

8-31-2010

## Janet Poppendieck, Free for All: Fixing School Food in America

Cheryl Hudee  
*Sam Houston State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss>



Part of the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hudee, Cheryl. 2010. "Janet Poppendieck, Free for All: Fixing School Food in America." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 25(2): Article 8. Available At: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol25/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Population Studies at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

*Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 25(2), 2010, pp. 183–185.  
Copyright © by the Southern Rural Sociological Association

Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010 (353 pp.), ISBN 978-0-520-24370-5, US\$18.15.

Reviewed by Cheryl Hudec

Janet Poppendieck's *Free for All* is an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the status of school meal programs in the United States. The author covers several subjects including the political history of the programs, nutritional quality and aesthetic quality of the food, finances and funding, and current structure and governing of the programs. The picture of school meals in America is provided through archival document analysis as well as various interviews with governing officials, school food service personnel, students, and activists. Ultimately Poppendieck provides solutions to the various problems that are presently a part of school meal programs in America.

The author spends a week in an actual school cafeteria to get first hand experience of school food operations on the ground. This is Poppendieck's attempt to illustrate the daily experience of school meal programs both by the employees and the students. While the author's narrative may be accurate, it cannot be interpreted as the universal narrative for all school meal operations in the United States. Several factors come into play to determine school food operations and the accompanying experience. In other words, no one school cafeteria is exactly like another. Poppendieck admits that money drives the menu. However, funding comes from several sources: federal, state, and local; and while the federal sources make up most of the funding, local district sources play a significant role in the differing cafeteria experiences. Federal funds are primarily directed toward the purchase of food, as there are restrictions on its use in other areas. Local funding, however, may be used for almost anything, including employee training and workshops, equipment, facilities, and so forth (if local funding is available). Additionally, while much of local operations are dictated by federal and state regulations and guidelines, local food service administrators have some discretion within the guidelines, which further creates varying experiences. The author does ask if her experience at Any Town HS is typical or unusual, an appropriate question given all of the influential factors that Poppendieck becomes aware of through her research.

The history of the programs that Poppendieck provides is both an accurate and detailed one that provides a good depiction of the social and political processes that have influenced the nature of present programs. It is divided into eras of war (on hunger, poverty, waste, spending, and fat), which is extremely useful for understanding the various historical themes and shifts in focus of the programs.

With all of the current attention focused on the influence of school meal programs on juvenile obesity, the programs have recently become nutrition driven. Poppendieck examines the impediments and consequences of this initiative. This chapter is brief and general. The local implications and the inaccuracies of measurement resulting from the bigger focus on nutrition within the programs is an excellent story that should be more extensively told.

The issue of participation is a major one among school meal programs. Administrators are continuously pressured to increase student participation in the programs, often with a very limited budget and numerous restrictions on use of funds. Additionally, numerous external variables are influencing participation within the programs. The author does an excellent job reviewing each of the internal *and* external influences on participation in chapter five.

Hunger and its prevention has always been a principal interest of the programs. Poppendieck addresses this issue as well as problems associated with the programs that impede efforts to prevent of hunger. She resolves that while the programs do give most hungry children a meal opportunity, there is a combination of structural and social obstacles preventing many hungry children from participating. Furthermore, Poppendieck discusses the problem of stigma: a consequence of the three-tiered eligibility structure of the programs as well as possible alternatives that might eliminate the stigma factor.

In chapter eight Poppendieck discusses some issues previously mentioned and local solutions for them. She calls this “fixing school food at the community level.” During her research, the author listened to various complaints about current problems as well as feasible and effective answers to those problems. Poppendieck outlines some of those for the reader in this chapter. The author makes it clear that there is no one simple method of reform for the programs but rather a recipe of methods (both structurally and socially based) involved in creating better school meal programs all around. It should be added that this recipe will vary according to differing local programs.

The author lastly introduces six significant “either, or” questions currently faced by school meal programs. The questions are based on the shifts in focus and various issues that have historically occurred within the programs. They include: 1) a

program for all children or a program that prioritizes poor children? 2) a business or social program? 3) an interruption or an integral part of the school day? 4) a nutrition or a food program? 5) a cost or an investment? and 6) a reflection of the American food system or a tool to change it? These are valid questions that should be more greatly publicized.

The book is written in a reformist tone. The tone directs the content toward those currently aware of problems within the programs and desiring change. Anyone interested in the status of school meal programs and understanding the circumstances that have led to their present form will receive an abundance of easy to understand information in this book. Persons who would find this book interesting include parents of school children enrolled in a school meal program, but also might include activists, policy makers, and food service personnel wanting to improve the condition of the programs. Whether one reads the entire book or just selected chapters, a wealth of valuable information is contained within. The information Poppendieck supplies to the reader remains general, however; any one chapter could be used to compile a whole book that might contain more detailed content that would be valuable within higher academia.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Cheryl Hudec** is the Associate Director of the Center for Rural Studies in the Department of Sociology at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. Her current research focuses on the operation of and influencing factors on school lunch programs in rural Texas. Contact information: Cheryl Hudec, Department of Sociology, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas 77341 USA (email: [clh003@shsu.edu](mailto:clh003@shsu.edu)).