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FIELD TO PLATE™ looks to France for answers about childhood obesity as Congress considers bipartisan legislation requiring high nutritional standards for all food sold on school premises.

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As reported by Marian Burros in the NY Times, the debate over what students eat at school is heating up in the US. Last week a group of senior level health practitioners, chefs and food industry representatives sought answers in the northwest corner of France in a small town called Challans. Touring local schools at lunch time, as part of Field to Plate's Comparative Exchange Forum, they observed children ages 3 to 10 happily clean their plates of beet salad salmon served with a side of lentils, a cheese course, and a apple compote.

“In Challans, the health of the child is the most important outcome for the community, and they invest the resources to support children’s future health and well-being that thus far the U.S. has not,” said conference co-creator Kate Geagan. In contrast to many school meal programs in the USA, the Challans school lunch program serves 700 children each day 2.5 to 10 years of age, and focuses on fresh ingredients and meals made from scratch. Fresh baguettes are delivered to the school district’s four schools daily from local bakeries. Students are allowed a full 45 minutes to eat, followed by 45 minutes of recess to promote physical activity. According to the school district’s Director of Foodservice, Bernard Hervé, “If you provide children with a wide variety of fresh foods, presented in attractive and flavorful ways, they will eat it.”

For Hervé, school lunch is a continuation of the classroom, and an opportunity to teach children about food, flavor and table courtesy. Children over the age of 5 serve themselves and each other. All children eat from real plates and use real utensils to move food from plate to mouth.

Members of the French press who followed the American contingent for 2 days were astounded to learn that while French children eat with knives and forks, many American schoolchildren eat with their fingers or forks, plastic utensils - part spoon part fork, and have 20 minutes or less to eat, and a diminishing recess, if at all. In 2005, France passed a law banning vending machines in all French schools. Responding to press queries about the outcome of the forum, forum co-creator and owner of Field to Plate, Amanda Archibald stated, “our goal is to learn what is working in France and use those ideas to continue a dialog about what is possible in the USA.”

The federal government reimburses schools \$0.22 per child, (with an additional \$2.10 for children eligible for free meals) , while in Challans the district is spending about \$7.80 for each child. However, as the CDC now predicts that 30 – 40%% of children born in 2000 will be saddled with diabetes, one could argue that the health care costs associated with *not* feeding the children in a different way far outweigh to costs of instilling good eating habits. “Our children’s health must become a priority of all of us and I hope we can make it part of the presidential debate,” said Ann Cooper, Executive Chef and Director of Foodservice of Berkley Unified School District and participant in the program.

“It’s time for farmers, the food industry, and local boards of education to work together to provide fewer processed and more whole foods in schools,” said Dorothy Caldwell, former president of the School Nutrition Association and Deputy Administrator for school meals in the Clinton Administration.

About Field to Plate™

Field to Plate™ is a food education company whose mission is to create meaningful and rewarding educational events for professionals, corporations and the consumer at large. Field to Plate™ Comparative Exchange Forums are produced in partnership with Park City based IT Nutrition LLC.