals and food education opportunities.

In a complementary chapter, Anore Horton, Faye Mack, Betsy Rosenbluth, and Amy Shollenberger tell the story of the Vermont Farm Fresh School Meals for All Bill, passed in 2022, which was developed and championed by Vermont state legislators representing all three of the state's major parties. The authors are leaders in a solidarity coalition, which includes stakeholders with varying political affiliations and organizational purposes (e.g., anti-hunger, child nutrition, farm-to-school, union labor), who united to achieve this shared vision through policy protagonism at the state level. In chapter 15, they provide a history of their campaign and explain the action circles organizing model they used to pass legislation that guarantees universal free school meals, establishes a new local food purchasing incentive program, and funds the Farm to School and Early Childhood Network and grants program.

We draw the collection to a close with a conclusion in which we discuss our efforts to push the field of school food politics forward, strategies and priorities for expanding the field, and our vision for transforming school food politics through care and community.

In this contemporary moment, as school food programs around the world are being reimaged and rebuilt after the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, we see both an urgent need for a more radical school food politics and an expansion in the politics of the possible. *Transforming School Food Politics around the World* charts a path forward by harnessing the collective wisdom of a diverse group of practitioners, youth, academics, and community-engaged scholars who possess vital knowledge and experiences of transforming school food politics on a scale

that is relatable and translatable to other contexts. It is through a transnational dialogue, as offered in the chapters to come, that both school food scholarship and political practice are pushed in exciting new directions. We hope readers will emerge with a deeper understanding of the critical role of feminist politics of care and policy protagonism, while learning innovative strategies to inform their own efforts to change school food policy and systems.

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